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Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan visits Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite Catho

Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan visits Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite Catholic patriarch, to share Christmas greetings at Bkerke, the Maronite patriarchate near Beirut, Dec. 27, 2021. (CNS photo/Mychel Akl for Maronite patriarchate)

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Patriarchs of the Middle East urged their faithful, overwhelmed with suffering, to hold on more tightly to hope this Christmastime.

In Lebanon, collapsing since 2019 under financial and social disintegration in which nearly 80% of the population now lives below the poverty line, Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite Catholic patriarch, admonished the country's officials for their "disdain" for their people.

"If love existed … in the hearts of those responsible, the people would not be suffering under the worst tragedy in (Lebanon's) history," Cardinal Rai said in his Christmas message.

If those responsible were to "walk among the people ... visit homes to talk to fathers and mothers, listen to the groans of the afflicted, the cries of children, the pain of the sick ... and survey the number of those who sleep without food ... the homeless, the children not enrolled in schools," as well as tally the state fees owed to various institutions, "they would have been ashamed of their souls and would have resigned from their positions," he said.

In his Christmas message from the patriarchate in Beirut, Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan said each day brings more tragic developments and crises in Lebanon, particularly at the level of economic and financial deterioration. The Lebanese currency has depreciated by more than 90% since late 2019, and thus the value of salaries, for those who still have jobs.

"The (monthly) salary of the Lebanese citizen is now sufficient for only a few days, in the light of the almost complete absence of those who call themselves responsible," Patriarch Younan said of the country's leaders.

"The electricity is out of order, the official departments are closed due to the rightful strikes of employees, smuggling at the legitimate and illegal crossings is wide open, and the medical sector is in a tragic decline, starting with the loss of medicines and medical equipment, passing through the lack of electricity to run hospitals and the emigration of doctors," Patriarch Younan said.

He expressed his hope that, with parliamentary elections, "the Lebanese will change, by their own will and by democratic and peaceful means, this ruling clique that has brought them to bankruptcy and starvation, and (will) reproduce a new political authority that is entrusted with their interests and the sovereignty of their country, and rid them of their misery, and return Lebanon to its previous era of prosperity and development."

Regarding Syria — where he made a pastoral visit earlier in December — Patriarch Younan said it is "still suffering from the effects of the war, which is approaching its 12th year, despite all the efforts made by the government and its friends of goodwill, and it is struggling to get out of this dark tunnel that divided the country and displaced millions of its children, so they became refugees in all parts of the world."

"It is true that the sounds of cannons have subsided and life has returned to normal in most cities and villages, and negotiations have progressed but, unfortunately, the interests of the major countries continue to control the fate of an entire nation,"

Patriarch Younan continued. He prayed that Jesus would fill hearts with "the hope emanating from his wondrous birth."

Melkite Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi said the Middle East "is groaning more and more under the weight of evil, sin and pain: the evil of external and internal exploitation; sin toward ourselves, toward others, and toward our countries; the pain of poverty and want, the pain of humiliation and need, the pain of doubt and despair about the future. We see our families disintegrating due to immigration, and we see our young people leaving their land in pursuit of a better life."

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"A decent life is a right for every individual, as is justice and equality," Patriarch Absi said, urging Catholics "to hold more tightly to our hope."

"If the days in which we live have taught us anything," Patriarch Absi said, it is that "relying on humans will not bring us the safety we seek, but rather relying only on God." He reminded the faithful that St. Paul "invites us to cling to hope in the darkest of times."

In his first Christmas message as patriarch, Armenian Catholic Patriarch Raphael Bedros XXI Minassian said: "Today we are in dire need of Jesus the Savior more than ever. Today we are living through horrors and horrible and exhausting difficulties in our beloved country Lebanon."

Quoting St. John Paul II, he urged the faithful: "Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors to Christ."

From Iraq, Cardinal Louis Sako, patriarch of Chaldean Catholics, pointed to a political and social climate charged with "tensions and conflicts" linked to October's parliamentary elections.

Cardinal Sako called for "a sincere national vision and a courageous dialogue in facing the accumulated crises and complicated problems in favor of security, stability, consolidating democracy, providing services and maintaining the dignity of Iraqis."

"Let us pray for peace and stability in our beloved country, Iraq and the whole world. Let us radiate values of tolerance, mercy, peace, and fraternity .... The last thing to

die is hope."