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Synod opens with call for religious freedom for all in Middle East

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Oct. 11, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- In the face of tension and violence, Middle East Christians must work to defend freedom, democracy, peace and the human rights of each and every individual, said leaders of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: Index of stories from the Synod [1].

"We must emerge from a logic in defense of the rights of Christians only, and engage in the defense of the rights of all," said the introduction to the synod prepared and read by Coptic Patriarch Antonios Naguib of Alexandria, Egypt, the synod's recording secretary, and by Maronite Archbishop Joseph Soueif of Cyprus, synod special secretary.

The introductory report introduced the topics for discussion at the synod during its first working session Oct. 11.

The goal of the synod, it said, is to promote "communion and witness -- both communal and personal -- flowing from a life grounded in Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit."

The synod is not designed to solve political or social problems, the report said. But the report also acknowledged that the everyday life of Catholics in the region obviously is impacted by the political and social realities that can make their lives difficult and that have inspired their works of charity, education and health care for centuries.

While the history, presence, challenges and composition of the Catholic communities in the Middle East vary from Egypt to Iraq and from Turkey to Yemen, the report said they share an attachment to tradition and the experience of identifying themselves and being identified by others in a way that is strongly focused on their religious affiliation.

The report called on Catholics and other people of good will to work together to promote civil communities and nations that have a "positive secularity," which respects the religious identity of its members, but does not define citizenship or rights on the basis of religious belonging.

"Religious freedom is an essential component of human rights," it said.

All the constitutions of the countries represented at the synod recognize the right of religious freedom, but some of them place limits on the freedom of worship and some, in effect, violate the freedom of conscience with legal or social pressures against conversion, it said.

While the Catholic Church "firmly condemns all proselytism" -- pressuring, coercing or enticing someone to change faiths -- Christians can contribute to the freedom and democracy of their nations by promoting greater justice and equality under the law for all believers, the report said.

Patriarch Naguib, speaking at a news conference after the first working session, said that for many Muslims throughout the region, when one speaks of "secularism," it often is seen as a call to do away with religion or at least to limit its influence to people's private lives.

Maronite Bishop Bechara Rai of Jbeil, Lebanon, told reporters later that the church supports a form of church-state separation that ensures religions have a voice in society and that laws reflect moral values -- including laws against euthanasia and gay marriage.

But when religion becomes the primary source of a country's laws and religious authorities have civil power, members of minority communities end up being seen and treated as second-class citizens, he said.

The synod's introductory report asked members to keep in mind the particular difficulties facing Catholics in some countries.

"In the Palestinian territories, life is very difficult and often unsustainable," it said.

The Catholic Church condemns all violence, whatever its origin, and calls for "a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," the report said. The church supports the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians to live in freedom and security in their own countries with internationally recognized borders, it said.

It also said the international community must pay greater attention to "the plight of Christians in Iraq, who are the primary victims of the war and its consequences."

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Iraq are the primary causes today of the emigration of Christians from the region, a phenomenon that not only reduces the Christian presence in the region but also robs the Catholic community of some of its best and brightest members who have an easier time getting into other countries.

The introductory report condemned anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism and called on both Catholics and Jews to recognize that the political tensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not an interreligious conflict among Jews, Muslims and Christians.

And while recognizing there has been a rise in "political Islam" throughout the region since the 1970s, the report said the Muslim communities differ from country to country and have a great variety of positions internally as well.

Catholics must reach out to their Muslim neighbors, promote dialogue with them and work with them to improve the living situations and freedom of all, it said. Religions should be builders of "unity and harmony and an expression of communion between individuals and God," it said.

"Difficulties in the relations between Christians and Muslims generally arise when Muslims do not distinguish between religion and politics," the report said. In such situations, Christians may be treated as second-class citizens in the countries where their families lived before the development of Islam in the 7th century, it added.

"Christians deserve full recognition, passing from being merely tolerated to having a just and equal status based on common citizenship, religious freedom and human rights," the report said.

The synod, which was to meet Oct. 10-24, included the participation of 13 "fraternal delegates" from the Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran communities.

The introductory report called for a real ecumenical push aimed at the full unity of the churches, so that

Christians would support one another and together proclaim the Gospel.

In particular, it urged real action in "establishing dates in common for the celebration of Christmas and Easter," which vary according to the calendars the different churches use.

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