The “Little Flock” of Christians in the Middle East

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(Responding to the often expressed desire of numerous bishops in the Middle East, Pope Benedict XVI convoked a special gathering in Rome from October 10-24 with the theme: “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness.”)

At the intersection of three continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe), at the crossroad of great civilizations, the countries of the Middle East (from Turkey to Iraq, passing through Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine Jordan, and Iran) are experiencing a particularly painful moment today marked by conflict and war. More than others, these countries are dear to believers. Why? Because, in fact, they are the cradle of the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; it was here that they were born and developed. It was here that the Word of God was revealed to the People of Israel who welcomed it and passed it on from generation to generation in its books, which make up the Bible. It was also here that the early Church came to birth and grew thanks to the apostles and first Christians.

A much needed synod



During the 4th and 5th centuries many inhabitants of these lands heard the Good News of

Jesus Christ and made it their own. As the preparatory document for the synod states, “These lands have been blessed by the presence of Christ himself and the first generations of Christians. (#19, *instrumentum laboris* — “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness. ‘Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul’” Acts 4: 32). But, today, one can only deplore the decline of Christianity and fear its disappearance in the land of its birth. That would be an immeasurable loss for the universal Church.

For a long time the patriarchs and bishops of this “remnant” have been sounding the alarm and drawing the whole world’s attention to the dramatic plight of their communities. Pope Benedict was able to get a first-hand look of the situation by his visits — first in Turkey (November 28-December 1, 2006), then in Jordan, Palestine, and Israel (May 8-15, 2009), and finally, just recently, to Cyprus (June 6, 2010). Taking into account both the ecclesial and social situation of these countries, he favorably received the request of bishops and decided to convoke a synod on “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness.” Already in 1995 (November 26-December 14) Pope John Paul II had called a synod of the bishops to discuss the situation in Lebanon.

A double objective



All of the representatives of the episcopacy in the Middle East, together with delegates from the Churches of North Africa, came to Rome, therefore, at the beginning of October. They had a double objective: first, “to confirm and strengthen the members of the Catholic Church in their Christian identity, through the Word of God and the sacraments” and, second, “to foster ecclesial communion among the Churches sui iuris, so that they can bear witness to the Christian life in an authentic, joyous and winsome manner” (#3). During two weeks, then, they were “asked not only to describe the prevalent situation in their counties and analyse its positive and negative aspects, but primarily to supply Christians with the basis for their existence in a predominantly Muslim society, be it Arab, Turkish, Iranian or a Jewish society in the State of Israel (#6) but also to listen to the Word of God that “provides assistance in facing the challenges of today’s world” and that “is meant for enlightenment, especially in the choices communities” (#12). “The faithful are relying on their Pastors to give them precise guidelines in (re)discovering their mission in each country” (#6).

A Church which has known division



Born from the same source, “the Church of Jerusalem, made one by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost” (#14), Christ’s Church, experienced division and separation form its earliest days. Why? For religious and dogmatic reasons, but also because of political, cultural, and linguistic reasons. So it is that the great theological controversies (reflected in the councils of Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451) and the political conflicts between the great cities of Christianity in 5th, 6th, and 7th centuries (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople) explain the diversity of Churches in the East. One must not overlook, either, the “great schism” that ended up separating Rome and Constantinople to this day, Orthodox East and Catholic West. A majority in the first centuries, the Christians of the Middle East constitute a small minority now, between 12-13 million (of which 2 million are Catholic), that is to say, a tiny percentage of the population in these lands.

“The bitter fruit of the past,” all of these divisions still exist today. In the Middle east, there are no less than 12 different Churches, either orthodox or united to Rome (Maronite, Chaldean, Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Latin....). Certain of these are very old and jealously maintain their tradition, their liturgy, their language and their ecclesiastical discipline. These divisions reflect deep wounds, but are also a richness for the universal Church.

Communities in danger

As Islam has grown (more particularly ‘political Islam’ since the 1970s) and the expansion of conflicts in the entire region, Christians have had to face conditions of life that have become more difficult by the day : persecution, discrimination, absence of religious freedom (even the denial of practicing their faith). The political and social situation is especially fragile and unstable. Therefore the temptation to find refuge in a more favorable place is enormous. In recent years, thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, have had to leave their land. “The emigration of Christians and non-Christians from the Middle East, a phenomenon which began at the end of the 19th century, chiefly arose for political and economic reasons....Today, emigration is particularly prevalent because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the resulting instability throughout the region” (#43).

The meaning of a presence



This movement of people is such that some even envisage the disappearance of Christian from the Middle East. If this were to occur, it “would impoverish the pluralism which has always characterised the countries of the Middle East. Middle Eastern countries would be at a disadvantage without the Christian voice” (#24). As it stands, although they are a minority everywhere, Christians “are nonetheless active, forceful and involved where social and political situations allow” (28). “Christians have the unique and specific contribution of enriching with Gospel values the society in which they live” (#111). They “have a special contribution to make in the area of justice and peace” (#112). That is why for the survival of these communities and for the well-being of society in general, it is important that Christians remain in their land and be “more aware of the meaning of their presence and the need to engage, here and now, in public life” (#114). For, as the preparatory document recalls, “Each Christian, no matter what country, is the bearer of the message of Christ to society, which must be announced even amidst trials and persecution” (#46).

“You have a future”



The situation of Christians in the in the Middle East is grave. The document concludes in this fashion, “History has made us a little flock.” (#118). “Despite the fact that both Pastors and the faithful might oftentimes be tempted to discouragement, we must remember that we are disciples of the Risen Christ, who conquered sin and death. We have a future! We must firmly grasp it. Much will depend on the way we collaborate with people of good will in promoting the

common good of the societies in which we live. Today, the Lord Jesus can again say to Christians in the Middle East: "Do not be afraid, little flock!" (Lk 12:32). You have a mission; the growth of your country and the vitality of your Church depend on you. This will only be achieved with peace, justice and equality for all citizens!”(#119).

N.B. the entire preparatory document can be found at : http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20100606_instrumentum-mo_en.pdf