NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Protests against 'Roman imperialism' at Middle East synod

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 12, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
Rome

While the Christians of the Middle East face a staggering variety of external challenges, from the Israeli/Palestinian problem to the rise of radical Islam, it was internal ecclesiastical questions which actually loomed largest during day two of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East.

Concretely, several representatives of the Eastern Churches of the region registered strong protests against what they almost seem to regard as a sort of ?Roman imperialism? inside global Catholicism. Their basic argument is that reforms are required if the identity, authority and heritage of the 22 Eastern Churches in communion with Rome are to be preserved.

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

Six different Eastern churches from the Middle East are represented in the synod: Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite, Melkite, and Syrian. Concretely, different prelates from those churches proposed:

- Eastern Churches in Europe, North America, and elsewhere should be allowed to ordain married priests, not just in the ?historical? territories of those churches;
- Patriarchs and other heads of Eastern Churches should have authority over their communities all around the world, not just those back home;
- Eastern Patriarchs should automatically have the right to cast votes in papal elections, and should take precedence over cardinals;
- The process of papal approval of the election of bishops by the synods of Eastern Churches should be simplified and sped up.

Whether any of those ideas actually survives in the propositions which the Synod of Bishops will eventually deliver to the pope remains to be seen, but collectively they suggest a fairly widespread frustration with what leaders of the Eastern Churches sometimes perceive as a sort of second-class citizenship within Catholicism.

The proposal for married priests came from Archbishop Antonios Aziz Mina, a Coptic prelate from Egypt.

?Since the 1930s there has been a ban on the ordination of and the practice of the ministry by married priests outside the territories of the Patriarchy and the ?Historically Eastern regions,? Mina said.

?I think, in line with whatever the Holy Father decides, that the time has come to take this step in favor of the pastoral care of the Eastern faithful throughout the diaspora,? he said.

Historically, the Vatican has been reluctant to countenance the ordination of married priests for communities of Eastern faithful outside their home regions, partly on the grounds that it might call into question the practice of mandatory celibacy for Latin rite priests as well.

Bishop Vartan Waldir Boghossian, responsible for Armenian Catholics in Latin American and Mexico, delivered the most forceful argument in favor of extending the authority of Eastern patriarchs and other church leaders over their faithful who have emigrated outside the traditional territories of that church.

?It is difficult to understand why the activities of the patriarchs, the bishops and the synods of the Eastern Churches should be limited to their territory,? he said. ?Of the 23 Churches that today in their own right make up the Catholic Church, only one, the Latin Church, is not subject to this limitation.?

?This paternity and jurisdiction must not be limited to a territory,? Boghossian said. ?Limiting it to its faithful is perfectly logical, but not limiting them to a territory, especially if there are no longer members of the Church in that territory!?

The same point was made indirectly by American Monsignor Robert Stern of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, which said that limiting the power of Eastern structures makes sense given an older ?geographic? model of the church, but not so much in light of a more personal approach.

?The limitation of the jurisdiction of Eastern heads of churches ?outside? their homelands presumes a geographic model,? Stern said. ? If a personal network, this is not appropriate.?

Mina, the Coptic bishop from Egypt, echoed the argument in favor of extending the jurisdiction of Eastern patriarchs.

Boghossian was also the prelate who insisted that Eastern patriarchs should vote for the pope and trump cardinals, since a patriarch is actually the head of a church in its own right.

?The Patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches, because of their identity as fathers and leaders of ?sui iuris? churches that go to make up the Catholicism of the Catholic Church, should be ipso facto members of the college that elects the pontiff without the need for the Latin title of ?cardinal?,? he said.

? For the same reason, they should also take precedence over [the cardinals],? Boghossian argued.

Mina also offered several practical suggestions for streamlining and expediting papal approval of the election of bishops in the Eastern Churches, which is typically done by the body of bishops meeting in a synod. In effect, he suggested that the pope be regarded as a member of each synod even if he?s not physically present, and that his consent to an election generally be presumed.

Finally, one additional ?outside the box? idea was floated in the synod this morning: the creation of a bank of priests ready to give three months to a year in service to a community in the Middle East or some other exceptionally priest-starved region of the world.

That idea came from Bishop Giorgio Bertin of Djibouti, and it?s a response to a little-appreciated reality in the West: However bad the priest shortage may seem in Europe and the United States, it?s infinitely worse most other places. In the U.S. and Europe there?s a ratio of 1 priest for every 1,300 baptized Catholics, while in sub-Saharan Africa it?s 1-5,00, in Latin America 1-7,000, and in Southeast Asia 1-5,300.

?I therefore propose the creation of a bank of available priests,? Bertin said. ?That is to say, that from all the Churches and religious congregations a number of priests should make themselves available for a set time: 3

months, 6 months, 9 months.?

?This could be a development and an adaptation to modern scenarios of the ?Fidei donum? and could also provide a shot in the arm both to the churches of the Middle East and the other churches to live and develop their missionary dimension,? he said.

Obviously a man with one eye on marketing, Bertin even had a catchy name for this new bank of priests: ?We could even call [it] ?Priests without frontiers,?? he said, ?because they are ready to be sent and welcomed in a very short period of time.?

Source URL (retrieved on *07/30/2014 - 19:58*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/protests-against-roman-imperialism-middle-east-synod

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/mideast_synod