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Beyond a 'tea and cookies' dialogue with Islam

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 15, 2010 NCR Today

ROME -- Given the setting of the Middle East, Christians are compelled to pursue dialogue with the vast Muslim majority; in fact, it would be virtually impossible to avoid.

Several participants at the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, however, seem eager to push that dialogue beyond a ?tea and cookies? stage, where the point is merely being polite to one another, into blunt talk about religious freedom, democracy, and what one speaker described as ?satanic plans by fundamental extremist groups? to extinguish Christianity in the region.

While it?s not clear what real impact either the local churches of the Middle East or Catholicism generally can have on those fronts, there appears to be a strong feeling in the synod that it?s time to lay things on the line.

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

One such call came from Archbishop Cyrille Salim Bustros, a Greek-Melkite prelate in the United States.

t?On one hand and in principle, the assertion of tolerance is clear in the Koran,? Bustros said. ?On the other hand, and in fact, the laws of all the Arab countries, except for Lebanon where one is allowed to change religion, threaten death to all Muslims who convert to another religion."

Mincing no words, Bustros added, ?We ask here: where can tolerance be found??

?The first principle of all societies is the equality of all citizens before the law,? Bustros said. ?The respect for the conscience of each individual is the sign of the recognition of the dignity of the human being.?

Chaldean Archbishop Thomas Meram of Iran was equally candid.

?The Christian hears every day from loudspeakers, television, newspapers and magazines that he is an infidel, and he is treated as a second-class citizen,? Meram said.

Those words seemed to have a special resonance in light of a presentation to the synod by Ayatollah Sayed Mostafa Mohaghegh Ahmadabadi, who claimed that ?in most Islamic countries, notably Iran, as it has been stipulated also by law, Christians live side by side and in peace with their Muslim brothers.?

Despite the pressures he described, Meram said that Christians ?stand firm and solid and ? become more courageous and proud of their faith.?

Maronite Bishop Paul-Emile Saadé of Lebanon said that accelerating migration out of the Middle East is robbing the Christian community of its ?brains and specialized personnel,? violating their right to build a future.

?Their homeland is the land of their ancestors,? Saadé said, adding a clinching sound-bite: ?The homeland is not

a hotel.?

In that light, Saadé, it?s critical for Christians to engage moderate Muslims and encourage them ?to stand firmly against fanatical extremist religious movements.?

tCardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, President of the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, also delivered a blunt diagnosis.

?The churches and minority religions in the Middle East must not be subject to discrimination, violence, defamatory propaganda (anti-Christian), the denial of building permits for places of worship and the organization of public functions,? he said.

Turkson told NCR Friday morning that when he spoke about building permits, he was partly thinking of a situation in Egypt where a Coptic church is crumbling but local political authorities have so far refused to issue permits for repairs. Turkson said that it seems as if there?s a deliberate policy to allow the church, and eventually its faithful, to disappear.

Turkson also took on a resolution of the United Nations on ?Defamation of Religions,? which decries words or actions perceived as attacks on a religion, and which has been backed by Islamic nations. Some Christian activists have criticized the resolution as a not-so-subtle way of criminalizing Christian missionary efforts and of defending the controversial ?blasphemy laws? in some Islamic states.

?Promotion of the resolution against the Defamation of Religions in the framework of the United Nations should not limit itself to Islam, or ?Islamophobia, in the Western world,? Turkson said. ?It should include Christianity, or ?Christianophobia,?in the Islamic world.?

?We can also promote the adoption, again within the UN framework, of a resolution on religious freedom as an alternative to the resolution on the defamation of religions,? Turkson said.

Fr. Raymond Moussalli, an official of the Chaldean patriarchate in Jordan, said that Christians in Iraq are under attack ? and he describeditt in unstinting terms.

?There is a deliberate campaign to drive Christians out of the country,? Moussalli said. ?There are satanic plans by fundamental extremist groups that are not only against Iraqi Christians in Iraq, but Christians throughout the Middle East.?

Moussalli pled for global outrage.

?We want to make the international community aware that it cannot remain silent in the face of the massacre of Christians in Iraq, the countries with the Catholic tradition, so that they might do something for Iraqi Christians, beginning with placing pressure on local government,? he said.

tPerhaps the most emotional speech of the day came Archbishop Ruggero Franceschini of Izmir, Turkey, who is also struggling to lead the small Catholic community in Anatolia after its own bishop, Italian Capuchin Luigi Padovese, was murdered in June by his longtime driver. Though the driver?s motives remain murky, many have speculated that he came under the influence of extremist groups.

tFranceschini said the ?organizers? of the killing are now spreading ?intolerable slander,? likely a reference to claims initially voiced by police sources in Turkey that Padovese had subjected his driver to homosexual abuse. Those claims have been strongly denied by church personnel in Turkey.

?The survival of the Church of Anatoly is at risk,? Franceschini said, ?and this is a situation in which I ask you,

gravely and urgently, to participate.?

Franceschini openly described ?a dark plot of complicity between ultra-nationalists and religious fanatics, experts in schemes of tension,? which is targeting the Christian presence.

Turkson said that the Catholic church may not be able to directly influence either the political realities in the Middle East or internal debates within Islam, but it can, and must, speak out, because the situation is too dire for diplomatic silence.

Certainly yesterday at the Synod of Bishops, that seemed to be the spirit of things.

Editor's Note: John Allen had a full week in Rome, and not just at the Synod of Bishops from the Middle East. Read a full accounting of his week in his Friday online column, All Things Catholic: "**Sweeps week in Rome** [2]."

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