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

Archbishop (gently) corrects pope on Arab Spring

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tIt?s not often during a papal trip that a Catholic bishop and one of the pope?s official hosts actually corrects the boss, or at least strikes a slightly different note, but it happened Saturday night to Benedict XVI in Lebanon vis-à-vis the most important movement in this part of the world, the ?Arab Spring.?

tLast night, Benedict visited the headquarters of the Maronite church, by far the largest of the seven Catholic churches in the country, to celebrate a youth rally that drew an estimated 20,000 young Lebanese, mostly Catholics but with some Muslims in the crowd as well.

tPrior to Benedict?s speech, the crowd heard from several figures, including Archbishop Georges Bou-Jaoude of Tripoli, a Maronite, who heads up the lay apostolate here. Bou-Jaoude?s brief welcome included a slightly different take on the Arab Spring than that offered by Benedict himself on Friday, in remarks to reporters aboard the papal plane.

tSpeaking about Lebanon?s youth, the archbishop said: ?They know they are called to rebuild their country together on a sound footing after long years of war lived in Lebanon for decades. It?s the same feeling of young people among our Arab neighbors after the upheavals facing their respective countries during the so-called ?Arab Spring,? who are hoping that this is really a spring.?

tThat?s a somewhat more skeptical note than the line offered by Benedict, who said that ?in itself the Arab Spring is a positive thing."

t?It?s a desire for greater democracy, for greater liberty, greater cooperation and a renewed Arab identity,? the pope also said, calling the movements in the Arab world ?a very positive and healthy thing, also for us Christians.?

tTo be sure, Benedict went on to add that there?s a risk that the present push for liberty may forget tolerance of the other. Moreover, the pope has repeatedly stressed the importance of religious freedom and the need to build societies which respect minority rights throughout his three-day trip.

tFurther, it?s not as if Bou-Jaoude were explicitly responding to Benedict?s comment. His welcome was prepared days in advance, well before he had any idea what the pope might say to reporters.

Still, Bou-Jaoude?s take on the Arab Spring inescapably came off as slightly less rosy.

Perhaps not accidentally, Bou-Jaoude is the archbishop of Tripoli, in Lebanon?s north, where on Friday Muslim protestors smashed a Kentucky Fried Chicken and a Hardees, and later tried to storm a government building, leaving one person dead and several wounded. Tripoli has also been the scene of sectarian violence between

Shi?ites and Alawites in recent months.

In reality, Bou-Jaoude?s caution probably comes closer to capturing the sentiments of many Christians across the Middle East, many of whom fear that the Arab Spring may turn into a Christian winter.

tRecent history illustrates it?s not a hollow concern. In Iraq after Saddam Hussein fell, in some ways it's become open season on Christians. According to the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization in Iraq, some 900 Iraqi Christians were killed between 2003 and May 2012, while 200 were kidnapped, tortured and ultimately released for exorbitant ransoms. While there were 1.5 million Christians in the country prior to the First Gulf War in 1991, today the high-end estimate is 450,000.

tMany Christian leaders in places such as Egypt and Syria worry it may be their turn next ? that the fall of a dictatorial regime will not usher in vibrant democracy, but rather chaos and a rising fundamentalist tide, with Christians bearing the brunt.

tIn the run-up to the papal visit to Lebanon, Fr. Rafic Greiche, spokesperson for the Catholic Coptic church in Egypt, stressed that the country?s Christians understand that many Muslims have been offended by the obscure American movie attacking Islam which has been cited as a pretext for the violence that?s spread across the region this week.

tIn the same breath, however, Greiche complained that the Muslim world rises up whenever anyone insults Muhammad, yet Christians in Egypt appear to be open season.

?After the fall of Mubarak, the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood have filled the newsstands and shops with newspapers, magazines, books that contain entire passages against Christians each week,? he said.

Magdi Cristiano Allam, an Egyptian-born convert to Christianity who's a prominent Italian figure and member of the European parliament, recently said: "If we are to assess the 'Arab Spring' by its fruits, we must conclude that it is not a good tree," claiming it has emboldened Islamic terrorism.

In Syria too, many Christian leaders worry about the aftermath should the Assad regime implode -- in part because some elements among the rebel forces have reportedly adopted the motto, "Christians to Lebanon, Alawites to the grave!"

Jesuit Fr. Samir Khalil Samir, an Egyptian who teaches in Rome and Beirut, and whose views on Islam carry weight in the Vatican, recently declared that the Arab Spring is "no more," claiming that it's been hijacked by Islamist groups, including in his homeland.

tIn that sense, the slight but significant contrast between the papal line and the archbishop?s ? the verbal difference between ?positive and healthy?, and ?so-called? ? perhaps captures the ambivalence that many Christians across the region presently feel.

Source URL (retrieved on *06/19/2013 - 10:44*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/archbishop-gently-corrects-pope-arab-spring