



ZE10101412 - 2010-10-14

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-30658?l=english>

EGYPTIAN BISHOP: TAKE DIALOGUE TO THE STREETS

Interview With Catholic Coptic Bishop of Luxor, Egypt

By Tony Assaf

VATICAN CITY, OCT. 14, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- While interreligious dialogue between leaders is advancing, it's time to take it to the streets, where the people are "good and peaceful," says the Coptic Catholic bishop of Luxor, Egypt.

Bishop Yoannes Zacharia is in Rome to participate in the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, and he spoke with ZENIT about the situation of Christians in his country, as well as what he thinks needs to be done to further advance interreligious dialogue.

ZENIT: How will the decisions of the synod be applied to the general public?

Bishop Zachari: Of course we will wait for the crystallization of the synod's recommendations and for the apostolic exhortation, and I hope that these recommendations do not only apply to the bishops or priests, but also the general public, and that they serve to promote the Christian faith.

What matters for our people are not the words or the theological synonyms, but the simplifying of Christian life to make it accessible to all parishes.

ZENIT: Christians in the Middle East are perhaps tired of listening to the West saying that they are the living stones of the faith, and that they are important, because life on the ground in some countries does not make them feel this way. What is the situation in your area?

Bishop Zachari: The Christian in the Middle East, in order to preserve his faith and his Christian life, is exposed to many problems in his civil life and at work. However in the Middle East, there is no persecution in the real sense of the word, but there are some kinds of restrictions on Christian life.

Christians in the Middle East simply want to live their faith. Before I came to participate in this synod, I visited some of my parishes in Upper Egypt, and had meetings with some people there, and they asked me to convey their voices and their hopes for this synod, so they can feel that they belong to the universal Church, the Catholic Church all over the world. I hope that the ecclesial communion becomes a reality, so that all Christians become one bouquet.

ZENIT: Some time ago, you were sent a letter informing you of the burning of a church in the village of Hegaza. Can you explain to us what happened? Were things clarified?

Bishop Zachari: Of course things became clear with time, and someone had caused the fire, but, like the saying goes: "It was a blessing in disguise."

The Sunday after the fire, I went to the village of Hegaza and celebrated Mass in the place where the church burned, and it was the most beautiful Mass in my life: the faithful sitting on the ground, no big churches nor icons nor pictures, our roof was the sky. Now we are hoping that the officials give us the permission to rebuild and repair the church.

ZENIT: What is the status of Islamic-Christian Dialogue in Egypt? Does it only exist at the level of leaders? And what are some ways to activate the dialogue among the public?

Bishop Zachari: Unfortunately, since the dialogue began, it has been a dialogue between the leaders or among the upper classes in society, and what we need now is dialogue at the level of all citizens, at the level of the common people.

I can say that when I visit my parishes, Muslims do greet me and welcome me. Dialogue comes naturally among the common people, and comes naturally also between the Catholic and Orthodox common people. We want to promote this dialogue. We have had plenty of dialogue between the leaders, and I must admit that it has remained like ink on paper.

We need to go down to the street level, to the level of the general public. Our Christian and Muslim people, not only in Egypt, but in the Middle East in general, are simple people, good and peaceful people, and we need to reach out more to these people.