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## **Retired Nuncio: West Needs to Better Understand Islam**

### **Lebanese Archbishop Speaks of Solutions in the Middle East**

ROME, APRIL 20, 2012 (Zenit.org).- Born in the mountains of Lebanon in a small village called Akoura, Archbishop Paul-Mounged El-Hachem was appointed in 2005 the Apostolic Nuncio of Yemen, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Apostolic Delegate in Arabia, which includes Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Mark Riedemann for Where God Weeps in cooperation with Aid to the Church in Need interviewed the archbishop.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about how you came to this position?

Archbishop El-Hachem: For 29 years I had been a professor of Islamic Law at the Lateran University. In 1997, I sponsored a conference in Lugano [Switzerland] on Christian-Muslim relationships in Lebanon and the Middle East. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, attended. Pope Benedict XVI, knowing the importance of having better Christian-Muslim relationships, called and asked me to be Nuncio to that area of the world. I was 71 years old at that time.

Q: There is a misconception that there are no Christians in the Arab and Gulf States and in fact there is a large community?

Archbishop El-Hachem: We have very large Christian communities in all the Gulf countries. Let us take Kuwait for example: The population is about 3.1 million, of which 1 million are Christians. The Catholic population is about 400,000 the majority are Filipinos and Indian.

Q: The majority of Christians are in fact foreign workers?

Archbishop El-Hachem: Yes labourers but also professionals, such as doctors and engineers. It is almost the same proportion in every country and we can say that the Christians constitute at least a third or a quarter of the population.

Q: Notwithstanding this important minority, the life of a Christian in the Gulf States is not always easy?

Archbishop El-Hachem: It varies from country to country. In Kuwait we have three Catholic churches - officially recognized as churches. The other communities, Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Coptic Orthodox have their own churches.

Q: In many of these countries Christians face various restrictions. In some countries like Saudi Arabia, the Church cannot construct churches, whereas in Qatar an opportunity has been given to the Church. Is there generally 'freedom of religion' or only 'freedom of worship' and if so what is the difference?

Archbishop El-Hachem: Indeed in Qatar, I inaugurated a big Catholic Church in Doha, one of the biggest Catholic centres in the world. The Emir of Qatar gave 600,000 square metres to build 16 Christian churches. Now let me answer the important question you posed, the difference between religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Lebanon is the only country in the Arab world and the Middle East that openly declares in Article 9 of the constitution that every Lebanese has the complete freedom of conscience, which means that he can believe, he can choose the religion he wants and if he wants he can change from one religion to the other; a Muslim can freely become Christian and Christian can convert to Islam without any difficulties. This is well entrenched in the law.

Q: ...but Lebanon is an exception....

Archbishop El-Hachem: It is an exception, but we have to recognize that Lebanon is an Arab country. It is a founder and member of the Arab League. It is a founder and member of the Conference of the Islamic countries and yet it has in its constitution that freedom of conscience, and it is only in Lebanon.

Q: So this is the model that we would like to see?

Archbishop El-Hachem: Yes that is what we hope and the model we would like to see. This is what inspired Blessed Pope John Paul II to call Lebanon as more than a country...

Q ...A message to the world...

Archbishop El-Hachem: Yes, a message to the world. In the other countries, unfortunately we have religious freedom but with restrictions. In Saudi Arabia for example, we cannot have churches and yet we have priests there working without difficulties on the condition that they do not openly manifest or proclaim the gospel. In the Emirates for example, we have enough churches, Catholic schools, and the freedom to teach catechism in the churches but not in our schools. In Kuwait, the Muslim students in Catholic schools receive Islamic instruction and yet the Christians students are not allowed catechism classes despite that fact that the Christian population in these schools is about 60%. The government response is: 'you have full freedom to teach catechism on Friday and Sunday in your church'.

Q: So the governments in these countries, for the most part, take the position: You are a guest, you are a minority in our country. You have the freedom to worship but you do not have the freedom to evangelize. Church services have to be within the churches or on church grounds and there is no freedom of conscience in a sense that if a Muslim wishes to convert he is forbidden.

Archbishop El-Hachem: Yes, that is true and I have to say that in some countries - even in Kuwait - there are some cultural centres that officially are supposed to give foreigners an idea about the

Kuwaiti culture and Muslim religion, but in reality these centres are for proselytizing and the conversion of Christians to Islam. This is highly encouraged but never is a Muslim officially allowed to convert to Christianity.

Q: If we assume that the majority of Muslims wish to live in peace and are moderate, why do not we hear from this silent majority? Why is it that we only hear from the fundamentalist and we only hear about the violence against Christians?

Archbishop El-Hachem: What you are saying is very, very important. The Western countries must have a better understanding of Islam. Their behaviour and interaction should not provoke and encourage the fundamentalist and the fanatics to take power. I am absolutely sure that the events of September 11 were not approved by the majority of the Muslims. It was an action taken by some fundamentalists, fanatics like Bin Laden. This fanaticism and violent reaction was a response against the behaviour of some countries. The other issue, which altered, dramatically, the behaviour and mentality of many Muslims is the Israel-Palestinian issue.

Q: That is the heart of the matter?

Archbishop El-Hachem: That is the heart of the matter. The other is the consequences of the way in which the State of Israel was founded and how the Israelis behave towards the Arabs. If we go back to history and describe the reception the Jews received from the Arabs when they came to the Middle East prior to the founding of the State of Israel we discover a very friendly reception. Before the founding of the State of Israel more than 500,000 Jews were living in Egypt. More than 200,000 were living in Beirut, Lebanon, and more than 300,000 were living in Yemen in a perfect and harmonious relationship. The first Jews who immigrated to Palestine received a very hospitable reception from the Arabs. They sold them land. They lived a peaceful coexistence until the founding of the State of Israel. Since that time, and the fact that the Jews have declared Jerusalem as their own, the Muslims have felt humiliated. All this contributes to a deeper antagonism and provokes the further radicalization of Islam.

Q: What is the answer?

Archbishop El-Hachem: The answer is peace. The answer is what the Holy See has suggested from the very beginning; two states for two peoples with defined and secured boundaries and to re-introduce the good relations the Jews and the Muslims had prior to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

Q: Concerning the radicalized relations between Christians and Muslims there have been suggestions favouring the idea of a 'positive secularization', which I suppose is another variant on the separation of state and faith?

Archbishop El-Hachem: In the western countries that is possible. The idea of secularization is not possible in the Middle East. The idea of secularization is a concept that does not exist in the Middle East for both Christians and Muslims because in the Middle East people are by nature religious. It is much better to speak about *citoyenneté*, 'citizenship for all' whereby the citizens are allowed to pursue their own religious values. Islam is not just religion but is both religion and culture. Every act of a Muslim has both a religious and cultural value. I will never forget when the then President of Lebanon, President Rafic Al-Hariri prior to his assassination, wanted to introduce the idea that religion should only be taught in the mosque or the church. One of the prominent leaders of Hezbollah told me: 'What is Hariri thinking? He wants to remove God from Lebanon, he cannot do it...God has the right to be in Lebanon'.

Q: So this then is the thrust of the argument; it is for the recognition of the citizenships regardless of religious tradition?

Archbishop El-Hachem: Yes, to recognize equality, independent of religious belief; that all have the same rights, duties and obligations to be recognized and entrenched in the law of the state. The ideal for us is the constitution of Lebanon and for that I think Lebanon can be our model. I think the other important program for the Muslim world today is to understand democracy, the rights of man and to realize the importance of all forms of liberty. One of the greatest decisions of the Second Vatican Council, which for me, was a wonderful act of courage, is the declaration of religious freedom that states that every human being has the full right to have any religion he wants - and that is great and beautiful.

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This interview was conducted by Mark Riedemann for "Where God Weeps," a weekly TV & radio show produced by Catholic Radio & Television Network in conjunction with the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need.

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