

Church leaders in Egypt see signs of new unity among Christians and Muslims



Cairo, Egypt, Feb 2, 2011 / 01:46 pm (CNA/EWTN

News).- As massive demonstrations moved into their second week in Cairo — with more than 250,000 protesters filling the streets demanding an end to the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak — the Vatican’s top ambassador said there is a “sense of uncertainty” in the north African nation.

“There is a will for change in the country,” Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, M. Afr., the Vatican nuncio to Egypt told CNA in a phone interview from Cairo, Feb. 1.

He said the “underlying factors” in the protests are “social conditions which have made life very difficult for people” — including high rates of poverty and unemployment. In addition, he said there is a general “feeling of dissatisfaction with regard to a lack of political rights and dissatisfaction with the recent elections.”

The nunciature, the Vatican's diplomatic mission to Egypt located in Cairo, has been quiet in recent days. There is not a lot of movement due to communications restrictions and a curfew that has left only a six-hour window for people to be legally in the streets. The nuncio is in contact with religious communities by telephone to gauge the situation.

“Some, of course, are worried,” he said, “but I haven't had any news of any real disaster in any part of the country as far as the Christians are concerned.”

Archbishop Fitzgerald said the demonstrations have been remarkably free from religious overtones and that there are many signs of Christians and Muslims working together.

“There isn't a religious distinction,” he said. “They are not dividing themselves into Christians and Muslims, they're just the Egyptian citizens.”

Archbishop Fitzgerald said that in the first days of unrest, Muslims and Christians spontaneously formed neighborhood committees to provide security when police forces abruptly fled the area.

About 90 percent of Egypt’s population is Muslim. Catholics make up a tiny minority of about 500,000. The majority of the nation’s Christians are members of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Catholic Coptic Patriarch Cardinal Antonios Naguib, head of the country's Catholic Church, also said the protests have brought out "really wonderful" displays of Christian-Muslim unity.

The country was rocked by a wave of anti-Christian persecution at the start of the year, including the killing of 21 Coptic Orthodox worshipers by a Muslim extremist suicide bomber outside a church in Alexandria, Egypt.

Many analysts have expressed fear that the militant Muslim Brotherhood sect would exploit the protests in a bid to turn Egypt into an Islamic state. But in an interview Feb. 1 with the Franciscan-run news service, Terrasanta.net, Patriarch Naguib said a new "maturity" is being demonstrated in the protests.

"The religious element hasn't appeared at all," he said. "It is a real political movement and we really hope that this unity and solidarity that is being shown at the moment will help to change the mentality, bringing more mutual acceptance and collaboration."

In fact, some leading Muslims have expressed hopes that the current protests will lead to a post-Mubarak era that would rid the country of Islamic extremism.

"This is a revolution guided by the middle-high class which is asking before all for political and religious freedom," Wael Farouq, a Muslim and a professor at the American University of Cairo told the Milan based on-line daily, *Il Sussidiario.net* Jan. 31.

"The fundamentalists will not take control of the revolt," Farouq said. "What is happening in these days demonstrates that the true enemy of religious liberty in Egypt is the Mubarak regime, which seeks to divide Christians and Muslims to control the country."

Farouq said that although President Mubarak has sought to blame the Muslim Brotherhood for the protests, the protests are clearly "a secular revolution."

"The hundreds of thousands of people who have come down to the squares were asking loudly for the unity of Christians and Muslims. One of their slogans, for example, was 'Christians and Muslims, we are all Egyptians'," he said.

"At a certain point, one person tried to shout one of their slogans, 'Islam is the solution,' and was immediately chased from the area. Others ... contested them ... with these words: 'We are Egyptians, not Muslims.' A Christian carried a cross with him, and as soon as the other protesters realized it, they were happy and they raised it over their back, holding it high out of appreciation. I can tell you this because I saw it with my own eyes."

The leader of the Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Christian community, Pope Shenouda III, has expressed his continued support for the stability of the Mubarak regime and has urged believers not to join the protest movement.

Catholic leaders, thus far, have declined to comment or take sides in the political debate.

The Catholic Church, Archbishop Fitzgerald told CNA, is “leaving it to the citizens to decide what they want to do.”

Catholics, he said, are Egyptians and the Church’s concerns “are the same as all the Egyptians.”

He declined to speculate on the future of the country.

“No one knows exactly what is going to happen so there is this sense of uncertainty and I think that everybody shares in that,” he said. “We don’t know about the future. We have to wait and see.”

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