

Getting Lebanon's Catholics to work and play well together

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 13, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- As Pope Benedict XVI prepares to arrive in Lebanon, much has been made of the complex situation awaiting him ? the backdrop of civil war in Syria and spreading anti-American violence across the Middle East, as well as the perennially fractious patchwork of ethnicities and religions in Lebanon itself.

Less appreciated, however, is the complexity within the pope's own flock. While Catholics make up around one-quarter of the national population of four million, they're divided into seven separate churches ? and, to be frank, they don't always work and play well together.

Lebanon recognizes eighteen different religious groups, among them seven separate Catholic churches. They are:

- The Maronite Church
- The Greek Melkite Church
- The Armenian Catholic Church
- The Syriac Catholic Church
- The Chaldean Catholic Church
- The Coptic Church
- The Latin Church

Four of these are patriarchates, presided over by their own patriarch: the Maronites, Greek-Melkites, Armenian Catholics and the Syriac Catholics.

While all these churches are in full communion with Rome, they retain their own separate leadership, jurisdiction, structures and finances. Beirut alone, the national capital, is home to five overlapping dioceses for the Maronites, Melkites, Armenians, Chaldeans and Syriac Catholics, as well as an apostolic vicariate for the Latin Catholics.

Of the seven churches, the Maronites are by far the largest and most nationally prominent. There are almost one million Maronites in Lebanon, representing roughly 22 percent of the national population, and by tradition the president of the nation is always a Maronite (the prime minister is always a Sunni, and the speaker of the parliament is a Shi'ite.)

By reputation, Maronites are considered to be among the toughest Christian peoples in the world, perhaps because the community was born amid violence and persecution. Founded by a fourth century monk named St. Maron, the early Maronites were hounded by Monophysite heretics in the fifth century into the mountainous area known as Mt. Lebanon, which became their geographical stronghold.

Facing the rise of Islam, the Maronites clung to their independence and traditions. Some Maronite intellectuals even floated the idea that the Maronites weren't Arabs but descendants of the ancient Phoenicians, and thus

carriers of a completely separate Mediterranean culture. Though not taken seriously today, the notion reflects the desire Maronites historically have felt not to be subsumed by their Muslim neighbors.

When modern Lebanon achieved independence in 1943, the Maronites played a leading role in the transfer of power from French colonial authorities. To this day, the Maronite Patriarch is considered an important national figure and a political powerbroker, well beyond the boundaries of his church.

For instance, when Patriarch Béchara Boutros Raï said last year during a trip to France that the Western powers should stop trying to oust the Assad regime in Syria, and that Hezbollah was perhaps within its rights to refuse to disarm, it caused an uproar in Lebanon – not least because many leading Maronite politicians are strongly anti-Assad and anti-Hezbollah.

The Maronites also typically play a lead role in Catholic affairs. Raï also serves as president of the Assembly of Patriarchs and Catholic Bishops of Lebanon (APECL), and will be Benedict's most prominent host over the next three days.

By most reckonings, the Greek Melkites are the next largest Catholic body, led by Patriarch Gregorios III Laham, who was elected to the post by his church's synod in 1990. The Armenian Patriarch, or "Catholicos," is Nerses Bedros IX Tarmouni, while the Syrian Patriarch is Ignatius Joseph III Younan.

In a sign of the delicate balance among these sometimes rival churches, Benedict XVI will visit each of the four patriarchates during his three days in the country, signing the concluding document of the 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East with the Greek Melkites, holding a youth rally with the Maronites, eating lunch with the Lebanese bishops with the Armenians, and staging an ecumenical encounter with the Syriac Catholics.

Yonan, 67, is considered something of a rising figure in church circles, having served as co-president of the 2010 synod on the Middle East.

Observers of the Catholic scene in the Middle East say that sometimes struggles among these various churches, all of which tend to be fiercely protective of their prerogatives, get in the way of common pastoral or political efforts.

Lebanese writer Fady Noun, for instance, in a piece for "Asia News," noted there are five Catholic universities in the country, despite its small size, which risks being a "waste in resources and energies" grounded in "unproductive rivalries."

Fifteen years ago, when a pope last visited Lebanon, John Paul II warned the country's Catholics to avoid "opposition or competition among the different rites," which he said "damages the dynamism of the entire body of the church."

At that time, John Paul II presented an entire 41,000-word document entirely dedicated to Lebanon, the fruit of a special Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1995 to ponder reconstruction in the wake of the country's civil war. One of its top notes was the call to reject a "confessional mentality" in favor of an "authentic sense of the church." (The pope was actually quoting a 1996 pastoral letter Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East.)

Fifteen years later, most observers would say the surmounting of that "confessional mentality" remains, to some extent, a work in progress – among other reasons, because it was also widely discussed at the 2010 Synod on the Middle East, the concluding document of which is to be presented this time by Benedict XVI.

It will be interesting to see how, if at all, Benedict XVI will try to engage the issue this time around.

[John Allen is *NCR*'s senior correspondent, and is in Rome this week. Check back to [NCR Today](#) [1] throughout for his dispatches from the Vatican.]

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