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

Want to help Middle East Christians? Reach out to U.S. Muslims

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 17, 2010 NCR Today

ROME -- Created by mandate of Pope Pius XI in 1926, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association is probably the most important vehicle in the United States for supporting the Christians of the Middle East, as well as Eastern Catholic churches in Northern Africa, India, and Eastern Europe.

Some of the association's priorities are *ad intra*, such as providing formation for Eastern Catholic priests, and some are *ad extra*, such as providing job opportunities for unemployed Palestinians and caring for orphaned children in Ethiopia.

tAltogether, CNEWA channels about $20 million each year in support from Catholics in the U.S. and Canada to the churches of the Middle East.

tThe CNEWA also raises consciousness in the West about the realities facing the Middle East, which is part of the reason that Monsignor Robert Stern, secretary general, is a member of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East. In many ways, Stern has become the ?go-to? figure in the U.S. for insight about the state of Christianity in the land of its birth.

Stern sat down on Sunday afternoon for an interview with *NCR*.

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

As you move around the American Catholic church, do you find a lot of concern for the church in the Middle East?

I think that everybody knows about the Holy Land, because Israel and Palestine are in the headlines all the time. Of course, in recent years there?s been a lot of attention to Iraq too, although the idea of the church in Iraq is not what?s in the headlines. Elsewhere, there?s less awareness. A lot of Americans think of Syria as the bad guy, for example, yet the church in Syria is doing very well. It?s one of the best environments for Christians in the Middle East, and it?s probably one of the most ecumenical environments.

Do you find that American Catholics feel a special concern for Iraq because of the American role in that country?

No, I don?t see that. I think they see the Iraqis through the stereotype of Muslim extremists, militant extremists, whom we?re fighting. They?re the enemy. It?s hard to bridge that gap and say, wait, there are also Iraqi Christians and they?re our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Several Iraqi Christians at the synod have said that they are the primary victims of the conflict in Iraq. Has that penetrated the American Catholic consciousness?

I don?t think so. I don?t think we?re that conscious of the existence of a Catholic church in Iraq. It?s true that with the rise of Muslim extremism, all of a sudden Christians are targeted. That didn?t happen before with Saddam Hussein. They were protected, but now they?re targeted. There have been a lot of acts of violence, with religious and priests killed, a bishop killed, and so on.

So for the typical American Catholic, there?s concern for the Holy Land, but the broader situation for the church in the Middle East isn?t on the radar screen.

Exactly. I really think that for the average man and woman in the pew in the United States, the idea that Arabs are Christians is still a novelty.

There?s been a lot of talk at the synod about the need for greater democracy in Muslim societies, for a distinction between religion and the state and equality before the law. Realistically, is there anything the church can do to bring that about?

The Christians themselves in the Middle East are just a tiny minority. It?s hard for them to radically influence the direction of their societies. They?re part of it, but they don?t have the power. Sure, Christians in the Western world could have a big impact on it.

Speaking as an American, if we were more knowledgeable about the situation, and American Catholics influenced the formation of U.S. public policy, that could be very helpful.

I suspect it?s easier for Americans to grasp how we might influence Israel, given the massive subsidies we provide, than how we might influence Islamic societies like Iran.

I think you?re right, it?s very hard for us to intrude on the cultural realities. I think inevitably, as these societies have more interaction with Western countries and become less defensive, more comfortable liberalizing the way life is lived there, change will come. We have to think about the way we were 150 years ago. Can you imagine moving into Spain in the 1920s, and talking about equal rights for Muslims and Jews? It was unthinkable. They?re still evolving, and we have to be patient.

We have to do everything possible, but we also have to understand where they?re coming from, not pushing something down their throats. We have to give them a chance to grow and evolve, just as we had to grow and evolve. The way the Catholic church speaks about itself and the world now is very different than not so long ago. I was a kid at the beginning of the Second World War, and it was clear that outside the Catholic church there is no salvation, That was cut and dried and died in the wool. We?ve come a long way in fifty or sixty years.

Some say that American Catholics are in a privileged position to promote a reform within Islam, because not so long ago we were trapped between a lived experience that religion can thrive in a pluralistic culture, and an official theology that said religion must be supported by the state. Today, American Muslims are in the same situation, and the theory goes that American Catholics could help them walk the same path we have. Do you agree?

Enthusiastically. I firmly believe that the American experience of pluralism and religious freedom is fantastic. My greatest hope is that American Muslims will discover that you can be a good Muslim, you can thrive in a pluralistic society, and bring that value to the rest of the Islamic world. It would be a wonderful thing.

So when Americans ask what we can do to change Islam, the answer is to reach out to the Muslims in your own backyard?

Yes. Don?t be misled to think that Islam is what you read about in the newspapers and see on TV. Get to know the local Muslims in the States, who are fellow Americans. There?s an analogy with Judaism. There?s a huge difference between the Jews in Israel, and the Jews in the United States. American Jews have a whole different way of looking at the world situation. Some currents of Zionism and nationalism are detrimental to the long-term best interests of Judaism. I think American Muslims are in the same situation, and my greatest hope is with Islam in the United States. Americans are more religious that most other countries, and yet we have separation of church and state.

Muslims in America today are immigrants, in some ways in the same situation we Catholics were in the 19th century. Instead of taking arms up against them, what we should be doing is protecting them and welcoming them.

The usual narrative about Christianity in the Middle East is that it?s dying. Can you make a case for hope?

First of all, I don?t think we should be so geographically focused. If it?s all about Christianity in the Middle East, yes, it?s diminishing. But if it?s about the Christians of the Middle East, they?re flourishing, just not in the Middle East anymore. There?s nothing wrong with tons of Arab Christians being in Detroit, or Sydney, or Santiago in Chile, or Honduras. They?re bringing the richness of their culture and sharing it. They?re growing and expanding, their kids are moving on, they?re upwardly mobile. That?s great. It doesn?t have to take place within the geography of the Middle East.

Moreover, there is also an influx of new Christians in the Middle East in the form of foreign workers, isn?t there?

Sure. In the synod, it?s been said that fifty percent of the Christians in the Middle East today, meaning roughly half, are foreign workers. The modern world is one, and people are moving all over. It?s not like the old days, when we were in little boxes and you counted how many people were in each box. The number of indigenous Christians in the Middle East may be diminishing, but the total number of Christians is actually increasing because people are coming from other parts of the world to live and work there. Some of them are staying. They may not have citizenship and they may not feel welcome, but sooner or later that?s going to change.

Also, it?s important to realize that in terms of raw numbers, the number of Arab Christians in the Middle East is higher than it was 100 years ago. The proportion of Christians within the total population is much smaller, but the absolute number of Christians is tolerable.

There are also places in the Middle East where Christian life, if not flourishing, is at least tolerable, right? For example, Jordan, Syria ?

Absolutely. The situation in Lebanon is also fairly healthy. By no means is the situation a death sentence.

Some of the states of the Middle East give support and encouragement to the Christians. In Jordan and Syria, for example, and some elements of the Lebanese government, want Christians to flourish. They actually inflate the numbers of Christians because they want more Christians in parliament. Take Jordan ? traditionally, meaning the last century or so, Jordanian history started in the Islamic period. Now, we as Christians know, and archeologists know, that Jordan was totally Christian at one point in history. There were many bishoprics that were represented in the early church councils and so on. Yet history for the average Jordanian started in the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, maybe for very practical motives, is trying to call attention to the Christian

history of the country. It?ll bring people to Jordan, it?ll bring pilgrims. When you see a road sign that says, ?To the baptism site,? that?s astounding.

There are also higher motives. The former Crown Prince, Prince Hassan, always said that a Middle East bereft of its Christian community would be a Middle East bereft of its Middle Class, even its upper class, of its well-educated persons, It?s part and parcel of that mosaic that makes up the Middle East. They want to nurture and develop the Christian presence. It?s not just what we might call the ?enlightened? leaders of the region, either. Saddam Hussein was hardly an enlightened leader, expect that the understood it was in his best interests that the Christian community of Iraq be sustainable, healthy and vibrant. It?s the same thing with the Assads in Syria.

Even theologically, Islam grew out of a Judeo-Christian world, so if Christianity disappears, it?s cut off some of the roots of its own identity. Many Muslims understand this.

What is CNEWA?

CNEWA was set up in the 1920s as a specialized agency of the Holy See to assist all the churches under the jurisdiction of the Congregation for Eastern Churches and those of the Pontifical Commission for Russia.

Was it explicitly American at the beginning?

There were a couple of movements in the United States at that time. It was the post-World War I period, and all of the resources were in the States. There were movements for church unity, and movements to support the Eastern Catholic churches of the former Ottoman Empire. The Holy See put them all together in 1926, with a mandate to help the Eastern Catholic churches, to work for church unity, and to educate people in the West about the East.

Even though it was headquartered in the United States, it was bigger than an American Catholic operation?

It was, so to speak, the theoretical equivalent of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith for the mission countries, even though it was very American-bound.

What does CNEWA look like today?

There are many agencies that have developed to help the church in the Middle East and the Eastern churches. I think what?s distinctive about us is that we have local offices, with local staff, and we try to work very closely with the local churches and to place our local offices at the disposition of the Holy See and all other Catholic donor agencies around the world.

How many staff do you have?

Altogether, about 125 people. We have an office in Amman for Jordan and Iraq, an office in Jerusalem for Israel and Palestine, an office in Beirut for Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, and Addis Ababa for Ethiopia and Eritrea, and an office in India. Of course, we also have a central office in Rome.

Do you have any idea in dollar terms how much support flows from the American Catholic church to the church in the Middle East?

Just for CNEWA, from the United States and Canada too, where we have a major program, somewhere in the neighborhood of $20 million a year.

What is that money spent on?

A lot of it is institutional subsidies. We support the formation of most Eastern Catholic priests around the world.

You mean outside the Middle East, or in the Middle East?

Both. We?re not the Middle East alone. The name implies the Middle East, but we?re concerned with the Eastern churches everywhere. A major program is supporting the theological formation of Eastern priests, and also the formation of religious, especially sisters. We also have a big program for supporting child care institutions. That includes a lot of orphanages and child care institutions. In Eritrea, there are a lot of schools, in Lebanon, a number of specialized child care institutions. We also support other projects to help the work of the church in all of the countries.

We?re a relatively small agency, so I guess our philosophy is that we try to address the needs that fall through the cracks with the big guys.

Many American Catholics wonder what they can do to be of help to Christians in the Middle East. What?s the answer?

We?re concerned about raising consciousness. The first thing is to realize that Muslims are fellow believers in the same God, and that they share a huge patrimony with Christianity. Muslims have very similar values with Christians. The first thing is to reach out to Muslims as brothers and sisters. Maybe they look different, sound different, and act different, but deep down inside they?re very similar. That?s step one. If we think of the challenge as creating greater strength for Christians vis-à-vis Muslims, we?re going down a dead-end street. In the Middle East, it?s an Islamic world. What we have to do is stress that we?re so close to you, we?re fruits of the same tree. If we reach out to Muslims, then Muslims will see affinities with Christianity, instead of seeing the Christian West as the home of the enemy.

Practically, that means dealing with the local Muslims. Reach out to the American Muslims and welcome them as part of the American scene. If we can establish that Islam can flourish in the United States, it?s a lesson for the whole Islamic world.

What about those Catholics who want to do something concrete to help Christians in the Middle East?

Obviously, our agency is trying to raise money, so one thing would be to help us. We are an agency that channels support effectively and discretely and cost-effectively to Christian institutions in the Middle East. That helps to keep the church alive, although those institutions actually serve the total population.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/29/2015 - 08:27*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/want-help-middle-east-christians-reach-out-us-muslims

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