

His Holiness

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Christianity in the Middle East: Challenges Facing Inter-religious Dialogue

At the outset of my presentation I would like to express my joy for being once again in this blessed country of the United States of America where I acquired an important part of my educational makeup as a former student of Fordham University, the Catholic Jesuit University in New York. The United States of America, with its values, aspirations and dreams, has been very close to my heart and in the hearts and struggles of my church and people all over the world. We have always supported what the United States of America stands for. We have always participated actively in the struggle for the promotion of moral human values and for justice, peace, human rights and reconciliation. I would like to express my deep appreciation for this invitation on the part of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, which comes at an important point in my life when I am once again visiting our communities in Canada and in the United States of America.

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I'm supposed to talk to you about the Christian presence in the Middle East with particular reference to Christian-Muslim dialogue, and I'm supposed to condense what I am going to say to twenty minutes. Well, one needs hundreds of volumes to write about the Christian presence in the Middle East because the Christian presence in that part of the world, the birthplace of Christianity, is deeply rooted in the history, civilizations, and cultures of the region. Therefore, it is important that we look at the Christian presence in the Middle East in the historical perspective and not as a reality pertaining to the present landscape of religions in the Middle East. In other words, Christianity is deeply rooted in the Middle East; therefore, to speak about Christianity in the Middle East is simply to speak about a history of the Middle East in all its aspects, dimensions and manifestations, in all its mysteries and conflicts. To speak about the history of the Church in the Middle East is simply to speak about the history of the Middle East.

You see, things are so interconnected in the Middle East, you cannot simply draw lines of demarcation between Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Israel, the Arab world, Palestinians, Armenians and different branches of Christianity that are represented in the Middle East. Again, I would propose that we look at the Christian presence in this perspective—that is to say, in the perspective of inter-relatedness,

that has always been one of the significant features of the history of the Middle East in general and the history of the Church in particular.

Now, I'm supposed to talk to you about the challenges that we are facing in the Middle East. As I told you, the birthplace of Christianity is in the Middle East. Christianity is not a foreigner in the Middle East, it's not a newcomer to the region, it's part and parcel of the history of the Middle East. If you look at the development and the formation of Christian faith and the Church in the Middle East you may identify a number of aspects of concerns that have always been part of the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East. Let me just pinpoint briefly some of these important features.

Number one: The Christian faith started as an indigenous faith in the Middle East, as a faith of the people, of the culture. The Syrian culture, the Armenian culture, Byzantine culture—these cultures became the most efficient ways of articulating Christian talks in the Middle East. Even today, if you go deeper into Christian faith, you will see the presence of these cultures—Syrian and Jordanian, Greek and Armenia. Therefore, this is one of the important points that I want to underline.

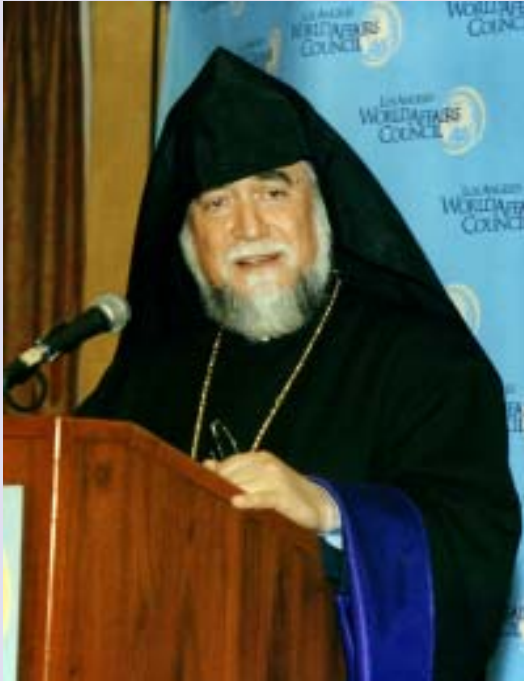
Second: the identification of faiths, cultures and nations. This is an important aspect that deserves our serious attention. The Christian faith became iden-

tified with the people, with the culture, with the identity of the people. To that extent you cannot draw lines of demarcation between faith, culture and nation. That's true with all the churches and Christian nations in the Middle East including my own nation, my own church. You see, if you look at the history of the

lowing picture. I would like to provide you with some figures, but these are just estimates because we don't have concrete specific numbers. We have around 16 million Christians living in different parts of the Middle East, mainly in Egypt where we have the Coptic Church, which is the majority church with about ten million faithful. We have different churches, the Orthodox branches including the Armenian Church, the Syrian Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Latin Catholic churches, and different branches of Protestant churches. As a matter of fact, all the major Christian families are represented in the Middle East. The Middle East presents a panorama of different Christian churches or confessions. We live together and, in fact, we try to live together as one Christian community. In spite of dispersions of Christianity in the Middle East, living together has been a primary concern to all churches in the Middle East. We have in the region a Council of Churches, which provides the platform and the framework for the churches to interact together, to collaborate with each other and to become the voice of Christian communities in the Middle East as far as possible.

must have the courage to face these challenges in faithful obedience to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the context of the Middle East some of these challenges are much more acute and extensive and crucial. Therefore, as churches we feel that we must organize our lives and reactivate our witness in response to the challenges that we are facing in the countries where we live in the Middle East.

What are these challenges? The first of these challenges is how we can reorganize and revitalize our community lives. I believe that it is important that in the world today we keep pace with the rate of changing times and realities. As the Bible says, we must read the signs of the times, not only we, but also you, the politicians in all countries, all the institutions, to read the signs of the times, to discern the emerging realities so our way of life, will become responsive to the emerging needs and changing realities of time. I think this is more than true in the Middle East. I think this is one of the priorities of the churches—to reorganize our lives in a way that is responsive to the new realities of our environments. The Christians of the Middle East are no more remnants of the glorious past. They are living, dynamic communities and as such they must take into consideration the changing times and situations of their environments and organize their lives and witness accordingly.



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Middle East you will see that the Christian churches, which were the main communities in the Middle East, for one reason or another, political, religious, were directly impacted by these developments, and they became minorities in the Middle East. Time does not permit me to go into the deeper analysis of this reality. But the fact is that today the Christian communities in the Middle East have become small communities in the context of Islam, which is the predominant society or religion in the Middle East.

The present landscape of Christianity in the Middle East presents the fol-

Now, let me identify for you some of the challenges that we are facing today in the Middle East. The other day I was telling a friend of mine that not only in the Middle East but also in different parts of the world wherever we live as Christian communities or individuals we are faced with challenges of different nature and scope. Living responsibly as Christians in the world today means having the guts to face challenges. We are surrounded with different challenges. We are constantly invaded by the kind of values, trends and tendencies that endanger our Christian identity. Therefore, we

Challenge number two. As I pointed out, the churches are an integral part of the societies of the Middle East. They are part of the history; therefore, they should not remain on the margin of the society line. They have to reactivate their community lives in a way that is integral to the broader life of the community. I believe that integration, not assimilation—integration—articulated by participation is a priority and great challenge for our churches in the Middle East. In some countries of the Middle East, such as Lebanon, this is a possibility and a must. In some countries we may have

some difficulties of various natures but in spite of that the Christian communities should constantly endeavor to take an active part in the total life of the community, the integral part of the fabric of Middle Eastern society.

Number three. The Christian communities have been very active in the

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political life in the Middle East, but again I would say we cannot generalize this—and again for different reasons. In the Middle East we are living in different political contexts. In some contexts it's very difficult if not impossible to take an active part in the political lives of the countries because the Middle East presents different systems of governments. I can give you Lebanon as a model. In Lebanon the churches are part of the political system, and it is our expectation that more and more the Christian communities become more actively involved in the political life of that country. Here I would like to make a distinction between the church and the community. I believe that the church should not be politicized; there are certain things that the church can do and should do in terms of the political life, but at the same time identification with the political structures, I think, is not in line with the vocation of the church. In Lebanon we tried to maintain

this distinction between the church and the Christian community.

Number four. The family life. You see in the whole world today the family life is in decay. If we really want to look up a perfect community, a morally, spiritually healthy community, that process must start in the family and with the family. The historian of the Roman Empire says that the Empire fell because the Roman family had fallen morally; therefore, we need to strengthen the family life—the family is the basic unit in our society. We need to strengthen and deepen the sacredness of family. We, as Christians, believe that the family has a significant role to play in community building and this is a great challenge for us in the Middle East.

In many of my [interactions] in the United States of America I repeatedly reminded my people and our American friends that education is key in community-building, in interfaith dialogue, in living together, and for us school is not a place where you get information but school is a sacred institution where you are formed—humanly, spiritually, morally. It's a school that provides this formation, and therefore, besides the family, I think the school must be given a priority in our society life in the Middle East. The school is a challenge for us. Whatever we do as a church and Christian community, the school has always been dominant, a primary place on the agenda of the church.

A fifth priority for us in the churches is social action. You see, for us the church is not just an institution where the people go to pray. We believe that the church is at the heart of the community life and the whole community revolves around the church. The church in this light and witness embraces the totality of the life of the people in all its aspects and manifestations. The people are part of the church and the church is part of the people through social action.

In the social action of the church our approach has never been discriminatory. Even Muslims, non-Christians, have been part of the social action of the church. In the community schools, Christian community schools, there are also Muslims. In the Christian-run hospitals, there are also Muslims, and I can continue. Therefore, the social action of the churches in the Middle East embraces all people, all human beings, without any discrimination.

The sixth concern, or challenge, is peace with justice, reconciliation based on justice, human rights and accepting the truth. The churches in the Middle East have been vocal in promoting justice, in making peace, in the peace process. The churches in Palestine and countries of the Arab world, have repeatedly emphasized the crucial importance of the peace process. We believe that justice, peace, reconciliation and human rights are not political issues pertaining to political agendas, these issues belong to the agenda of all the religions, including Christianity. These are human issues. Sometimes we politicize these issues—justice, human rights, reconciliation—these are human issues, these are moral issues, and therefore religion has an important role to play in the Middle East. The churches, individually and through the Middle East Council of Churches, have committed themselves to promoting peace with justice and reconciliation, and we will continue doing that.

We are also facing problems in the Middle East. One of the problems is migration; Christians are leaving the region. This is a sad reality and our churches are against the migration. Believe me, the Muslim communities and political institutions as well are against the migration of Christians from the Middle East. Because Christian-Muslim coexistence has been part of our lives, the Christian presence in the Middle East gives some quality to the region, it strengthens this diversity of the region. Christians in that

part of the world have been faithful citizens, committed people; therefore, we all believe that churches and Muslims, the communities, the political institutions, the governments, they're all committed to this process and they're against the migration of Christians. Look at what's happening in Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been the city of diversity of three monotheistic religions. For centuries they have lived together in peace and coexistence, but the Christians are leaving. I don't want to make any interpretation or pass any judgment. I just want to state the fact. I think we all tried to stop this process because I believe for Christian-Muslim dialogue for the region, for the progress of the region, the Christians should stay and reorganize their communities in the Middle East.

These are some of the challenges that I wanted to share with you. But I believe that I should also emphasize in a special way another challenge, which is not only our challenge but also your challenge. We are living in a globalized world, where we cannot say that my concern is my concern; your concern is your concern. It's the other way around; your concern is my concern. This is a global village and this is the household of God where we are bound to live together. In a world where things are so interconnected in the Middle East, interreligious dialogue is the number one priority for all communities—for the Muslims, for Islam and for Jews, for everybody who is part of the societies of the Middle East. I believe that is also true in the United States of America.

Today, the societies have become pluralists. We are living in societies where cultures, ethnic communities with different traditions, civilizations, and values interact. We must make that into action—a coherent, creative one—and not an interaction that generates tension. In other words, how can we transform the interaction to community building process in the Middle East? Dialogue is not a con-

ceptual reality; it's part of our lives. We don't talk about it, we live it. It's integral to our daily lives. It's taking place in the schools, in the markets, in the streets, even in the families. We live together as one community. We're not just coexisting. Living together is more than coexisting. Living together means that we are part of one community, and being part of one community means that we live together on the basis of common values. Christian-Muslim dialogue, therefore, is an especially apt reality.

As you know, for many reasons, particularly for political reasons unfortunately, Judaism is not part of this dialogue. These three monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—share common traditions. We are deeply rooted in a common Abrahamic tradition. Therefore, there are lots of things that unite us; unfortunately, we tend to emphasize what divides us. This is the time that we come together as religions to strengthen, to deepen, and to develop what unites us. In the Middle East we are out to strengthen our togetherness through dialogical interaction between Christianity and Islam. I believe that Lebanon is a good model, an excellent example, of what it means to live together.

I'm Lebanese of Armenian origin; I come from Lebanon, was born in Lebanon, formed in Lebanon. I served in Lebanon for 17 years as Archbishop of Lebanon, trying to play the breaching role between the Christian and Muslim communities, between East and West. This is what we need in these societies today. I think that in order to generate trust we must build bridges. We must destroy all kinds of walls that exist between cultures, religions, nations, states, but first of all we have to destroy the walls that exist in us. That's much more difficult than the destruction of material walls. We must bring the people and the cultures together in dialogue; we must engage them in dialogue by reconciling the memories, by working for peace with justice. Leba-

non is a concrete example of living together. In spite of some sensitivities here and there, we've committed to living together and we constantly affirm in communities in Lebanon our togetherness. In the Middle East, I believe, as Christian communities we have to take much more seriously dialogue with Islam as an integral part of our shared lives.

I believe that the following issues need to be part of this dialogue between Christianity and Islam. Let me just mention without any further elaboration. First, the misuse of religion is one of the critical problems of the world today. Let's not blame this or that religion. I put that as a basic issue that needs to get addressed by religions. All religions of the world should come together to address this issue. Religion sometimes is part of the conflict, but this is against the voca-

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tion of religion. Religion must play an instrumental role in promoting justice, reconciliation and human values.

The second concern of common nature is the struggle for social and economic justice. Poverty is a problem. Combating violence is important, but also combating poverty is an important issue that I believe religions should address together. Combating terrorism in all its forms and expressions is a moral,

human issue that the religions must address together, and I believe that Islam and Christianity can provide a common platform to overcome violence because these are two religions that are against violence. In the Koran and the Bible you will clearly see that violence is a source of evil. The crucial importance of moral values—this is an area where I believe Islam and Christianity can do good work together. Democratization of societies—this is another area where I believe Islam and Christianity could help the political powers, and institutions could engage the people through awareness building, and through education in the process of democratization of Middle Eastern societies.

In conclusion, the churches in the Middle East are facing tremendous challenges. These are only, you see, some of the challenges that I tried to outline. I believe that we must take these challenges very seriously in the Middle East. For some, the Christian presence in the Middle East is at stake. I don't share this pessimistic assessment of the Christian predicaments. The Christian communities are vibrant and active communities. The objectives of the vision of these communities should be renewal and not blind traditionalism; integration and not self-containment; participation and not alienation. I believe that this vision and this way of life, this way of Christian

witness, will ensure the credibility, the reluctance, the integrity, the dynamism and serenity of Christian persons in the Middle East. We believe that living with Judaism and with Islam for the Christian communities is a must. I believe that, as the region is in the process of transformation, this dialogue among the three monotheistic religions will give more dynamism, more vitality to all religions in my part of the world. I believe, finally, that the United States of America has a significant role to play in the transformation process of the Middle East.

Thank you very much

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