

Synod announces dramatic mission to Syria

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 16, 2012 NCR Today
Synod of Bishops 2012

In an unusual and dramatic gesture of concern for the ongoing violence in Syria, the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization announced Tuesday afternoon that it will dispatch a special delegation to Damascus next week to promote a solution based on "reason and compassion."

The delegation will be composed of five senior prelates currently taking part in the Oct. 7-28 synod, representing all five continents, and will include Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Two senior Vatican diplomats will round out the group.

According to a brief announcement by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, the delegation will depart next week after the details are worked out through diplomatic channels. The announcement did not indicate with whom the delegation will meet, though sources indicated they will try to see both officials of the Assad government and leaders of the opposition as well as the local Christian communities.

The fact that this is an initiative of the synod, rather than just the Vatican, is intended to convey that concern about the Syrian situation is shared widely among all the bishops of the world.

To date, estimates put the total number of casualties as a result of the fighting in Syria at somewhere between 23,000 and 38,000. Since the outset of the crisis, Benedict XVI has repeatedly called for peace and a diplomatic solution, but the Vatican has not taken a clear position on what exactly that solution might look like.

Though Vatican diplomats and various Catholic groups have been involved in diplomatic efforts in a variety of global hotspots, this is apparently the first time a synod of bishops has dispatched its own trouble-shooting delegation. Among other things, the move reflects the depth of concern among the bishops about the fate of the 2.3 million Syrian Christians, who represent roughly a tenth of the national population.

The synod's delegation will be composed of:

- Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, Archbishop of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo
- French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue
- Dolan of New York
- Bishop Fabio Suescun Mutis, Military Ordinary of Colombia
- Bishop Joseph Nguyen Nang of Phat Diem, Vietnam
- Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State (in effect, the Vatican's "foreign minister")
- Mnsgr. Alberto Ortega, an official of the Secretariat of State

"We cannot be mere spectators of a tragedy like the one that is unfolding in Syria," Bertone told the synod yesterday in making the announcement.

Bertone said the delegation will carry a message based on the following three points:

- "Our fraternal solidarity to the whole population, with a personal offering from the Synodal Fathers as well as from the Holy See."
- "Our spiritual closeness to our Christian brothers and sisters."
- "Our encouragement to all those who are involved in the search for an agreement that respects the rights and duties of all with particular attention to what is demanded by humanitarian law."

During his trip to Lebanon in mid-September, Pope Benedict XVI used his strongest language to date on the Syrian crisis, asking plaintively "Why so much horror? Why so many dead?" and demanding an immediate halt to "the din of weapons."

In addition to an appeal to the international community, Benedict called on Arab nations "that, as brothers, they might propose workable solutions respecting the dignity, the rights and the religion of every human person!"

The comments came at the end of an open-air Mass on Beirut's waterfront that attracted an estimated 350,000 people, mainly Lebanese but with pockets of believers from across the Middle East, including a sizeable group of Syrians ? many of whom are refugees in Lebanon.

Benedict also touched on Syria during a youth rally last night, directly addressing Syrians in the crowd and telling them, "The pope has not forgotten you," and that he is "saddened by your sufferings and your griefs."

The most developed statement from the Vatican on Syria so far has come from Monsignor Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, a Colombian and the number two official at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, during an Istanbul conference in early September on the "Arab Awakening."

In his speech, Ayuso outlined a four-point Vatican position on Syria:

- An immediate end to violence "from whatever part"
- Dialogue "as the necessary path to respond to the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people"
- Preserving the unity of the Syria, "regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation"
- An appeal to the international community to commit itself to a peace process

According to some critics, the series of Vatican statements to date has left some key questions unanswered, such as whether the Vatican believes the government of President Bashar al-Assad should stay or go, and whether an armed international response would be warranted to impose a cease-fire.

In late July, a Vatican spokesman said the country is experiencing a "slow descent into hell," but also called the prospect of an armed international response "very worrying." On the papal plane en route to Syria, Benedict XVI called the importing of arms into the country a "grave sin," but didn't make clear whether he meant the arming of the Assad regime, the rebels, or both.

The Vatican's caution has been tweaked in various quarters.

At the time of the Lebanon trip, a leading Turkish daily called the pope's line on Syria "elusive," complaining that the pope has not backed Assad, despite the fears of Syrian Christians that regime change could make their lives worse. The editorial contrasted Benedict unfavorably with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, who has largely echoed the pro-Assad position of the Kremlin.

Meanwhile, a well-known Italian Jesuit who spent thirty years in Syria, Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, has complained that the Vatican has not supported the uprising. He recently tweaked the Vatican's unwillingness to support international intervention to keep Assad's force at bay, saying that if the Vatican doesn't believe foreign troops have a legitimate role to play in keeping the peace, then what are the Swiss Guards doing in St. Peter's Square?

In an interview with the French daily Le Figaro ahead of the trip to Lebanon, the pope's Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, responded to criticism that the Vatican has been "overly prudent" on Syria.

"The church's position is not neutral, it is just clear: violence simply leads to more violence! Violence leads to death," Bertone said.

"The pope [has] accepted the aspirations of the Syrian people as legitimate, repeatedly inviting all leaders to abstain from violence and commit to dialogue and reconciliation," he said.

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