Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



The patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Moran Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, second from left; the head of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Aram I, third from left; Cardinal Bechara Boutros al-Rahi, fourth from left; and Pope Francis arrive July 1 in St. Peter's Basilica to attend a prayer at the Vatican. Pope Francis welcomed Lebanon's Christian religious leaders to the Vatican on Thursday for a day of prayer amid fears that the country's descent into financial and economic chaos is further imperiling the Christian presence in the country, a bulwark for the church in the Middle East. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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Pope Francis insisted July 1 that Lebanon must remain a "land of tolerance and pluralism" as he welcomed the country's Christian patriarchs to the Vatican to pray for an end to the economic and political crisis that has thrown the country into chaos and threatened its Christian community.

Francis presided over an evening prayer service in St. Peter's Basilica with the leaders of Lebanon's Christian churches, which featured prayers and hymns in Arabic, Syriac, Armenian and Chaldean. Members of the Lebanese community in Rome and the diplomatic corps filled the pews.

During the service, Francis said Lebanon's vocation was to be an "oasis of fraternity where different religions and confessions meet, where different communities live together, putting the common good before their individual interests."

"Lebanon cannot be left prey to the course of events or [to] those who pursue their own unscrupulous interests," he said. "It is a small yet great country, but even more, it is a universal message of peace and fraternity arising from the Middle East."

The Mediterranean nation of 6 million, including an estimated 1 million refugees, has the largest percentage of Christians in the Middle East and is the only Arab country with a Christian head of state. Christians make up a third of the population, and the Vatican fears the country's collapse is particularly dangerous for the continued presence of its Christian community, a bulwark for the church in the Mideast.

Lebanon is going through an unprecedented economic and financial collapse, coupled with an 11-month political deadlock over the formation of a new government. The developments pose the gravest threat to its stability since the end of its civil war three decades ago. It is also trying to recover from the devastating Beirut port explosion last summer and the coronavirus pandemic.

Francis invited the religious leaders for a day of prayer that began with a silent meditation at the tomb of the Apostle Peter and was followed by closed-door talks about how to help Lebanon emerge from what the World Bank has described as likely to be one of the worst crises the world has witnessed over the past 150 years.

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In his final remarks at the ecumenical prayer service, Francis urged political leaders to find solutions and appealed to the international community to help the country recover.

"Stop using Lebanon and the Middle East for outside interests and profits," he said. "The Lebanese people must be given the opportunity to be the architects of a better future in their land, without undue interference."

Embattled Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, who met with Francis at the Vatican in April, said from Beirut that he hoped the meeting would call on all Lebanese to preserve their coexistence.

"It is no surprise that the pontiff keeps it in his heart through this invite to 10 spiritual leaders with the aim of getting Lebanon through its difficult reality," he tweeted July 1, repeating the words of St. John Paul II that "Lebanon is more than a country, it is a message."

The Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, was blunt in explaining the Holy See's "strong concern about the collapse of the country" during a briefing with journalists last week.

He said Francis had invited the religious leaders to Rome in an acknowledgment that the Christian community had been particularly hard-hit by the crisis, which has sent the well-educated middle classes fleeing power cuts, fuel shortages, soaring prices and now sporadic acts of violence.

The crisis, Gallagher said, "risks destroying the internal balance and Lebanon's own reality, putting at risk the Christian presence in the Middle East."

Noting the potential for Lebanon to fall into conflict, he said the country must be helped economically and to keep the peace, saying it "remains the final vanguard of

an Arab democracy that welcomes, recognizes and coexists with a plurality of ethnic and religious communities that in other countries aren't able to live in peace."

"It must be helped to maintain this unique identity, to ensure a pluralist, tolerant and diversified Middle East," he said.

Francis has said he hopes to visit Lebanon once a government is formed. Gallagher said if that happens soon, Francis could make a trip early next year.

[AP correspondent Zeina Karam contributed from Beirut.]