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Maronite patriarch pledges to work with Muslims

Doreen Abi Raad Catholic News Service | Mar. 28, 2011

BEIRUT -- The new patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church pledged to work with Muslims, noting that Lebanon is a country of partnership between Muslims and Christians.

Patriarch Bechara Rai said that, for the sake of communion and love, he would work "to establish a sincere and complete dialogue" with Muslims "and build together a future in common life and cooperation."

Thousands of people, accepting the open invitation from Bkerke, the patriarchal seat of the Maronite church, flocked to witness the patriarch's enthronement.

They came from all over Lebanon, many arriving in convoys of buses decorated with pictures of the new patriarch, papal flags waving from windows. The patriarchate said people filled all 16,000 seats outside the domed church on the sprawling grounds.

Crowds cheered and ululated as the new patriarch made his way on the red carpet followed by his predecessor, 90-year-old Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir, who resigned in February because of his age.

In his homily, Patriarch Rai called attention to the significance of the date, March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, pointing out that it was instituted in 2010 as a national holiday in Lebanon because it is holy to Christians and Muslims.

The patriarch also noted the special meaning of the Annunciation for him personally, as he was baptized on the feast at the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation in the village of Chouya, Lebanon, 71 years ago. His name, "Bechara," means "Annunciation" in Arabic.

The new patriarch referred often to "communion and love," which he chose as the motto for his patriarchal ministry.

He lamented how Lebanon's diversity of religions had become "tainted by political and partisan colors that have stripped them of their sanctity, the purity of their faith and the spirituality of their religion."

As is customary for the patriarchs of the Eastern churches in union with Rome, the new Maronite leader -- elected March 15 -- formally requested communion with Pope Benedict XVI, which was granted. The Vatican published the exchange of letters between Patriarch Rai and Pope Benedict March 25.

Patriarch Rai takes leadership of the Maronite Catholic Church during a period of political divisions in Lebanon, particularly among Christians.

The new patriarch warned that Lebanon "is not for one religion, party or group alone, and it should not be monopolized by any, because the monopolization of Lebanon by a single group would represent humiliation to all and a loss to the country whose greatness lies in the diversity of its spiritual families and their richness."

He said he was following events surrounding the unrest sweeping the Arab region with anxiety and was praying for stability and peace.

Patriarch Rai said his predecessor "struggled with insistence to free both the national decision-making and the land of Lebanon from all forms of tutelage and occupation, worked for reconciliation in Mount Lebanon and realized needed church reforms."

"All of these constitute an extension of the church's springtime started by the Second Vatican Council," he said.

Patriarch Rai called upon the intercession of St. Rafqa -- who, like the patriarch, was born in Himlaya, Lebanon -- and her mission of suffering. He said he relies on the merits of the blood of the martyrs of Lebanon, the intercession of its saints, and the prayers of the sick, the handicapped and the elderly "who join their suffering to the redemptive suffering of Christ."

The patriarch also said the youth, and the nation's 1.3 million students are "our future and the hope of our church and homeland."

"Our concern is also the family -- the essential cell of our society and the natural and first school of our values -- and the 'domestic church' which educates in faith and prayer," he said.

Among those seated inside the church for the enthronement Mass were Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, a Maronite Catholic; caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Prime Minister-designate Nagib Mikati, Sunni Muslims; and Speaker of the House Nabih Berri, a Shiite Muslim; rival politicians, including a representative from Hezbollah; diplomats, dignitaries, patriarchs and other religious officials; nuns and priests.

Of the approximately 5.5 million Maronites worldwide, about 1 million live in Lebanon.

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