

Summary of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "ECCLESIA IN MEDIO ORIENTE"



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Vatican City, 15 September 2012 (VIS) - Given below is a brief summary of the main points contained in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Medio Oriente".

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Medio Oriente" is the document elaborated by Benedict XVI based on the forty-four final propositions of the special Synod for the Middle East, which was held in Vatican City from 10 to 26 October 2010 on the theme: "The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and witness. 'The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul'". The text is subdivided into three parts, plus an introduction and a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The Exhortation invites the Catholic Church in the Middle East to revive communion within the Church, looking to the "native faithful" who belong to the Eastern Catholic Churches "sui iuris", and opening up to dialogue with Jews and Muslims. This is a communion, a unity to be reached within the context of geographical, religious, cultural and socio-political diversity in the Middle East. Benedict XVI renews his call to conserve and promote the rites of the Eastern Churches, heritage of all Christ's Church.

PART ONE

The Context: Firstly, the Pope exhorts us not to forget the Christians who live in the Middle East and who bring a "noble and authentic" contribution to the construction of the Body of Christ. Then, in describing the situation of the region and the peoples who live there, Benedict XVI dramatically emphasises the deaths, the victims of "human blindness", fear and humiliation. Without entering into detail, the Exhortation briefly recalls that the position of the Holy See on the various conflicts in the region and on the status of Jerusalem and the Holy Places is well known. Finally, a call is made for conversion to peace - understood not only as the simple absence of conflict, but rather as interior peace and linked to justice - overriding all distinctions of race, sex and class, and to practice forgiveness in the realms of both private and community life.

The Christian and ecumenical life: This chapter is a call in favour of ecumenical unity which "does not mean uniformity of tradition and celebrations". In a difficult, unstable political context inclined towards violence such as the Middle East, in fact, the Church has developed in a truly multi-form fashion, encompassing Churches of ancient tradition and more recent ecclesiastical communities. It is a form of mosaic which requires significant effort in the reinforcement of Christian witness. In line with Vatican Council II the Pope encourages spiritual ecumenism, and a communion understood not as confusion, but rather as recognition and respect for others. At the same time, the Exhortation reasserts the importance of the work of theology and the various ecumenical commissions and ecclesial communities, in order that - in line with the doctrine of the Church - they speak with one voice on the most important moral questions (family, sexuality, bioethics, freedom, justice and peace). Diaconal ecumenism is also important, in both charitable and educational fields. Several concrete proposals for an ecumenical pastoral outreach are then listed: among these, the application of conciliary openness towards a certain "communicatio in sacris" (i.e., the possibility for Christians to access the Sacraments in a Church other than their own) for the Sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick. The Pope states his certainty of the possibility of reaching agreement on a common translation of the Lord's Prayer in the local languages of the region.

Inter-religious dialogue: Recalling the historical and spiritual links that Christians have with Jews and Muslims, the Exhortation reaffirms that inter-religious dialogue is not dictated by pragmatic considerations of a political or social order, but is based primarily upon the theological foundations of faith: Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in a single God and for this reason it is hoped that they may recognise in "the other believer" a brother to love and respect, avoiding the exploitation of religion for conflicts which are "unjustifiable for authentic believers". With particular regard to Christian-Jewish dialogue, the Pope recalls the common spiritual heritage, based on the Bible, which leads back to the "Jewish roots of Christianity"; at the same time he invites Christians to be aware of the mystery of the Incarnation of God and to condemn the unjustifiable persecutions of the past.

With regard to Muslims, Benedict XVI uses the word "esteem", "in fidelity to the teachings of Vatican Council II"; however, it is regrettable that doctrinal differences have been used as a pretext by both Christians and Muslims to justify, in the name of religion, acts of intolerance, discrimination, marginalisation and persecution. The Exhortation then shows how the presence of Christians in the Middle East is neither new, nor casual, but historical. An integral part of the region, they have given rise to "a particular form of symbiosis" with the surrounding culture, specific to the Middle East, and they have the right and the duty to participate fully in civil life, and should not be considered as second class citizens. The Pope affirms that religious liberty - the pinnacle of all freedoms, sacred and inalienable - includes the freedom to choose the religion one considers true and to publicly manifest

one's belief and its symbols, without putting one's own life or personal freedom in danger. Force and constriction are not admissible in religious matters. The Pope calls for the step to be taken from tolerance to religious freedom, which does not imply an open door to syncretism, but rather "a reconsideration of the relationship between man, religion and God".

Two new realities: The Exhortation considers at length the matter of secularisation, including its extreme forms, and the violent fundamentalism that claims to have a religious origin. A healthy secularity means distinction and collaboration between politics and religion, characterised by mutual respect. It requires the political sphere to operate without manipulating religion, and guarantees that religion may live without the encumbrance of political interests. Religious fundamentalism - which grows in a climate of socio-political uncertainty - seeks to take power for political ends, at times using violence, over the individual conscience and over religion. For this reason, the Pope issues a heartfelt appeal to all the religious leaders of the Middle East to endeavour, by their example and their teaching, to do everything possible to uproot this threat which indiscriminately and fatally affects believers of all religions.

Migrants: The Pope faces a crucial question, the exodus - indeed, a haemorrhage - of Christians who find themselves in a delicate position, at times without hope, and are subject to the negative consequences of conflicts, often feeling humiliated, despite having participated throughout the centuries in the construction of their respective countries. A Middle East without, or with few Christians, would no longer be the Middle East. The Pope therefore asks political and religious leaders to avoid policies and strategies tending towards a monochromatic Middle East which does not reflect its human and historical reality. Benedict XVI also invites the pastors of the Eastern Catholic Churches to help their priests and their faithful in exodus to remain in contact with their families and their Churches, and encourages the Pastors of the ecclesiastical circumscriptions who welcome the Eastern Catholics to allow them the possibility of worshipping according to their own traditions. This chapter also considers the question of immigrant workers - often Catholics of Latin rite - from Africa, the Far East and the Indian sub-continent, who too often experience situations of discrimination and injustice.

PART TWO

Patriarchs: Leaders of the "sui iuris" Churches, in perfect union with the Bishop of Rome, render tangible the universality and unity of the Church and, as a sign of communion, are able to reinforce this union and solidarity within the framework of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East and the patriarchal Synods, always favouring consultation and collegial action on questions fundamental to the Church.

Bishops: A visible sign of the unity in diversity of the Church understood as a Body, of whom Christ is the head, the bishops are the first to be sent forth into all nations to make disciples. They must proclaim God's Word with courage and firmly defend the integrity and unity of the faith, in those difficult situations which are unfortunately common in the Middle East. The bishops are also required to ensure a wise, honest and transparent management of the temporal goods of the Church and to this end, the Pope recalls that the Synod Fathers have requested serious revision of finances and assets, to avoid confusion between personal property and that of the Church. The bishops, furthermore, must be vigilant in ensuring that priests receive appropriate remuneration, in order that they do not become distracted by material matters. The alienation of the goods of the Church must adhere strictly to

canonical norms and the current papal legislation. Finally, the Pope exhorts bishops to ensure the pastoral care of all Christian faithful, regardless of their nationality or ecclesial provenance.

Priests and seminarians: The Exhortation underlines that priests must educate the People of God in the construction of a civilisation of evangelical love and unity, and this requires an in-depth transmission of the Word of God, and of the tradition and the Doctrine of the Church, along with intellectual and spiritual renewal of the priests themselves. To this end, celibacy is important - a priceless gift of God to the Church - as is the ministry of married priests, an ancient component of the Eastern tradition. As servants of the communion, priests and seminarians must offer courageous and unambiguous testimony, must conduct themselves irreproachably, and must be open to the cultural diversity of their Churches (learning, for instance, their languages and cultures), along with ecclesial diversity and ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

The consecrated life: Monasticism in its various forms was born in the Middle East and gave rise to several "sui iuris" Churches. Men and women religious must collaborate with the bishop in pastoral and missionary activities. They are invited to meditate upon at length and observe the evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty and obedience), as there cannot be spiritual regeneration - of the faithful, the community and the Church as a whole - without a clear and unequivocal return to the search for God.

The laity: Members of the Body of Christ through Baptism, and thus fully associated with the mission of the universal Church, to lay people the Pope entrusts the task of promoting - in temporal matters, their proper domain - the sound administration of public goods, religious freedom and respect for the dignity of each person. They are invited to be bold in the cause of Christ. In order that their witness be fruitful, however, lay people must overcome the divisions and all subjective interpretations of Christian life.

Family: A divine institution founded on the indissoluble Sacrament of Marriage between a man and a woman, today the family is exposed to many dangers. The Christian family must be supported in the problems and difficulties it faces, and must look to its own deepest identity, in order to become first and foremost a domestic Church which educates in prayer and in faith, a seedbed of vocations, the natural school of virtue and ethical values, and the primary cell of society. The Exhortation gives considerable consideration to the question of women in the Middle East and to the need for equality with men, in the face of the discriminations they suffer which gravely offend not only women themselves, but also and above all, God. The Pope emphasises that women must play a greater role in public and ecclesial life. With regard to judicial disputes in matrimonial matters, the voice of the woman must be heard with equal respect to that of the man, without injustice. To this end, the Pope encourages a sound and just application of the law, in order that the judicial differences regarding matrimonial matters do not lead to apostasy. Finally, the Christians of the Middle East must be able to apply their own law, both in marriage and elsewhere, without restrictions.

Young people and children: The Pope exhorts them not to be afraid or ashamed of being Christians, to respect other believers, Jews and Muslims, and to always cultivate, through prayer, a true friendship with Jesus, loving Christ and the Church. In this way, they may discern wisely the values of modern life that may be useful to their fulfilment, without allowing themselves to be seduced by materialism or certain social networks, the indiscriminate use of which may distort the true nature of human relations.

With regard to children, in particular, the Exhortation calls upon parents, teachers, guides and public institutions to recognise the rights of minors from the moment of their conception.

PART THREE

The Word of God, soul and source of communion and witness: After expressing recognition of the exegetical schools (of Alexandria, Antioch, etc.) which have contributed to the dogmatic formulation of Christian mystery in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Exhortation recommends a genuine biblical apostolate, to help dissipate prejudice or mistaken ideas which may be the cause of needless and humiliating controversies. This leads to the suggestion of proclaiming a Year of the Bible, in accordance with the pastoral conditions of each country in the region, and to follow it, if appropriate, with an annual Bible Week. The Christian presence in the biblical countries of the Middle East - which is far more than a question of sociological belonging or simple economic and cultural success - by rediscovering its original inspiration and in following Christ's disciples, will take on new vitality.

Liturgy and sacramental life: For the faithful in the Middle East, the liturgy is an essential element of spiritual unity and communion. The renewal of celebrations and liturgical texts, where necessary, must be based on the Word of God and undertaken in collaboration with the Churches who share the same traditions. The importance of Baptism is a key issue, which enables those who receive this sacrament to live in communion and to develop true solidarity with other members of humankind, without discrimination on the grounds of race or religion. From this point of view, the Pope hopes for an ecumenical agreement between the Catholic Church and the Churches with whom it is in theological dialogue on the mutual recognition of Baptism, in order to restore full communion in apostolic faith. The Exhortation also expresses hope for more frequent practice of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and exhorts pastors and the faithful to promote initiatives for peace, even amid persecution.

Prayer and pilgrimages: The Middle East is a privileged land of pilgrimage for many Christians who come to consolidate their faith and to seek a profoundly spiritual experience. The Pope asks that the faithful have free access, without restriction, to holy places. It is also essential that contemporary biblical pilgrimage returns to its original motivations of penitence and the search for God.

Evangelisation and charity; the Church's mission: The Exhortation underlines that the transmission of faith is an essential mission of the Church. The Pope therefore encourages the new evangelisation which, in a contemporary context, marked by change, makes the faithful aware of the testimony of their lives: this reinforces their word when they speak of God courageously and openly, to announce the Good News of salvation. In particular, in the Middle East, deepening of the theological and pastoral meaning of evangelisation should look to both the ecumenical and inter-religious dimensions. With regard to ecclesial movements and communities, the Pope encourages them to act in union with the bishop of the place and according to his pastoral directives, with due regard for the local history, liturgy, spirituality and culture, without confusion and proselytism. The Catholic Churches of the Middle East are therefore invited to renew their missionary spirit, a challenge more urgent than ever in a multicultural and pluri-religious context. A strong stimulus for this may be given by the Year of Faith. With regard to charity, the Exhortation recalls that the Church must follow the example of Christ Who drew close to those most in need: orphans, the poor, the disabled, the sick, etc. Finally, the Pope praises and encourages all those who carry out impressive work in the educational centres, schools,

higher institutes and Catholic universities of the Middle East. These tools for cultural formation, that should be supported by political authorities, demonstrate that it is possible to live in a spirit of respect and collaboration in the Middle East, through education in tolerance.

Catechesis and Christian formation: The papal document encourages the reading and teaching of the catechism of the Catholic Church and a solid initiation in the social doctrine of the Church. At the same time, the Pope invites the Synods and other episcopal organisms to enable the faithful to have access to the spiritual wealth of the Fathers of the Church, and to focus on patristic teaching, as a complement to scriptural formation.

CONCLUSION

Benedict XVI solemnly asks, in the name of God, that political and religious authorities not only alleviate the suffering of all those who live in the Middle East, but also eliminate the causes of this suffering, and do all in their power to enable peace to prevail. At the same time, the Catholic faithful are exhorted to consolidate and live together in communion, giving life to pastoral dynamism. "A lukewarm spirit is displeasing to God", and therefore the Christians of the Middle East, Catholics and others, are encouraged bear witness to Christ, courageously and as one - a difficult witness, but exhilarating.

Pope Benedict XVI