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Fate of Christians, Muslims tied in Middle East

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Feb. 4, 2011

ROME -- Christians and Muslims are involved together in the democracy and reform movements bubbling up around the Middle East and members of both communities will gain from their success and suffer if they are violently suppressed, said a leading Lebanese Muslim scholar.

With demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt, simmering unrest in Yemen and government changes in Lebanon, "I am both worried and hopeful," said Muhammad al-Sammak, adviser to the chief mufti of Lebanon and secretary general of Lebanon's Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue.

Al-Sammak, whom Pope Benedict XVI invited to speak to the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in October, met with journalists Feb. 4 at the Rome headquarters of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay organization active in interreligious dialogue for peace.

"It is true that the situation of Christians in the Middle East is not good," al-Sammak said, adding that the region's governments must do more to protect the religious minorities in their midst.

One concrete proposal for accomplishing that, he said, is a "fatwa" -- an Islamic legal opinion -- declaring that in Islam and for a Muslim "harming a Christian is like harming a Muslim and attacking a church is like attacking a mosque."

Al-Sammak drafted a fatwa at the request of Saad Hariri, when Hariri was still Lebanon's prime minister. Adoption of the fatwa by Islamic and government leaders around the Middle East stalled only because Hariri's government fell and the essential support of influential Muslim scholars at Al-Ahzar University in Cairo was difficult to obtain while their country was experiencing widespread demonstrations, al-Sammak said.

The scholar told reporters in Rome that the protests and unrest throughout the Middle East "just started, but it came after a long period of fermentation. The political outcome is likely to take different shapes in different countries," he said.

But one thing he knows for sure, and that, he said, is "the Christians in the Middle East are part of this change. They are not opposed to it; they are not leading it; they are part of it."

Members of the bishops' conference of northern Africa, which held its annual meeting Jan. 29-Feb. 2 in Algiers, Algeria, said the protests in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries are a sign of the "demand for freedom and dignity, particularly by the younger generations in the region."

The bishops in the conference, which covers Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya, said the demonstrations show that the region's inhabitants want to "be recognized as citizens" with full rights and responsibilities to participate in governing their countries.

The North African bishops said wider respect for religious freedom should be part of the regional push for

human rights.

Religious freedom "means, above all, freedom of conscience granted to everyone, the freedom to seek the truth. It implies respect for others, their dignity, (which is) the foundation of the moral legitimacy of any legal or social norm," the bishops said in a statement published Feb. 3.

The bishops said freedom of conscience and the meaning of citizenship "will no doubt increasingly be at the heart of the dialogue between Muslim and Christian believers" who live in northern Africa.

Decades of dialogue, of living side by side and of sharing joys and hardships have led to real friendships being formed between Christians and Muslims in the region, the bishops said.

The experience has convinced the bishops that, "yes, Christian-Muslim dialogue is possible," they said.

Also Feb. 3, Fides, the Vatican's missionary news agency, published an interview with Comboni Father Luciano Verdoscia, who lives and works in Cairo. The Italian missionary said that after several days of peaceful protests, "the climate has changed," with many people blaming members of President Hosni Mubarak's National Party for provoking violence among the crowd Feb. 3.

"Tempers are heating up," the priest said, and foreigners have been urged not to leave their homes.

Father Verdoscia said the situation is complex, with the protesters calling for Mubarak to leave after almost 30 years in power.

But "there are many people who support Mubarak," Father Verdoscia said. "In my opinion, they may account for 40 percent of the population, particularly people from the upper and upper-middle classes," in a country where the divide between rich and poor "is very deep and evident."

"I hope that this will not have a bloody ending, because what has been occurring in recent days has been an example of nobility, gentleness and courage on the part of the people," he said.

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