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Young Lebanese see papal visit as sign of hope, encouragement to stay

Doreen Abi Raad Catholic News Service | Aug. 20, 2012

BEIRUT -- Lebanon's younger generation of Catholics sees Pope Benedict XVI's Sept. 14-16 visit to their country as a sign of hope in a region embroiled with violence.

Marielle Boutros, a 25-year-old Maronite Catholic from Jbeil who teaches science at a Catholic school, said the pope's visit "means that even though we are suffering and don't have stability, there is someone in this world who cares for us and wants us to stay here."

"That's why he's coming here, to tell us to stay here and not to quit our cause," she said.

Firas Wehbe, a 34-year-old Maronite Catholic who heads up the sales unit of a bank, said the pope's visit "is a sign of hope for the youth, a support for them to stay in their country and the Middle East, especially with the turbulent situation around us."

Wehbe said when Pope John Paul II visited Lebanon in 1997 and the country was under Syrian occupation, it was "a bad situation."

"But now, it's all the region," Wehbe said. "So I think that this visit is a sign from God, a message for us to resist in a Christian way: through our beliefs, to stay here in the holy lands and to live our lives according to the Bible. Otherwise, we can go everywhere in the world. But here, we have a message to live all together with other religions, especially Muslims."

"I'm talking from personal experience, because I live in Tripoli, which is 90 percent Muslim," Wehbe said. "In fact, we don't have problems as Christians, but the city is experiencing political problems related to the situation in Syria. The conflict in Syria is affecting the city, but we hope it will end soon."

Clashes between pro- and anti-Syrian groups in Tripoli in May and June killed up to 25 people.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, said despite instability from Syria that has spilled across Lebanese borders, preparations for the trip "are proceeding without any uncertainties on the Vatican's part." In fact, he said, the popemobile has already been shipped to Lebanon.

During his visit, Pope Benedict will present a major document addressing concerns expressed at the 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East, but on Sept. 15 he is expected to meet with about 30,000 young people at Bkerke, the patriarchal seat of the Maronite Catholic Church, north of Beirut.

Fr. Toufic Bou Hadir, president of the Maronite Patriarchate's Youth Department, has been planning the visit with a team of youth representatives from Lebanon's Catholic rites -- Maronite, Syriac, Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, Coptic and Latin -- as well as representatives of Scout associations, apostolic movements, students, nongovernment organizations, youths with special needs, religious and seminarians, and representatives of other Mideast countries.

"The Middle Eastern countries are now living a so-called 'spring.' But a lot of places are seeing that spring turning into winter and fall because we see blood and terror around us," Bou Hadir said, referring to the instability in the region.

"But we have faith that the real spring is our youth having real faith in God," he added.

The priest said Pope Benedict's visit would reinforce what Pope John Paul II said when he visited, "that Lebanon is more than a country, it's a message of peace and coexistence between the East and the West."

Of Lebanon's population of almost 4 million, approximately one-third is Christian. The country's population belongs to 18 different religions, 12 of which are Christian.

Joe Zoulikian, a 33-year-old Armenian Catholic who works at the American University of Beirut, described Pope Benedict's visit as "very emotional, because the head of Catholic church is coming to Lebanon while the region is full of war and revolutions."

"For us it's a [sign of] hope to stay," Zoulikian said.

Joseph Semaan, a 36-year old Maronite from Beirut who works as a technology manager and represents the Scouts of Lebanon on the youth meeting planning committee, said the pope's visit "will give us empowerment and hope."

About 500 of Lebanon's some 10,000 Scouts will be assisting the entire weekend of the pope's visit to Lebanon, mostly serving as ushers.

"I think he is here also to deliver a message of peace and to reinforce the diversity of Lebanese society, especially with what is happening in countries near us. There is a lot of war. So he is here to tell us not to be afraid. I am sure he will ask us to build the peace, to have faith," Semaan said.

Saher Dawood, a 30-year-old Chaldean Catholic refugee from Baghdad who has been in Lebanon for two years, said the pope's visit "will give the youth a push in their faith and hope because [the youth] don't have this strong hope now." Dawood is one of some 30,000 Christian refugees from Iraq now living in Lebanon.

Samieh Traboulsi, a Chaldean Catholic deacon, added that Lebanon is "in big danger now, because all the young people are immigrating to Europe, the Gulf and other countries."

Bou Hadir said not only logistical preparations are under way for the pope's visit: "We also have to prepare our hearts."

For the nine days before the visit, Catholic churches will conduct a novena of prayer.

"We are waiting with love, enthusiasm and prayer for this visit of the father to his children," Bou Hadir said.

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