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Patriarch: Lebanon a model for Arab democracies

Tom Gallagher | Oct. 21, 2011

Maronite Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai addresses the media during a news conference at the headquarters of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in New York Oct. 20. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

NEW YORK CITY -- Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai, head of the Lebanon-based Maronite Catholic Church, held up Lebanon's government as a model for emerging Arab democracies because Lebanon separates church and state, Rai said at an Oct. 20 news conference.

"In Lebanon, Christians and Muslims made a conviviality, a 'National Pact,'" Rai said. "They incorporated it into the Introduction of the Constitution, where it is stated there is no legitimacy for any authority that contradicts the conviviality."

That "National Pact" was turned into a formula for securing equal participation in government and civil service for Muslims and Christians, he said.

"Thanks to this National Pact, Lebanon became a secular country that separates religion from the state and is governed on the basis of a consensual parliamentary democracy guaranteeing civil liberties and basic human rights, in particular freedom of opinion, speech, religion and conscience, where dialogue and consensus prevail," he said.

"Lebanon is more than a country. It is a message of cooperation to both East and West, and an example of dialogue between Christians and Muslims."

"Moreover, the church in Lebanon is considered a guarantee for the Christian presence for that part of the world," he added.

A PDF copy of his prepared remarks are here [1].

Rai was elected to lead the Maronite church, the largest Catholic patriarchal church with 13 million members, in March. He is on a tour of Maronite church communities in the United States and met with reporters Oct. 20 in the offices of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in New York City.

On the topic of the Arab Spring, Rai was hopeful but cautious and denounced violence, especially against

Christians. Rai said that Christians were in that part of the world 600 years before the arrival of Islam.

"The so-called 'Arab Spring' sweeping the Middle East holds much promise, yet we must be vigilant," Rai said. "The church abhors the use of violence to meet any goal. Violence can never by justified.

"We want to see a Middle East renewed in its respect of human rights and dignity, especially for her minorities. We want to see people electing democratic governments and holding them accountable.

"It is important to point out the role the Christians played in upholding democratic principles, freedoms and human rights in the Middle East. This is why a Christian presence there should be safeguarded and strengthened," he said.

As part of his prepared remarks, Rai also spoke strongly for Palestinian refugees and said Israel needs to withdraw from parts of Lebanon.

"I ask the world community to commit itself to implementing the U.N. Resolutions concerning Lebanon in a direct way, such as 1701, which requires Israel to withdraw from the village of Ghajar, the Shebaa Farms and the hills of Kfar Shuba, and to refrain from violating Lebanese sovereignty," he said.

"Likewise, in an indirect way, Resolution 194, which guarantees the half a million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon the right to return" to their homeland, he said.

Rai said he is in the early stages of organizing a Middle East religious leaders summit.

On the topic of Israel, Rai recommended that Israel not become a state of one religion or one ethnic group. Israel, as well as Arab countries, he said, should adopt Lebanon's government model of democracy, separating church and government.

"Some say Israel wants to be a country for the Jews and some say it wants to be a Jewish country in order to protect democracy," Rai said. "In this day and age with globalization and what not, it is strange to see a nation wanting to be for one religion or one race because you are excluding the others."

Rai continued: "If there is a Jewish state declared or a state for the Jews, this is getting us back to the war of gods."

"This is going to be somewhat of a big challenge to Islam," he said.

"For Israel didn't tell us what they are going to do with 1.5 million non-Jews who hold Israeli passports. What is going to happen to them? This up to the Israelis to tell the world," Rai said.

Rai will be in Assisi, Italy, on Thursday, Oct. 27, with Pope Benedict XVI and other religious leaders for the World Day of Prayer for Peace. He is scheduled to visit Baghdad, Iraq, on Nov. 1.

Rai, 71, was ordained in 1967. He holds a doctorate in canon and civil law from the University of St. John Lateran. Rai founded Notre Dame University in Louaize, Lebanon, and was its president for six years. He also led the Maronite Tribunal. In 1986, he was made an archbishop.

[Tom Gallagher is an *NCR* contributor.]

Resources:

- Maronite Patriarch website [2]
- Pope Benedict XVI's letter accepting Patriarch Rai's request for Ecclesiastica Communio [3]
- Maronite Eparchy of Saint Maron of Brooklyn [4] (Another link [5])
- Catholic Near East Welfare Association [6]

Unofficial transcript of the Oct. 20 news conference by Patriarch Rai

During the question and answer period, Patriarch Rai listened to the questions in English, answered in Arabic, which was translated into English by his Vicar General, Archbishop Paul Sayah. Any mistakes with the transcription are entirely mine and NCR's.
--Tom Gallagher

Patriarch Rai expanded on his opening remarks about the Arab Spring.

"We wish the Arab Spring to be really a Arab Spring. We wish the countries to adopt this separation between religion and state, the system which Lebanon has adopted which respects all religions and all values of each religion. We wish to see freedom practiced in those. We wish to see all those values of human rights and democracy implemented in those countries. It is not easy to talk about democracy in the Western sense in countries that have a theocratic system.

"Christianity divides politics and religion and we wish Islam and other religions to do the same.

"We wish to see that the troubles do not lead to civil war. If we really want this movement to be a real spring, we wish not to see happening in those countries what happened in Iraq where the country is now in the middle of a civil war. In such a situation, this will not be spring.

"We are concerned about this situation leading to regimes that are even more fundamentalist because this is something that would be to the detriment of everybody.

"We would be, with the international community, look forward to a real spring but we just wanted to voice our concerns."

In response to my question about his impressions of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's track record on defending Christians, Patriarch Rai said:

"What we know in Syria is that Christians are living like everybody else and they feel secure and they have not suffered any attacks as has been happening in some other countries. We are sorry to see in some other countries Christians have been targeted. They have difficulties building churches or recognizing their worship and so on. In Syria, this is not the case.

In all the Arab countries the regimes tend to have a rather dictatorial slant. Everybody agrees that Syria is in need of reform for freedoms, human rights and so on. It's up to the Syrians, the people and authority, to find the best way to run the country. We wish to see this process being done in a peaceful way, through dialogue.

As a follow-up I asked whether uncritical Western support of Israel is actually making life more difficult for Christians in the region.

"It's not because the world is supporting Israel that this is impacting negatively the Christians in the region. The problem is that there are two conflicts in the Middle East: Israel and the Arab countries and Israel and the Palestinians. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a conflict at the level of religion and culture.

"The conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis is a conflict between a people whose sovereignty, whose land was taken away, who were displaced and for 64 years has been promised by the U.N., through U.N. resolutions, a right of return, but this situation has never happened. In Lebanon, we have half a million persons or refugees. The war in Lebanon in 1975 started with the Palestinians. This Jewish conflict led to injustice, oppression, it led also to the development of more fundamentalist movements in the region.

"This atmosphere that was created by those conflicts has impacted the Christian presence in the Middle East. Of course, some of them left because of economic and security reasons. Some of them are still living there, but this is what really impacted the Christians in the region. There will be no peace in that part of the world unless both Judaism, Christianity and Islam separate religion and state.

[With respect to the Coptic community in Egypt, Patriarch Rai said:]

"In the Middle East, it's not the same in all countries. In some countries, you may not have a right to have a church or any Christian presence. In other countries Christians exist there, they have their churches, they have their worship, but life is very, very difficult for them. For example, to build a church or repair a church, this is extremely difficult. There is a third category where Christians are living, accepted, but of course they don't have freedom of conscience. It does not exist. You cannot change your religion.

"It's important to note that when we are talking about the Christians, we are not talking about some people who came from the outside. In that part of the world Christians were there 600 years before Islam and they impacted their countries with their values.

"In Lebanon what we are doing is that each religion has full rights and each religion respects the others fully in order to minimize any possible religious strifes.

"In Lebanon we held two religious summits where all the heads of the religions in Lebanon came together and we came out with statements with our common convictions and common values that we shared and we asked the politicians to abide by those directives.

"We are in daily contact with Holiness Pope Shenouda III [the Coptic pope] and we have been discussing the matter with all the religious heads of religious communities in the Middle East and we are in the process of preparing a summit for the religious leaders in order to try to promote the atmosphere that exists in Lebanon, where all religious communities live together in freedom and in mutual respect.

Maronite Bishop Gregory Mansour of Brooklyn asked Patriarch Rai to share with the Western press his experience of visiting various communities in Lebanon after his enthronement this past March.

"Since I was elected March 15, I have started visiting the various regions of Lebanon and after my election, I

took as a motto for my patriarchal ministry, "Communion and Love" and am going around all those areas trying to implement this motto.

"As the patriarch I have to visit my people once every five years and I wanted very quickly after my election to start visiting our people in order to listen to them, to find out about their concerns, their vision and in order for all of us, myself and the [Maronite] Synod of Bishops to prepare a strategy for our work.

"In Lebanon we have 18 religious communities and those communities are not living in ghettos. We are all living together.

"Of course, I went to visit my own people, the Maronites, but as it turns out, I found that the people don't want me to visit the Maronites only. Everybody came out to meet me, the Catholic community, the Orthodox community and all the Muslim communities?all of them came out to meet me because they wanted this visit to be for them, not only our own people.

"This was a spontaneous mass movement. People came out, young, old, children, anybody and everybody, politicians, heads of religious communities. They all came out to meet the Patriarch. This was spontaneous.

"I want to note that especially in the Muslim areas how they put big posters of the Patriarch on their mosques, wrote a lot of very positive messages on big placards. They really showed that and voiced their opinions saying "you're not only the patriarch of the Maronites, you are the "patriarch of Lebanon, the "patriarch of communion and love", the "patriarch of national unity," the "patriarch of political reconciliation" and so on.

"I listened and I read and I concluded that in Lebanon Christians and Muslims really are very eager to live in peace.

"I really touched first-hand and realized how true what Blessed John Paul II said about Lebanon in his message to the Lebanese: "Lebanon is more than a country. Lebanon is a message of reconciliation and dialogue and conviviality for both East and West.

"This is a huge responsibility and I hope that myself with all the bishops do not disappoint.

"All the parties of Lebanon, all came out to meet me. I want to use this new opportunity to try to create true dialogue among all those factions. In Lebanon, you cannot exclude anybody.

"We want this dialogue to touch the points of conflict."

"Of course, we started this process of reconciliation in our own communities so we have had several meetings with the Maronite leaders and Maronite representatives in the [Lebanese] parliament in order to come out with some concensus. Of course, we respect peoples' differences. We are in a democracy. People are different. We respect that, but we want to reach a consensus and from there on start branching out to the other people.

On the topic of the possible ascension to power by the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Patriarch Rai said:

"First, the U.S. does not have a problem if the Muslim Brotherhood takes over Egypt. Second, as a Church we do not side with any government or any regime. If the Egyptian people want the Muslim Brotherhood to govern Egypt, this is a matter for the Egyptian people. The Church is neither with the regime nor is it against the regime.

"Independently of who is in government, we ask for as a church respect for the person and respect for basic human rights. If the Muslim Brotherhood do reach government in Egypt or anywhere else, what we will ask of them is really to protect the rights of people and respect freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and

freedom of conscience.

"As a Church all we ask for is respect for human rights and respect for international law.

"We ask for justice. We ask for peace. We ask for equality among all people independently of their color, their religion, their race or anything on the basis of citizenship.

"If what you [the questioner] said about the [Egyptian army killing innocent Coptic people], we feel very bad about it. We have said that there are countries where Christians are subjected to persecution.

"We have 11 million Coptics in Egypt and they are the original Egyptians. The name itself indicates this. We feel really, really bad about seeing those people being targeted in such a way.

"Of course, if Muslims or anybody reaches government in Egypt or anywhere else, we will ask them for the same thing. And we have to realize that the very large majority of Islam is moderate. It's not as if there is a Muslim government, it's going to be fundamentalist. In every case, we will ask the government to respect the rights of people and treat citizens as equal on all bases.

"The Islam community has an important role to play there. They have to make sure to as much as possible to prevent the spread of fundamentalism and to encourage the moderate people to be able to take the lead in those countries.

What will be the reaction of the world if Israel is accepted as a country for Jews?

"Some say Israel wants to be a country for the Jews and some say it wants to be a Jewish country in order to protect democracy.

"In this day and age with globalization and what not, it is strange to see a nation wanting to be for one religion or one race because you are excluding the others.

"If there is a Jewish state declared or a state for the Jews, this is getting us back to the war of gods. This is going to be somewhat of a big challenge to Islam.

"For Israel didn't tell us what they are going to do with 1.5 million non-Jews who hold Israeli passports. What is going to happen to them? This up to the Israelis to tell the world.

"If you really specify in a country the race or the religion of that country, automatically you are excluding the others who are not of that religion or a part of that race.

"I'm afraid that this is going to be more and more fundamentalist for Christianity, Judaism and Islam itself. This fundamentalism is motivated by the fact that some people are being excluded.

Where does the Middle East religious summit planning stand at this point in time.

"We are still at an initial stage of initial contacts with religious heads. Some have responded positively. We are awaiting the response from Al-Azhar University because it has a special status in Islam.

With respect to recent violence in Egypt, does he think that Christians will flee the country?

"We are afraid that this may lead to some kind of civil strife in Egypt. Christians don't want to engage in a civil war.

"Persecution will definitely lead to immigration. Some of the older generation will stay, but young people need a future and to be able to something worthwhile with their lives, so those people may not be able to accept the persecution or the injustice. They have to build a future for themselves.

"There is no justification whatsoever for Muslims to persecute those Christians or to hate them because they haven't done anything to anybody or to harm anybody. First of all those people [the Christians] go back to the time of Christ and the apostles, 600 years before Islam. Those people have impacted the Egyptian society and other societies with their values. Those people are pioneers in the renaissance culturally, social, political, educational, those people have contributed greatly to the renaissance in those countries. The Egyptian press was started by a Christian Lebanese.

"All the heads of state say and believe that Christians are people who are contributing positively to their countries and they are faithful to their countries and they never tried to do anything that would harm their countries. Why should they be scapegoats in Egypt or anywhere else?"

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