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Beyond exodus, a Christian influx in the Middle East

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While pundits and activists sound alarms about an "exodus" of Christians out of the Middle East, raising questions about whether Christians may be an endangered species in the land of Christianity's birth, the Synod of Bishops this morning heard a reminder that there's an opposite, if not exactly equal, movement of Christians into the region.

Of the sixteen nations that make up the Middle East, seven have actually seen significant spikes in their Catholic population since 1980: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Yemen. All are part of the Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi Arabia is an especially interesting case. Home to the holy Islamic sites of Mecca and Medina, it also now contains the second largest Catholic community in the Middle East, with what the Vatican estimates at 1.25 million believers, though some experts believe the real number may be closer to almost two million. Even considering merely the official count, Saudi Arabia trails only Lebanon's more than two million Maronites in terms of Catholic population.

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In some cases, the new Catholics in these nations are refugees from war and social chaos. That's true in Kuwait, for example, where many Chaldean Catholics have sought refuge from the upheaval in Iraq. This morning, Patriarch Antonios Naguib of the Egyptian Coptic church said Iraq's Christians have been "the

primary victims of the war and its consequences.?

More often, however, the rise in the Catholic (and other Christian) population of these Arabian states has been driven by a significant influx of new migrants from Asia and Africa, drawn by the affluence and construction boom of the region. Saudi Arabia's population today is roughly 27 million, including an estimated total of 5.5 million resident foreigners, most of them "guest workers" in the oil and construction industries and in domestic capacities.

Asians in particular have swelled the expatriate community in Saudi Arabia, with pools of new migrants from India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines. During the 1980s there were also significant numbers of South Koreans, but most have subsequently gone home.

These new immigrants are often disproportionately Christian, and in the case of Filipinos, disproportionately Catholic. The swelling Filipino diaspora on the Arabian Peninsula has actually prompted some Filipino Catholics to float the idea of a new "Personal Prelature" for their expatriates in the Middle East, which would mobilize clergy to provide pastoral care.

The new migrants in Arabia are also often disproportionately women. Saudi households, for example, employ an estimated 1.5 million domestic workers, primarily from Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Nepal.

The sudden rise of a large Christian minority in nations where Islam is effectively the state religion has made religious freedom a signature cause for church leaders, and not just in the Middle East but also in the countries of origin of these migrants.

In India, some 700 members of a Catholic group called "Christ Army for Saudi Arabia" are currently fasting in conjunction with the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, praying that it promote the religious freedom of Indian Catholics in Saudi Arabia.

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The group's founder is an Indian priest named Fr. George Joshua, who spent four days in a Saudi prison in 2006 for celebrating Mass in a private home. Joshua was later expelled from the country by the Muttawa, the religious secret police.

"There is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia and no official pastoral care for the over a million who live in the country," Joshua said in a recent interview. He said that recently a French priest was also detained after celebrating Mass for various groups and released only after several hours of interrogation.

The official Vatican argot for talking about religious freedom in majority Muslim states is usually "reciprocity." The argument is that if Muslim immigrants to the West can claim the benefit of the rule of law and religious freedom, then religious minorities in Muslim states, including Christians, should get the same deal.

During his "report before the discussion" this morning, Naguib argued for special attention to these new Christian arrivals in the Middle East.

"Oftentimes they are faced with injustice and abuse, to the point that international laws and conventions are violated," he said, referring especially to the conditions facing women.

?Our churches must make a greater effort to help them by welcoming them and providing religious and social guidance through appropriate pastoral care in a coordinated effort among bishops, religious congregations and social and charitable organizations,? he said.

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