

Franciscan: Middle East Christians must be courageous

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VATICAN CITY -- Christians in the Middle East should not live in fear of the changes happening across the region but should act with courage to denounce situations of injustice and with a Christian attitude of willingness to dialogue, said the head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

"There is great uncertainty and great fear" among Christians in Egypt and Syria, Franciscan Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa told Vatican Radio Aug. 24.

Speaking to the radio in Rimini, Italy, where he was participating in a conference sponsored by the Communion and Liberation movement, Father Pizzaballa said that, too often, if Christians in the Middle East express concern about problems or potential tensions between Christians and Muslims, they are accused of "wanting to accentuate the differences."

"If, on the other hand, you say there is collaboration and sharing, you're (accused of being) naive," he said. "Both these experiences exist. It's not one or the other.

"There are experiences of sharing, but also elements of fundamentalism, division and persecution" in the region, he said.

"We must not be afraid, we always say, but we must have the courage ... to say how things really are with clarity, but also maintaining a Christian attitude of witness, openness, welcome and trying in every case to reconstruct dialogue and relationships," the Franciscan said.

"From a strategic point of view, if we want to be practical, there is no alternative, but also because this is what our faith teaches," he said.

In parts of the Middle East and the wider Arab world, Christians can witness to their faith only through the way they live and relate to others, he said.

The changes sweeping through countries across North Africa and over to Syria obviously give rise to hopes, but also concerns, he added.

"Right now in Egypt there is much fear and uncertainty because, after a period of euphoria" and unity after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, "it seems that the more fundamentalist parties are prevailing," he said.

In Syria, "Christians were and still are treated with great respect," but the protest movements against the government have led to concerns that the respect they were guaranteed for decades may be threatened, Father Pizzaballa said.