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'Statehood for Palestine now', patriarch tells pope

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 14, 2012 NCR Today

BEIRUT -- One of Lebanon?s most senior Christian leaders tonight told Pope Benedict XVI that recognition of Palestinian statehood would be ?the most precious good the Arab world can obtain? for both Christians and Muslims, but stopped short of directly calling on the Vatican to extend that recognition unilaterally.

Patriarch Gregorios III Laham spoke tonight while welcoming Benedict to the Greek Melkite Basilica of St. Paul, where the pope was to formally sign the concluding document from a 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East.

An advance text of Laham?s welcome was briefly placed on the official Lebanese web site for the papal visit two weeks ago, then quickly taken down. In it, Laham called on the pope to recognize Palestine, ahead of an expected push for Palestinian statehood at the United Nations General Assembly later this month.

Tonight, Laham didn?t go quite that far, but he made his support for the Palestinian cause abundantly clear.

?The recognition of a Palestinian state is the most precious good that the Arab world can obtain in all its confessions, Christian and Muslim,? Laham said.

?It can guarantee the realization of the orientations expressed in the post-synodal exhortation,? referring to the pope?s document, ?for which we express our most lively gratitude.?

Statehood for Palestine, Laham said, ?would prepare the way for a true Arab Spring, true democracy, and a real revolution capable of changing the face of the Arab world and of bringing peace to the Holy Land, the Middle East, and the world.?

In general, Christian leaders in the Middle East tend to be sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, in part because many of them are Arabs themselves, and in part because they believe Christians in Israel and Palestine suffer the same injustices as Arab Muslims.

Though never officially confirmed, it was widely believed that Laham's original text, asking the pope to recognize Palestine himself, was taken down because it could embarrass Benedict during his three-day stop in the Middle East. Officially, the Vatican's line on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict favors a negotiated two-state solution without unilateral gestures on either side.

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