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'Black Sunday' for Christians in Egypt

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 14, 2011 All Things Catholic

Somewhere down the line, historians may point to Sunday, Oct. 9, 2011, as the date when the Arab Spring began to give way to a deadly winter, especially for the Christians of the Middle East. On that date in a Cairo suburb, at least 25 people were killed and hundreds injured when bands of thugs and the Egyptian army attacked demonstrators, mainly Coptic Christians, protesting the burning of a Christian church in September.

(See below for extracts from an eye-witness testimony from a young Egyptian Muslim woman, who was on hand to express solidarity with the Christians. She's emphatic that what happened last Sunday was not primarily about Muslim-Christian animosities, but an army that fired indiscriminately on a peaceful mix of Christians and Muslims for its own reasons.)

Whatever the real roots of the violence, it's tough for Egypt's Christians, who represent 10 percent of the population and the largest Christian community in the Middle East, not to see Oct. 9 as a sort of "Black Sunday," potentially marking the beginning of the end. That's especially tempting when they look across the region at Iraq, another traditional Middle Eastern powerhouse where a dictator recently fell, and where the aftermath has been cataclysmic. Since the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq has lost two-thirds of its Christian population, falling from two million to perhaps as little as 250,000 in the arc of just two decades.

The slow-motion decline of Christianity in the land of its birth has been underway for almost a century, turbo-charged recently by violence and the rise of Islamic radicalism. Ironically, it tended to be the region's old-style police states, such as Iraq, Egypt, and Syria, where Christians fared the best. Now that those regimes have either vanished or are on life support, many analysts wonder whether Christianity will be the first victim of the new order taking shape.

For on-lookers in the West, it's hard to know what to make of the rapidly shifting situation, and harder still to know what to do that might be of real help. For perspective, I turned this week to Scott Appleby of Notre Dame, a distinguished American Catholic historian and scholar of religion who heads the university's "Contending Modernities" project, designed to foster dialogue among Catholics, Muslims, and secularists. As part of that effort, Appleby has forged close ties with important religious authorities in Egypt, including Shaykh Ali Goma, the Grand Mufti.

Excerpts from my conversation with Appleby appear below. Two points stand out:

- If American Catholics want to support the beleaguered Christians of the Middle East, Appleby says, the best long-term strategy is to boost our own "Islamic literacy," learning to make careful distinctions among various actors in the Islamic world ? and the best way to do that, he says, is by engaging the Muslims in our own backyard.
- Christians in the West must acknowledge, and help revitalize, the traditional authority structures and leaders in the Islamic world, Appleby says, because relying solely on moderates and Westernized Muslims will not reach the "street" in Egypt or anywhere else.

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Q: What's your read on the anti-Christian attacks last Sunday?
Appleby: I may be too sympathetic to the conspiracy theorists, but based on what I'm hearing from my Egyptian friends, I think there is some plausibility to the idea that the military is attempting to stir up trouble. Some say they want a civil war, or at least widespread unrest, in order to impose a state of emergency and to postpone elections indefinitely. One surefire way to do that is to stir the pot with the Copts, dividing the Muslim population and giving support to the more radical wings of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is a diverse organization, undergoing an internal struggle right now, and there are also Islamic jihadist groups not part of the Brotherhood which are in the mix. One way of thinking about it is that this could be the military giving the Christians an excuse to become militant, thereby dividing the national community.

What are you hearing from Christians in Egypt?
All things considered, Mubarak was a friend to the Copts. He kept the peace and made certain concessions to Pope Shenouda. It was all theatre in some ways, but there was give and take. As a result, the Coptic Christian leadership was not a prophetic voice against the Mubarak regime. That's also true of the smaller, but still important, Christian community in Syria. You'll find many rank-and-file Christians in the protest movements, but the leadership is generally more supportive of the regime. They're taking what one might call a more realistic view of what comes afterward, as in Iraq, which was bad news for the Christians. Their sense is that it's better to deal with the devil you know. The generalized attitude among the Christians, especially at the leadership level, is that their community is vulnerable and shrinking, and the fear of Islamic extremists is very real.

What should Catholic leaders in the West be doing?
The Vatican and the Catholic bishops in the United States have to be much more discriminating in their public statements about Islam, and in terms of their general attitude toward Islam, especially the Sunni world. Several of my Muslim colleagues want a stronger relationship with Catholics, but they're disgruntled over what they see from the Vatican. Some who have been involved with [formal dialogues] say that both publicly and behind closed doors, Vatican officials make insensitive remarks that suggest they don't understand Islam, and which have created obstacles to Christian/Muslim relations. They find a broad-based criticism of Islamic violence and irrationality. Some have told me they actually walked out of the dialogue, or at least considered doing so.

In particular, Catholics need to focus their efforts on reaching out to traditional Islam and its authority structures. Take Al-Azhar [a university and mosque complex in Cairo sometimes dubbed the "Vatican of the Sunni world"], which has 500,000 students, and that's not counting its network of schools at what we would call the elementary and early high school levels. Its potential influence in Egypt is enormous.

What needs to happen is that traditional, orthodox Islam has to be liberated. The departure of Mubarak has opened a slight window to set Al-Azhar's sheikh and Grand Mufti free from overwhelming control by the state. Because of that control, the mufti and other traditional authorities have been discredited for years, and so the Islamist radicals have set up a sort of 'alternative magisterium.' In Catholic terms, it's like laity issuing their own encyclicals because they think Benedict XVI is corrupt. The result is chaos.

The perception of my Muslim colleagues is that the Vatican and the Catholic church more broadly, including in the United States, has not understood the terrain in the Islamic world and is not doing the right things, either privately or publicly, to ally with the Grand Mufti and other Islamic authorities. Of course, my Muslim friends often don't understand that the church, and even the Vatican sometimes, speaks with more than one voice. What they see is an insensitivity and lack of nuance on the part of the church's official spokespersons.

The question is how Catholics can engage the traditional structures of Islam shrewdly and diplomatically. My

friends all say that anything perceived as 'intervention' in some clumsy way will immediately backfire. The balance across the Islamic spectrum in Egypt, and in the Middle East broadly, is so delicate that you have to be very careful about whom you support. Many Egyptians have a chip on their shoulder about everyone telling Egyptians what to do. They want help, but in a way that's subtle, consistent, and in which the effort can be led by their allies in Islamic officialdom such as the Grand Mufti's office. They're trying to find allies in the Catholic world. What they want is to restore some kind of autonomy to Islam. Their diagnosis is that if you want to fight extremism among these various Sunni groups, the traditional authorities have to be restored.

At the grass roots, what can individual American Catholics do?
Right away, they could give money to Catholic Relief Services, which is working in Egypt and across the Middle East. In addition to immediate relief, CRS also has a peace-building division. A second element is to get more involved politically in supporting candidates and policies committed to reaching out to the Muslim world, especially the traditional Islamic authorities. There are some very influential Catholics in this country who could leverage attitudes. Right now, for example, Americans could be using their political and financial clout to pressure the Egyptian military to keep elections on track.

More long term, American Catholics can become more literate about Islam, reading more and becoming more involved in inter-faith dialogues in this country. Make this a priority among parishioners, especially in urban communities where there's encounter with American Muslims. It's not going to help the people in Egypt tomorrow, but it's important. To put it bluntly, if you want to get into the ballgame in some effective way in this contest that's going on, you first have to start doing calisthenics to get into shape. Most American Catholics are still at a very basic level in terms of engaging Islam in this country, even when there are opportunities to do so. In a globalized world, Islam is going to become more important, not less. The way for Catholics to begin is by engaging Muslims in their communities. We have to create a seabed of awareness of what the issues are.

One Coptic Christian recently predicted in the *Wall Street Journal* that we're going to see an exodus of Christians out of Egypt, much like what's happened in Iraq. Do you agree?
It's a realistic possibility, depending on how the continuing revolution unfolds. One plausible, ugly scenario is that an alliance of convenience between the military and the more radical elements of Islam will squeeze out the Christians. A cultural civil war could be taking shape, which could turn very violent and very ugly quickly. I don't know that it will happen, but my friends in Egypt think it's a real possibility. A second scenario would be a "new boss, same as the old boss" situation, sort of Mubarak without Mubarak. In the short-to-mid term, that would mean a cultural, leading to a physical, war, which would end in the reassertion of complete military control. The third possibility is that the Twitter revolution and the movements of Tahrir Square will prevail, which would require even more stamina and courage than they've shown so far. Frankly, that's probably the most remote possibility.

Some Catholic leaders worry that we may be inadvertently fueling the Christian exodus out of the Middle East by providing networks of financial support and pastoral care for Christians who leave. Is that a fair concern?
It's unrealistic for the church to believe that some other approach would make any difference whatsoever. To think that these people wouldn't leave if we didn't offer them pastoral care is an illusion, it's not realistic. I don't think we have any alternative to providing pastoral care and networks of support and relocation. At this moment in history, it's what the church is called to do, because we don't have any choice.

One Catholic leader in Egypt recently called for three things: The resignation of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, who appeared to blame Sunday's violence on mysterious "hidden hands" rather than acknowledging the army's role; adoption of a law easing restrictions on building churches and mosques, which the military government has promised but not delivered; and an anti-discrimination law to protect religious minorities, including Christians. What do you make of that platform?

These are minimal measures, a sort of minimal threshold, to give some sense of security for the Christians.

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Perhaps the most high-profile effort in the Catholic world to engage "traditional" Islam, as Appleby recommends, is the Oasis Foundation in Italy. It was launched by Cardinal Angelo Scola, now of Milan, while he was still in Venice, in an effort to promote Christian/Muslim relations and to support the Christians of the Middle East. (For what this sort of thing is worth, Scola, who turns 70 in early November, is generally considered to be in the top tier of candidates to become pope someday.)

Oasis provides some of the best observation and analysis of current realities in the Middle East, especially as they affect Christians. This week, the foundation provided a first-person account of the violence in Cairo last Sunday from a young Egyptian Muslim woman named Basma Amin, who had been invited to the demonstration by a Christian friend. She describes taking refuge in the nearby Ramses Hilton Hotel when the violence broke out, watching the injured stream in and listening to the cries of terror and panic in the streets.

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching part of her account comes when Amin describes a Christian family, a mother and two small children, along with several other Christian women, who had taken refuge with her in the Hilton. When darkness fell, they wanted to go home. They begged her to go with them, she writes, in the hope that having a Muslim woman wearing a veil in their midst might afford some protection. Amin says she didn't share their confidence.

"It was a painful feeling," she writes, "and I sincerely didn't understand why they said that, since I was completely of the opinion that the army was shooting randomly, and the question was absolutely not confessional. The proof is that many of the injured and the dead are Muslims, as we learned later."

At the end, Amin stresses four points:

- "The procession of Copts was peaceful from the beginning, and there were many Muslims and ordinary people in the crowd to express their solidarity."
- "Hooligans attacked the people twice, once at the Ahmed Helmy tunnel and again near the Ramses Hilton."
- "The army opened fire on the people indiscriminately, with real bullets, and armored cars crushed the young people in the first rows of the march. Many people witnessed this. I personally saw the marks left by the bullets on their bodies."
- "The question at the beginning was not at all confessional, contrary to what the TV and the military council are saying in order to inflame opinions. They are the ones trying to make it look this way."

Amin say that anyone who wishes to believe her is welcome to do so; anyone who doesn't, she writes, can watch Egyptian TV, where a "fine job of brain-washing" is underway.

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Bishops Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, and George Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, were in Baghdad Oct. 2-5 at the invitation of the Iraqi bishops. They visited churches, convents, schools and hospitals, including the Syrian Catholic Church of Our Lady of Deliverance, attacked by suicide bombers a year ago.

"Instability and the fear of violence permeate the city," Kicanas said in a statement. "The sanctions, war, and occupation have taken a heavy toll on the people ? So many have fled the country or are internally displaced. Many live in desperate situations. Christians will remain in Iraq only if there are opportunities to work, if greater stability and peace can occur."

Murry called on the American government to take concrete steps to boost security.

"As the United States military moves to the planned withdrawal from the city in the next months, it is critical that a plan be in place for a peaceful transition and not one marred by more violence and the killing of innocent people," he said.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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