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Don't lose hope, even in hardship, pope tells Middle East Christians

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Mar. 7, 2012

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI urged Christians in the Middle East not to lose hope despite the serious difficulties they face.

"I extend my prayerful thoughts to the regions in the Middle East, encouraging all the priests and faithful to persevere with hope through the serious suffering that afflicts these beloved people," he said.

The pope made his remarks when he greeted Armenian Patriarch Nerses Bedros XIX Tarmouni of Beirut and Armenian bishops from around the world attending their synod in Rome.

At the end of the general audience Wednesday in St. Peter's Square, the pope expressed his "sincere gratitude" for Armenian Catholics' fidelity to their heritage and traditions, and to the successor of St. Peter.

Such fidelity has always sustained the faithful throughout "the innumerable trials in history," he said.

The majority of Catholics in the Middle East belong to Eastern Catholic churches -- the Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite or Melkite churches.

In his catechesis, the pope said oftentimes it seems God is silent, especially during times of great trial and difficulty.

"Often in our prayers we find ourselves before God's silence and we almost feel a sense of abandonment; it seems that God isn't listening or answering," he said.

But that silence "is not a sign of his absence."

"The Christian knows well that the Lord is present; he listens even in the darkness of pain, refusal and loneliness," he said.

God knows what each and every person needs and desires even before it's voiced in prayer, and God's silence "invites us to deeper faith and trust in his promises," he said.

Silence plays an important part in everyone's relationship with God, he said.

It is only by carving out quiet time where outside disturbances are avoided and an inner silence is cultivated that God's voice can be heard and meaning found, the pope said.

However, that is proving to be very difficult to do today, he said.

This is not an era that fosters silence and reflection, rather "sometimes there's the impression that people are afraid to detach themselves even for a moment from the flood of words and images filling every day," he said.

He said Jesus taught his disciples how to pray in silence and how to create a space of inner calm deep inside so that God can dwell there, so his word can take root there, and "so one's love for him radiates out to our mind, our heart and animates our life."

At the end of his audience talk, the last of a series of talks on the prayer life of Jesus, the pope said he was praying for all those affected by a March 4 train wreck in southern Poland.

Speaking in Polish, the pope said he was praying for those who died in the catastrophe and that those who were injured would have a speedy recovery.

Sixteen people were killed and 58 others injured, many seriously, near the town of Szczekociny when two trains traveling at high speed were mistakenly on the same track and collided head-on.

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