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Pope Benedict's apolitical line on the Middle East, and Christians in Syria

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 27, 2012 All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI will travel to Lebanon on Sept. 14-16, marking his first visit to the Middle East since the Arab Spring and his fourth overall to the region (after Turkey in 2006, the Holy Land in 2009 and Cyprus in 2010). It's also the closest he's likely to get to the current chaos in Syria.

The official purpose is to present the conclusions from the Vatican's Synod on the Middle East in October 2010. Lebanon is an obvious launching pad, since Christians make up roughly 40 percent of the country's total population of 4 million, the largest Christian footprint in percentage terms in the Middle East. It's also, of course, one of the few places in the region where the pope's safety can be reasonably assured.

While current events form the subtext to the trip, anyone hoping for high political drama probably should prepare for disappointment.

If things hold to form, Benedict XVI seems unlikely to outline a bold new vision for the Arab world, nor to strike a sharply defined stance on Syria, even if the present carnage is somehow still unfolding. Instead, the trip shapes up as an experiment in whether Benedict's basically "apolitical" vision of the Christian future in the Middle East has legs.

In that light, Benedict in 2012 should offer a sharp contrast to John Paul II in 1997, the last time a pope traveled to Lebanon. The country was then under Syrian occupation, and Christians were seen as the bulwark of the resistance. During a massive open-air Mass in Beirut, the head of Lebanon's Maronite Church at the time, the legendary Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, compared the situation to that of Poland's Catholics under the Soviets, invoking Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski's heroic defiance of Communist rule. John Paul encouraged the analogy, welcoming opposition leaders to his events and explicitly endorsing the aspirations of Lebanese youth to "freedom, sovereignty and independence."

The take-away for Lebanese Christians was that John Paul wanted them to play a major role in the affairs of state, and they proceeded to do just that.

Fifteen years later, Benedict XVI will probably deliver a different message. His counsel, albeit voiced mostly by example rather than explicit instructions, will likely be to avoid partisan politics, focusing on a humanitarian role as reconcilers, peace-makers and dispensers of charity across sectarian and ideological divides.

In part, that apolitical stance is dictated by the fact that there simply isn't a coherent Christian line on the questions facing the region, and Lebanon offers a classic case in point. When John Paul arrived, Lebanese Christians were united against a foreign occupation -- two of them, actually, since a strip of southern Lebanon was also under Israeli control. Today, the country's Christians are splintered. Some, including former general and politician Michel Aoun, are allied with the Hezbollah and sympathetic to Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria. Others, especially the "March 14 alliance," are strongly anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian. Most simply live in

fear of whatever might follow the collapse of the Assad regime, and its potential spill-over effects for Lebanon.

Today's Maronite leader, Patriarch Béchara Boutros Raï, is also a different figure from Sfeir, now 92 and retired. Raï got in hot water last year for opposing regime change in Syria as well as seeming to accept Hezbollah's unwillingness to disarm. Raï has subsequently backed away, trying to steer a more neutral course.

Given the welter of competing Christian voices, it would be tough for Benedict to offer political marching orders even if he wanted to.

It seems clear, however, that he has no such desire. To date, neither the pope nor the Vatican's diplomatic apparatus have taken a strong position in any of the countries gripped by the ferment of the Arab Spring, including Syria. A month ago, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, quoted the pope's ambassador as saying the country is experiencing a "slow descent into Hell," but also called the prospect of armed international intervention "very worrying" -- raising the question of what other solution the Vatican might see.

(An Italian Jesuit who lived in Syria for 30 years until being expelled for supporting the anti-Assad uprising, Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, recently tweaked that ambivalence. If you don't believe foreign troops sometimes have a legitimate role to play in keeping the peace, he told Vatican Radio, what are the Swiss Guards doing in St. Peter's Square?)

Surveying the Middle East, Benedict knows that it's a precarious moment for the Christian minority, already decimated by decades of out-migration, political and economic stagnation, and rising Islamic radicalism. He has watched as the church in Iraq imploded, and knows that many Christians fear the same thing may be about to happen in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere.

The best survival strategy, he seems to feel, is for Christians as much as possible to stay out of the political fray. At the very least, he obviously feels it's not helpful for him to take anything other than a neutral humanitarian stance.

For sure, there's a good argument to be made along those lines. It's usually a bad idea to place a bet when you don't even know the odds, and right now it's impossible to predict what the new political architecture of the region will look like. John Paul gambled and won in Eastern Europe by aligning himself with the anti-Soviet resistance, but is anybody prepared to assure that Benedict XVI or other Christian leaders would win a similar wager in the Middle East today if they openly embraced, say, the anti-Assad movement in Syria, or pro-democracy forces in other Middle Eastern societies?

What remains to be seen is whether the Christians now preparing to welcome the pope ultimately will buy that an apolitical stance can keep them safe. Some might be forgiven for thinking that staying out of the fray is a fantasy -- because, sooner or later, the fray will find them.

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At a distance, it's tough for outsiders concerned about Christians in Syria to know where their sympathies ought to lie.

Persistent reports lend credence to fear that whatever might follow Assad could be worse than the status quo. The Beqaa Valley in eastern Lebanon is now home to a growing community of Syrian Christian exiles, many of whom say they're fleeing specific threats against Christians from factions within the opposition Free Syrian Army, influenced by foreign jihadists.

Refugees from the city of Qusayr recently told the German magazine *Spiegel* that they fled an outright campaign against Christians that took shape last summer.

"They sermonized on Fridays in the mosques that it was a sacred duty to drive us away," one woman told the *Spiegel* reporter. "Christians had to pay bribes to the jihadists repeatedly in order to avoid getting killed."

Granted, it's hard to know whether such hostility is rooted in religious prejudice or in political perceptions that Christians tend to be more pro-Assad. Facing threats to life and limb, however, that's probably a distinction without a difference for a growing number of people.

Mansour Saad, the Christian mayor of an eastern Lebanese town now offering temporary shelter to many Syrian exiles, says he still believes Assad is the best bet to keep Christians safe.

"The rebels haven't managed to convince me they're fighting for more democracy," Saad said. "We know the types of Muslims who have emerged at the head of the rebellion: the ones who would like to lead the people back into the Stone Age."

Dall'Oglio, the Jesuit who backs the Syrian opposition, has a different perspective, insisting the idea that Assad is a bulwark against Islamic radicalism is nothing more than propaganda manufactured by the regime.

Dall'Oglio has criticized church leaders of all stripes in Syria and abroad -- particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, which has given spiritual cover to Russia's pro-Syrian foreign policy -- for recycling what Dall'Oglio describes as the "lie" that Assad protects minorities against the majority Sunni Muslims. If Assad is really so friendly to Christians, Dall'Oglio asks, why have Syrian Christians been leaving for the last 40 years?

Dall'Oglio compares church leaders in Syria to their counterparts in Iraq, who took a soft line on the Hussein regime, and in Egypt, where the Coptic establishment largely backed Mubarak. In each case, he insists, they're on the wrong side of history.

Speaking about Christian psychology in Syria, Dall'Oglio says: "They are in a state of Islamophobia. Since the 1980s, all they have heard repeated over and over is that without the Assad state, Syria would be an Islamic hell."

In fact, Dall'Oglio warns, the longer the end-game in Syria drags on, the more space is created for jihadist forces to supplant the pro-democracy movement. In other words, by keeping Assad viable a little longer, Christians may be paving the way for precisely the nightmare they fear most.

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While the Vatican may be keeping its diplomatic powder dry, other Catholic actors are trying to play more of a protagonist's role. This week, the Community of Sant'Egidio hosted a cross-section of Syria's democratic opposition for several days of meetings, culminating on Thursday with the presentation of an "Appeal for Syria from Rome."

The appeal was signed by the leaders of 10 Syrian opposition groups who met at Sant'Egidio headquarters in the Roman neighborhood of Trastevere.

Signatories declare they are "not neutral," but rather "part of the Syrian people suffering because of the oppression of a dictatorship and its corruption." Yet they reject a military solution to the crisis, insisting that the resort to violence "is holding the Syrian people hostage."

While recognizing "the right of citizens to legitimate defense," the appeal calls on members of the Free Syrian Army to participate in nonviolent political struggle. It asks the international community to support a political exit strategy, beginning with "the imposition of a ceasefire, the withdrawal of the military, the release of detainees and the kidnapped, the return of refugees, emergency assistance for the victims, a real global negotiation."

"We are firmly opposed to any discrimination based on religious confession or ethnicity, from whatever side it comes," the appeal says. "We are in favor of a Syria of equals sharing citizenship. We desire to see a Syria that is a homeland for all, able to respect life and human dignity in justice."

The basic idea is that the choice facing Syria is not exclusively between dictatorship and theocracy. There's still a chance to forge a "free and democratic" society, in the words of Fayez Sara, a Damascus-based writer and opposition leader who took part in the Sant'Egidio event.

Whatever one makes of Sara's perspective, he's certainly earned the right to voice it. The 61-year-old activist has been arrested three times by the Assad regime since the 1970s, spending a total of five years behind bars for the crime of "disrupting national purity." He was joined in Rome by fellow pro-democracy leaders such as Abdul Aziz al-Khayyar, who spent 14 years in prison and now helps lead a National Democratic Union in Syria.

In explaining why they chose to launch the initiative, spokespersons for Sant'Egidio stressed two points.

- If there's any place in the Middle East with the social infrastructure and human capital to make co-existence work, it's arguably Syria. Although Sunnis account for three-quarters of the overall population of 22 million, the country also includes a staggering variety of Christian denominations, other Islamic sects, a sizeable Druze minority, and other religious and ethnic traditions. That pluralism has always been a source of national pride. (Among other things, Syria is a laboratory for on-the-ground ecumenism between Catholics and Orthodox, who often move seamlessly between one another's liturgies and communities, sometimes being only vaguely aware that they actually belong to rival confessions.)
- Syria isn't some backwater, but a country with high levels of economic and educational attainment, and a proud centuries-long cultural tradition, all of which have bred a robust civil society. Mario Marazziti, one of the Sant'Egidio leaders who convened the Rome meetings, described the purpose of the initiative as hearing what he called the "true voice of Syria," as opposed to those who have presently grabbed the megaphone by force of arms.

Marazziti insisted Thursday that the idea of a political solution isn't a "naïve pipe dream." Sant'Egidio pledged to continue to work in that direction, and they've certainly produced improbable diplomatic miracles before, most prominently brokering an end to the Mozambique civil war in 1992. No doubt Syria's minorities, beginning with the country's estimated 2 million Christians, would be the first to celebrate if Sant'Egidio has another trick up its sleeve this time.

It's also fair to wonder, however, how many of those Christians are likely to stick around to find out.

The full text of the "Appeal for Syria from Rome" can be found on the Sant'Egidio website at santegidio.org [1].

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[1] http://www.santegidio.org