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Cry from Middle East synod: 'Power to the Patriarchs!'

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 14, 2010 NCR Today

ROME -- Ferment around defending the heritage and prerogatives of the Eastern Catholic churches continues to swirl at the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, as yesterday a Lebanese prelate proposed launching a Vatican commission to study ways of revitalizing the office of Patriarch.

In broad strokes, Eastern bishops typically have two reasons for wanting to emphasize the role of the patriarchs. Internally, it?s an argument for greater collegiality, or shared decision- making, in Catholicism, as a corrective to what is perceived as excessive papal power; externally, it?s a way of giving the patriarch a higher international profile as a way of insulating their flocks in the Middle East against possible pressures and attacks.

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

Auxiliary Bishop Guy-Paul Noujaim pointed to Pope John Paul II?s invitation to study new ways of exercising the primacy of the pope, ?inspired by the ecclesical forms of the first millennium.?

The office of patriarch became a pillar of Christianity?s structure during it first 1,000 years, but Noujaim suggested that the traditional ?privileges? of the patriarchs went into decline during the second millennium.

Noujaim conceded, however, that several developments in the meantime complicate efforts to elevate today?s cluster of patriarchs:

- Several new patriarchates have been created since the traditional ?pentarchy? of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.
- In some cases, there are now several Catholic patriarchs and at least one Orthodox patriarch in the same diocese.
- The current structures of the Vatican have ?badly defined prerogatives? in terms of their relationships with the patriarchates.

As a result, Noujaim proposed creating a commission of ?theological, historical and pastoral experts? to study these problems and arrive at solutions.

Noujaim is not the only voice in the synod to press for greater emphasis on the role of the patriarchs. Some bishops, for example, have argued that Eastern Catholic patriarchs should have greater authority over their communities outside their traditional territories, for example in Western Europe and Canada.

Bishop Vartan Waldir Boghossian, responsible for Armenian Catholics in Latin American and Mexico, argued that patriarchs should take precedence over cardinals in the ecclesiastical pecking order, and that they should automatically have the right to elect the next pope.

The idea has some precedent. Pope Paul VI reportedly considered including the patriarchs, along with presidents of national conferences of bishops, in the conclave that elects the pope, but pulled back for fear that the process might become unwieldly or excessively political.

Around the margins of the synod, it seems clear that not all Eastern Christians share the same enthusiasm for strengthening the patriarchs or extending their authority. Quietly, some say that the patriarchates can at times be insular, and sometimes function as a sort of mini-papacy with the same struggles with authority and collegiality as Rome, but on a smaller scale.

Some suggest that if there's an institution from the Eastern tradition that ought to be enhanced, it's arguably the synod, where bishops settle most important matters collegially -- including the election of new bishops.

Archbishop Antonios Aziz Mina, a Coptic prelate from Egypt, has argued that the process of giving papal approval to episcopal elections by synods ought to be streamlined and accelerated.

Synod watchers will be waiting to see if the idea of a commission to study the patriarch?s office is included in the final set of propositions to be presented to Pope Benedict late next week.

Other reports on the synod can be found at http://ncronline.org/mideast_synod

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