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# FOSTERING DIALOGUE, BUILDING COMMUNITY

## Mideast Synod Focuses on Diaspora of Christians

By Bishop Béchara Raï

VATICAN CITY, OCT. 12, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Today we began with the synod father's interventions, which were related to the theme chosen in "Instrumentum Laboris," and each spoke for five minutes. We began with the intervention of the dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who underlined the closeness of the cardinals and Benedict XVI with the Christians of the East, and with the Middle Eastern countries, so that they remember that the Church is helping them to face the challenges in their lives. In reality, these challenges are not faced only by Christians, but by all citizens in the Mideast, but the impact is more negative upon Christians.

We spoke of the importance of education in schools, particularly in Catholic schools, and of the importance of their mission to be in the midst of societies that are open to all religions and to contribute, not only in the scientific education, but also in the moral education. The prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education reiterated that the Catholic schools should be open to all religions so that students can experience life together and build friendships for a better future.

We also spoke of the diaspora and the importance of the social and pastoral work so that Christian immigrants from the Arab world continue to conserve their identity and conserve their belonging to their countries of origin and their roots, to avoid being lost in the new societies. In addition, we spoke of life and practical initiatives through which immigrants can help their families still in the home countries, so that the families can remain there and witness to their Christianity.

Today, we also emphasized the Church in the Holy Land and the dialogue with Judaism, with a large separation between Israel as a Jewish political state and Judaism as a religion so that the church in the Holy Land remains a church of dialogue, similar to its role with Islam and other societies. The "Instrumentum Laboris" speaks of an Arab society, an Iranian society, a Turkish society, and a Jewish society, and that is

why the Church cannot close in upon itself nor close the doors to dialogue. It is very important to separate between what is political and what is a dialogue of life and cultures and art, thus building a unified human family. Obviously this helps to diminish the big political tensions.

After that, the synod fathers discussed the situation of Iraq. There was a call for solidarity with the Iraqi people in general, and with Iraqi Christians in particular, so they may reach peace and stability. Here appeals were made to the leaders in Iraq and to the leaders in the international community, to help build the peace in this suffering country.

The synod fathers asked that the authority of the patriarchs be expanded to become a personal authority, which means an authority that goes beyond the geographical limits to reach their flock all over the world. A large number of our people live outside our countries, and the heads of the Eastern Churches cannot be their religious father geographically.

Also, the churches of Africa made an appeal and expressed their need for priests and religious. One of the fathers suggested creating a bank of priests, priests without borders, priests who have been formed and prepared to help these dioceses in need of priests for a certain amount of time. This helps all of us live in communion between the churches and between each other. This is something that we, for example, are experiencing in the Diocese of Jbeil, Lebanon. Our priests serve in Nigeria, Benin, Sweden, Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries around the world.

## Dialogue

Another important issue we discussed today is the dialogue with Islam (not the theological dialogue, but the cultural one). There are many cultural things we can experience together. Art, sport, social events ... and this reminds us of Father Afif Oseiran, who was a Muslim Shiite, who became a Maronite, and then a priest, and who used to say, we are not asked to discuss theological matters with Muslims, we are asked to love Muslims. Our Christian mission is in living this love toward everyone and especially in our world of the Middle East.

We discussed the term "positive secularism" that is mentioned in the synodal texts and the fathers agree that this expression is not viewed well, and that it is better to use the expression also Muslims prefer, "civil state" instead. This diminishes the negative effect of the word secularism in the Muslim environment. Muslims see secularism in a negative light.

Today we also encouraged the importance of education in school and at home because our youth are suffering from a society filled with corruption, and that is why it is important to emphasize the first school, which is the home.

Work in societies with a Muslim majority is also one of the issues we discussed. Christians in those societies feel like strangers, and often they were in the country before Islam! Here I speak about the Middle Eastern countries where, in some of them, Christians feel like second-class citizens. Therefore, that is why the synod wants to remind the international community and the local authorities that Christians are citizens who have the right to equal rights and duties with their Muslim brothers.

Muslims are asked to trust Christians and Christians are asked to not close in on themselves. We are a community that wants to keep witnessing to the incarnation in order to build bridges between everyone. This is not an encouragement; this is, rather, awareness. Awareness of our vocation and mission in the societies where Providence put us, and as long as the hand of God is with us we can face all the difficulties and challenges with joy and generosity.

These were the themes of the day and I would like to remind you and remind all those who are listening, reading, and watching, that every day we leave the synod hall, we leave with more courage and more hope and joy, as if we are emerging from a new Pentecost. The synod is truly a new Pentecost within the churches of the Middle East.

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