
CEI Conference on the Mediterranean. Card. Sako (Baghdad): “Our future is the major challenge”

“The security situation remains uncertain at the moment. Hopefully the Pope will be able to visit Iraq perhaps in the fall. People in Iraq are eagerly looking forward to his arrival; his presence among us would be a concrete sign of deep closeness to all the countries of the Middle East, especially those afflicted by tensions and wars, such as neighbouring Syria and within Iran.”



SIR met the Chaldean Patriarch of Baghdad, Card. **Louis Raphael Sako**, after his meeting in the Vatican with Pope Francis on Friday, February 7, together with other Catholic patriarchs from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. "It was a necessary meeting - the Cardinal told SIR -. The atmosphere was very fraternal and sincere. We shared with the Pope the challenges faced by our Churches and by our countries. We described the life of Christian communities. We need the Pope's support to cope with all our suffering. We are now a small minority and our future is at risk. We felt his closeness and he repeated several times that he too is Patriarch, Patriarch of Rome, and that he stands with us, with the isolated Eastern Churches in Islamic majority countries. The meeting confirmed us in the faith and gave us new strength and hope." Card. Sako will be attending the meeting promoted by the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) titled, "**Mediterranean, frontier of peace**" in Bari (19-23 February). On that occasion, he added, "I will speak about the challenges faced by our Churches."

Your Eminence, is there a particular challenge faced by all the Churches in the Middle East?

The major challenge involves our future, namely, how to keep our faithful from fleeing their respective countries, despite the serious difficulties linked to instability, social and economic insecurity, wars. Every day in Iraq we count the dead, the wounded. Also in Syria. How can one live in this climate of fear? Like everyone else Christians seek stability, certainties for the future of their children and families. They want to leave. The challenge is to help them stay.

The Patriarchs of Eastern Churches have been accused of conniving with dictatorial regimes in their respective countries: Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, just to name a few. How do you respond?

As far as Iraq is concerned, many things have changed. We have ongoing communication with national institutions, we openly express our ideas. But it must also be said that it is necessary to be appropriately informed about the mentality and the situation in the various countries. Christians are seeking security and stability that they presently do not have. People are worried that the fall of the present regime could pave the way to a worse one. It happened in Iraq: the regime fell in 2003 and for the past 17 years there was nothing. We are experiencing anarchy. If I go out of the house today I

am not sure I will come back. Having someone - even if a dictator - who ensures security, becomes a lesser evil. Before the war Christians represented about 20% of Syria's population, today the figures dropped to approximately 6%, a great loss. Changing per se is pointless. People must be taught democracy and freedom first, but not with slogans. Lebanon, Libya, Yemen, Syria are similar examples .



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I remember one Saturday, we went with my auxiliary bishops to the Square. We received a warm, festive welcome. Hundreds of people came over to greet us. No cleric, not even Muslim, had gone to see them before us. They told me I was everyone's patriarch. Protesters' demands are fair and justifiable. How could we fail to share requests for truth, for justice, for the common good, for citizenship, for the homeland? Today everything is sectarian, the notion of homeland does not exist, all is divided, fragmented, including faith. I perceived Christ's presence in the protesters' yearning for fraternity, for justice, for goodness.

You have often spoken of liberation theology...

It is the duty of the Church to read the signs of the times, as in Latin America. Our young men and women are shedding their blood for the cause of peace, justice, human dignity and freedom. To date we have counted 600 dead and 25,000 wounded. There are realities where the Church must be present to offer a word of hope. We must not stand aloof from our present times. I have repeatedly asked the Iraqi authorities to listen to the requests of the protesters taking to the streets because those requests are voiced by their own children. They are the future of Iraq.

You have always championed the creation of a secular State: do you believe the time is ripe?

A secular State is the solution to Middle East countries' crises. A secular State means the end of sectarianism. I have to say that I am often criticized by Christians (he laughs, ed.'s note) because I talk about politics. But I consider it an opportunity to form consciences. Muslims themselves want to hear something different from what they normally hear. Political Islam aims to establish a theocratic State, but it cannot work. We are not in the Middle Ages. Religion and State are two separate domains. Religion has principles, politics has interests - unfortunately frequently personal and partisan interests. I am thinking of a civil State, based on citizenship, whose objective is the integration and service of all its components with no distinction whatsoever. Even Shiite authorities are now starting to talk about a civil State, albeit it's not yet clear in which terms. But to me the concept is clear: separation between State and Religion and respect for the religious and moral values of the people who must live in freedom without fear - not only Christians but all Iraqis. A bishop, a priest, serves not only his flock but everyone. Help, assistance, support must be offered to everybody regardless of differences. It's a great testimony.



I would define it as the manifesto of this process. The Document has somewhat changed the Muslim world, that seems more open to Christians today. We would never have imagined to see the Pope celebrate Mass in the Arabian Peninsula. For the first time Muslims saw Christians praying with respect and listening to the liturgical texts. Seeing our fellow other, knowing them, stirs a desire for encounter and exchange.

Citizenship and secularism are also discussed at large in Benedict XVI's post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in the Middle East". What remains of this document, 10 years after the Synod for the Middle East? I remember that, during an ad Limina visit, I personally submitted to Pope Benedict the request for a synod. It came from the realization that as small Churches we had - and still have - a need to work together for our future. The Synod was celebrated in 2010, in October. Problems then arose in connection with Al Qaeda, the creation of ISIS, with attacks on the Churches. Suffice it to mention the bombing in a church on 31 October in Baghdad, only a few days after the end of the Synod. More than 50 faithful were killed by terrorists. The Synod for the Middle East was not implemented in the practical life of our Churches. It is my conviction, now as it was in the past, that our Eastern Rite Churches must work together. There are small and large churches among us, with greater and smaller possibilities. My thoughts go to the schools, the hospitals, homes for the needy run by these Churches. If we want to have a future we must join forces and our competences.

Internal disputes amongst Churches should first be resolved...

Inside the Churches ethnic identity, linked to nationalism, is a powerful theme that does not reflect Church indications. Issues of 'Maronism' and 'Chaldeanism' are such examples. Instead, we should strive to preserve our adherence to the universal Church and to its mission. As Eastern Churches we

have lost the missionary dimension with the advent of Islam. The Chaldeans, at that time, started proclaiming the Gospel in India and China. Rising nationalism is a challenge that must not leave us unprepared.



I expect an open debate on the challenges facing not only Christians but also the peoples of these countries. All the barriers between us must be removed. Migrations that cause also a cultural impoverishment in these countries, facing major brain drain, represent a major challenge. Migration brings additional challenges, that of reception followed by integration. Immigrants cannot be abandoned to their fate alone, ghettoized. As Eastern Churches we try to assist our faithful in the diaspora, seeking to ensure also their spiritual care. But most of all it is necessary to develop a proper pastoral care that keeps alive their ecclesial tradition and identity while respecting the country in which they live. These countries have different mentalities, cultures, traditions and languages. Our Eastern faith heritage can also provide a model for the secularized Western world. Refugees can contribute to this. With our suffering, with our martyrs, with our fidelity we are a gift to the universal Church. Western Christians are exhorted by Eastern Christians - who have paid dearly for their faith in Christ - to revive their faith. There is a need to talk to each other.

Maybe with a new, different language?

We are seeking a new common vocabulary to talk about faith. Let us restart from the Bible, from biblical theology but with a more understandable language, incorporated into everyday life. It is also our mission to speak of the Christian faith to Muslims, and it is our duty to do so in a suitable language. It can't be done using classical, philosophical, metaphysical language. Hypostatic union, physis, prosopon, are enigmas for many. We must also reach out to young people, and social media are an excellent tool. We must talk to them about life, about solidarity, about respect, about human and spiritual progress, about care for Creation. All the wars in the world have been waged for economic reasons. But Jesus teaches us that man does not live by bread alone, but by His every word. Let us make this Word heard. The Pope offers us a great example. He understands humankind and knows how to speak to people's hearts.

It cannot be denied that controversies involving the figure of the Pope cause divisions and polarizations among the faithful. Why, in your opinion?

Pope Francis is an extraordinary figure for the Muslims, he is highly respected, everyone talks about him. For us Christians he is a grace. However, no one is perfect and people are never happy with everyone and so they criticize. They also criticized Jesus. I have heard people saying that he never talks about discrimination and persecution against Christians. That's not true, he always addresses this issue. He demands respect for them and for this reason he dialogues with Muslims. I'm sure that what is good remains and that it will emerge, putting an end to all the small talk.

