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

Pope tackles elephant in room of Christian exodus

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tIn a speech to at least 20,000 Lebanese youth tonight, both Christians and Muslims, Pope Benedict XVI tackled the elephant in the room during his fourth trip to the Middle East: Despite decades of papal appeals, so far nothing has stopped a steep decline in the region?s native Christian population.

tThe Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem, Foaud Twal, recently warned that the Holy Land is on the brink of becoming a ?spiritual Disneyland,? full of glittering spiritual attractions but empty of flesh-and-blood Christians. Many observers wonder if a similar fate awaits the entire region.

tTonight, Benedict addressed those concerns, almost pleading with Lebanon's Christian youth not to taste the ?bitter sweetness? of emigration.

t?I am aware of the difficulties which you face daily on account of instability and lack of security, your difficulties in finding employment and your sense of being alone and on the margins,? the pope said.

tBut those frustrations, he said, should not prompt them to choose ?an uprooting and a separation for the sake of an uncertain future.?

?You are meant to be protagonists of your country?s future, and to take your place in society and in the Church,? he said, speaking in French as he has throughout the trip.

tPopes and other church leaders have issued similar calls many times, but to date they?ve had little appreciable impact in arresting the demographic decline, which some experts call a ?Christian exodus.?

tAccording to statistics provided during the Vatican?s 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East, roughly 20 percent of the region was made up of Christians in the early 20th century, while today the Christian share stands at 5 percent. According to one projection, its native Arab Christian population could be cut in half again by 2020.

The Middle East is generally defined as consisting of seventeen states and territories:
Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, Palestinian Territories, and Yemen. According to statistics given during the Vatican?s 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East, there are 20 million Christians in the region, of whom 12 million are natives and roughly eight million are recent arrivals, mostly foreign ?guest workers.?

tTo be sure, alongside the exodus is a boom in new Christians. Saudi Arabia alone is now home to what the Vatican believes to be 1.25 million Catholics, mostly foreign nationals from places such as the Philippines and India, working in domestic services and the oil industry. Others, however, are Westerners employed in high-end

occupations.

tEven the well-heeled Westerners often face serious restrictions on their ability to practice Christianity openly. One recently described the situation as living in a ?gilded catacomb.?

tThe threats facing Arab Christians are, if anything, even more serious and, to some, seemingly intractable. They include:

- General political and economic stagnation
- Insecurity about the future, especially in the wake of the Arab Spring
- An endemic sense of second class citizenship, which is linked to Islamic fundamentalism in many places, and aggravated by Israeli security policies in the Holy Land
- In some cases, explicit anti-Christian persecution

tMany of those conditions afflict the general population too, but Christians are often better positioned to leave ? in part because they?re sometimes more educated and prosperous, thanks largely to the church's extensive school system in the region, and in part because they have access to networks of support in the West.

tIn Iraq, the country?s estimated 1.5 million Christians prior to the First Gulf War in 1991 have been reduced to perhaps 400,000 today, and many observers today believe similarly dramatic declines may be in store both in Egypt and in Syria.

tBenedict XVI heard plaintive references to these dynamics tonight, despite the fact that Christians remain a strong presence in Lebanon, and compared to the rest of the region, the country is presently relatively stable.

tArchbishop Georges Bou-Jaoude of Tripoli told the pope in a brief welcoming address that young people in the country ?live in anxiety and fear,? seeing their nation ?progressively emptied of its Christian presence.?

tLebanese youth, Bou-Jaoude said, fear rising fundamentalism and the region?s seeming inability ?to reconcile itself with modernity.?

tTwo young people struck similar notes, telling the pope they watch fellow Christians sell their land and move on, and would like to do something to stop it.

tBenedict suggested turning to the great saints of the church.

?Many of the Apostles and saints lived in troubled times and their faith was the source of their courage and their witness. Find in their example and intercession the inspiration and support that you need,? he said.

The cause of keeping Christians in the Middle East also got a boost from an unexpected source earlier today.

During a meeting between Benedict XVI and leaders of Lebanon?s four major Islamic communities, Mufti Mohammad Rachid Kabbani, a Sunni, told the pope that Muslims ?absolutely do not want Christians to leave the Middle East.?

The meeting took place behind closed doors, but a Vatican spokesperson later briefed reporters on its contents.

Tonight Benedict tried to spread Kabbani?s sentiment, asking the Muslims in his crowd ?to continue to live unity and harmony with Christians,? calling it a ?fine symbiosis.?

?It is vital that the Middle East in general, looking at you, should understand that Muslims and Christians, Islam

and Christianity, can live side by side without hatred, with respect for the beliefs of each person, so as to build together a free and humane society,? he said.

Throughout Benedict?s itinerary, Muslim clerics and dignitaries have appeared alongside the pope, often mixing freely with the Catholic prelates and other Christian leaders who join them in the VIP sections.

Beyond the plea to stay home, Benedict also urged Lebanese youth to pray and celebrate the sacraments, to ?fight superficiality and mindless consumption,? to avoid drugs and pornography, and to work to end ?abortion, violence, contempt for others, [and] injustice and war.?

tBenedict also reached out to Syrian refugees in the crowd, telling them that ?the pope has not forgotten you? and asking Muslims and Christians to come together ?to put an end to violence and war? in the country.

The youth rally was held in a large square outside the palace of the patriarch of the Maronite church, the largest of the seven Eastern churches which make up the bulk of Lebanon's Catholic population.

tTomorrow Benedict XVI wraps up his three-day trip to Lebanon with a large open-air Mass on Beirut?s waterfront, followed by an ecumenical meeting hosted by the city?s Syrian Catholic basilica.

Source URL (retrieved on *06/18/2013 - 17:12*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-tackles-elephant-room-christian-exodus