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Papal charge to Middle East Christians: 'Be peacemakers!'

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tWrapping up his three-day trip to Lebanon with a Mass staged on the Beirut waterfront, Benedict XVI urged Christians in the violence-torn region to be peacemakers.

t?In a world where violence constantly leaves behind its grim trail of death and destruction, to serve justice and peace is urgently necessary for building a fraternal society, for building fellowship!? the pope said.

?I pray in particular that the Lord will grant to this region of the Middle East servants of peace and reconciliation, so that all people can live in peace and with dignity,? he said. ?This is an essential testimony which Christians must render here, in cooperation with all people of good will.?

As an application of that principle, Iraqi Archbishop Louis Sako of the Chaldean church told reporters today that last night Benedict spoke to a group of Catholic patriarchs of the Middle East, urging them to "love Muslims" and to "pray for them," because "we are all brothers."

On his fourth trip to the Middle East, and his first in the wake of the Arab Spring, Benedict did not lay out a specific vision for the transformation of the region, nor a set of political marching orders for the Christian minority.

tInstead, he seemed to call Christians to an almost apolitical role of service, beyond the region?s partisan alignments.

t?Service must also be at the heart of the life of the Christian community,? the pope said in his homily, delivered in French.

tThis spirit of service, the pope said, should ?find particular expression in an effective commitment to serving the poor, the outcast and the suffering, so that the inalienable dignity of each person may be safeguarded.?

tThroughout the three-day trip, both Benedict and his Lebanese hosts seemed determined to broadcast images of tolerance and respect, in contrast to the violence that has swept across the region in recent days.

tCalling service ?a foundational element of the identity of Christ?s followers,? Benedict said that ?the vocation of the Church and of each Christian is to serve others, as the Lord himself did, freely and impartially.?

tThe crowd at this morning?s Mass was largely composed of Lebanese, though there were also pockets of believers from other parts of the Middle East, including Syria, Iraq, the Palestinian Territories, and Egypt ? all places where, for various reasons, many Christians perceive themselves to be at risk.

tRather than taking sides among the forces seeking to shape the Arab future, Benedict?s implicit calculation

here in Lebanon seemed to be that the best hope for Christianity is to carve out a profile for nonpartisan humanitarian service.

tThe crowds which turned out for Benedict XVI over the last three days were generally enthusiastic, though smaller than the last time a pope was in town, which was John Paul II?s 1997 trip. This morning, for instance, some 350,000 people attended Benedict?s open-air Mass, while an estimated half-million showed up for John Paul.

tThat trip, however, came under a unique set of circumstances, when Lebanon faced occupations by both Syria and Israel, and the pope?s presence had clear political subtext.

tBenedict returns to Rome this evening after an ecumenical meeting with Lebanon?s other Christian denominations, including both Greek Orthodox and Protestant leaders, and a brief farewell ceremony at Beirut?s Rafiq Hariri airport.

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