NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Syria's bishops call for cease-fire, urge Catholics to fast

Doreen Abi Raad Catholic News Service | Mar. 14, 2014
Beirut

Catholic bishops of Syria called for a cease-fire in Syria and for the pursuit of the Geneva peace talks to end the crisis in the war-torn country.

The bishops encouraged the faithful during Lent to "fast and show solidarity, charity and collaboration in alleviating the sufferings of internally and externally displaced persons."

In a statement following its spring session, the Assembly of the Catholic Hierarchy of Syria, said: "We declare our rejection of all forms of extremism ... murder and extortion, and all attacks on people and buildings. We condemn attacks on places of worship, whether churches or mosques."

Because of difficult travel conditions inside Syria, the meeting was held Wednesday at the Melkite Catholic patriarchal residence in Rabweh, Lebanon.

It was chaired by Melkite Catholic Patriarch Gregoire III Laham, president of the assembly, in the presence of Syriac Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan -- both natives of Syria -- as well as Archbishop Mario Zenari, apostolic nuncio to Syria, and other bishops.

"We should like to express solidarity with our beloved country, Syria, its people and government," the statement said.

"We support all efforts toward a peaceful, just and rapid solution to the crisis, especially through a continuance of the Geneva talks," the bishops said. "We want a united, free, democratic and pluralistic Syria, with the same citizenship criteria for everyone, and we want a worthy life for all constituents of Syrian society, irrespective of party."

The bishops said they prayed for the repose of the souls of all the victims and for the healing of all sick, injured, handicapped or marginalized people in distress. They said they also prayed for and remembered those kidnapped during the conflict.

Noting that the Syrian crisis is now in its fourth year, the bishops said, "Our situation can be described in the words of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes': 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.' "

"We appeal to all citizens, asking them to work for peace by all means, both local and international and emphasize the need for a cease-fire, dialogue, reconciliation and reconstruction. We all have the responsibility of working hard for peace," they said.

"We appeal to the conscience of all nations, and especially those countries capable of playing a decisive role in the Syrian crisis, to find a way to end the crisis."

"We beseech the Lord to lead our tragic, bloody way of the cross toward the dawn and joy of the holy Resurrection," the bishops said. "Let Syria return to its former state of peace, security, love, kindliness, communication, fellowship, mutual respect, living together, and a worthy life for all citizens."

The bishops congratulated Pope Francis on the first anniversary of his pontificate and thanked him as well as international institutions working to alleviate the suffering of Syrian citizens.

"We need the grace of fasting, prayer, spiritual strength, faith, hope and love. We must not give way to feelings of despair, frustration and fear, despite our tragic, terrible suffering that is daily increasing," the statement said.

"We call upon everyone, especially Christians during Lent, to ensure that the whole of Syria become so many hands raised in prayer," the bishops said. "May Lent cause the feelings and power of hope to spring up in us!"

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