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

For Palestinian Christians, things 'not hopeless, yet not very promising'

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

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
Rome

For Arab Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, the situation is ?not hopeless, yet not very promising,? a prominent educator and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council for Jerusalem said today.

Bernard Sabella, associate professor of sociology at the Holy See's Bethlehem University, and a participant in the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, offered the assessment during a press conference organized by the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and the Canadian media network ?Salt and Light.?

Sabella also said that Palestinian Christians can and should make a critical contribution to their societies: Promoting the development of secular, democratic states in which all citizens are equal before the law.

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

In general, Sabella said that many of the difficulties Arab Christians face in the Palestinian Territories are related to broad socio-economic and political factors, as opposed to specifically anti-Christian animus.

Sabella said that when the economy revives in the area, emigration by Christians declines, as the traffic of pilgrims from abroad picks up and local Christians are able to generate income by providing them religious items and services.

When instability is the rule, he said, Christians tend to leave.

Recent data, according to Sabella, show that some 900 to 1,000 Christians leave the Palestinian Territories each year, equivalent to 200 families. Given that the total number of Christians in the Territories is perhaps 50,000, he said, that?s a significant rate of attrition.

Sabella argued that in general, Arab Christians both in the Palestinian Territories and in Israel face similar challenges ? contrary to some suggestions from Israeli spokespersons that Christians inside Israel itself are in much better shape.

Sabella said that Christians in Israel are better off economically, and take advantage of Israeli educational institutions. Yet he also pointed to a recent survey of younger Christians in Israel, in which he said that 26 percent indicated a desire to leave. That number, he said, is basically equivalent to the percentage of young Christians in the Palestinian Territories who say the same thing.

The reason, he said, is that many Arabs in Israel do not feel ?fully integrated? into Israeli society.

As an example, Sabella pointed to a recent Israeli policy of refusing to reissue identity cards for Arab residents of Jerusalem who spend significant periods of time abroad, on the theory that the ?center of their life? is outside the city. He charged that the policy is motivated by a desire to maintain a demographic balance in Jerusalem of 30 percent Arabs and 70 percent Jews, although today , he said, it?s more like 35 percent Arab and 65 percent Jewish.

On the Palestinian side of the equation, Sabella conceded that ?we are aware and sensitive to the fact Islam is becoming more pervasive in the public sphere,? and that ?there is a political agenda to make Islam the law of the land.?

Yet, he said, those currents are not presently affecting the Christians in the Palestinian Territories. Even in the Gaza Strip, he asserted, relations between Christians and the Hamas movement are ?good, excellent.?

At the same time, Sabella said he would not support a Palestinian state governed by Hamas, because ?their vision is strictly religious, while ours is more secular and open, based on equality for all.?

He said he understands that some Christians in the Middle East feel ?cornered,? especially in places such as Iraq where their physical safety is often at stake. Yet, he said, ?The answer is not really to run away.?

?We must leave our imprint as Christian churches on the Middle East,? Sabella said.

Bethlehem University, the first university founded in the West Bank, was launched in 1973 and is sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Sabella said that two striking things about its student population of roughly 3,000 is that it?s 70 percent Muslim, and 70 percent women.

In truth, Sabella said, the overwhelming presence of Muslim students has sometimes been an obstacle to generating support in the West. Yet he said it?s actually a core aspect of the contribution made by the university.

?Catholic schools open the mind to the broader world,? he said. ?Someone said to me the other say that the Muslim students with whom I went to school speak a different language from the fundamentalists and more extremist people.?

On a related note, Sabella said that others wonder if by educating people at a high level, the university is simply making them more prone to leave. In fact, he said, the vast majority of the university?s 12,000 graduates have chosen to remain in the region.

Sabella also explained how the erection of Israel?s security wall around the West Bank, and the proliferation of check points in the Palestinian Territories, complicate life for students at the university. Physically, a trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem should take twenty minutes by car, he said, but in reality a student who leaves Jerusalem at 6:30 am would be lucky to make it to the university in time for an 8:00 am class.

Finally, Sabella suggested that the Middle East synod try to develop a plan of action not for the entire region, but for sub-regions, given the diversity of situations. He suggested the following breakdown:

?tSudan/Egypt/Eritrea/Ethiopia
?tSyria/Lebanon/Jordan
?tThe Gulf States
?tIsrael and the Palestinian Territories

In terms of what such a plan might contain, Sabella said the church by itself is ?not going to solve the Israeli/Palestinian problem,? but it can commit itself to ?working diligently for peace,? to ?real, honest dialogue,? and to efforts to alleviate ?poverty in our societies.?

Source URL (retrieved on *11/28/2015 - 12:55*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/palestinian-christians-things-not-hopeless-yet-not-very-promising

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