News

A large group, including women religious, takes a picture outside a chapel

The Continental Synodal Assembly for the Middle East gathered Feb. 13-17 in Lebanon at the Bethany Conference Center near the shrine of Harissa, Our Lady of Lebanon, north of Beirut. With representation from the seven Eastern Catholic Churches -- Maronite, Melkite, Syriac, Chaldean, Coptic, Armenian and Latin -- the 120 participants included patriarchs, religious and laity from each rite, gathering from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, the Holy Land, Iraq and the Gulf states. Together they visited the shrine of Harissa, Our Lady of Lebanon, on the final day of the assembly. (OSV News photo/Mychel Akl, courtesy Maronite patriarchate)

Doreen Abi Raad

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As the continental phase of the synod travels across the globe in February and March with sessions in Europe, Oceania, North America, Asia, Africa and Latin America, the Middle East encounter took place during a time of mourning for victims of the tragic earthquake.

Reflecting the richness and diversity of its apostolic churches, the Continental Synodal Assembly for the Middle East gathered Feb. 13-17 in Lebanon.

Representatives from Eastern Catholic Churches -- Maronite, Melkite, Syriac, Chaldean, Coptic, Armenian -- as well as from the Latin Church -- were present.

The 120 participants included patriarchs, religious and laity from each rite, coming from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, the Holy Land, Iraq and the Gulf states. The Continental Synod for the Middle East took place at Bethany conference center adjoining the shrine of Harissa, Our Lady of Lebanon, north of Beirut.

The continental phase is the latest stage of the 2021-24 Synod on Synodality, which has as its theme: "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." The synod is scheduled to open in Rome in October 2023.

In their closing statement, the Middle East assembly's participants said their meeting "comes in difficult circumstances for our region," especially economic and humanitarian, in particular "the devastating earthquake that struck our brothers in Syria and Turkey."

Participants "stopped at this painful and heartbreaking event and raised daily prayers for the intention of the victims, the wounded and the displaced in the stricken areas."

Deadliest earthquake in decades hit Turkey and Syria Feb. 6, killing 47,000. Lebanon, where the assembly took place, is Syria's neighboring country and a host of 1.5 million Syrian refugees.

Affirming that "we are children of the Resurrection," participants stressed the "profound positives that unite our churches … as a church of hope in the countries of the Middle East, despite their presence in the heart of adversity," the statement said.

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, general relator of the Synod, said in his opening address that he felt "particularly honored" to be present in the Middle East, where he noted that "synodality has a long tradition."

"I would like to experience and learn about synodality from you," he said.

Hollerich stressed that the synodality concept of "walking together" is "all the more delicate" in the Middle East, with its rich multireligious culture, yet "all this diversity is a richness and a beautiful opportunity that makes synodality possible."

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In reference to the synodal process, Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the synod, said in his address that "we can be greatly helped by the Catholic Eastern Churches, which, together with synodal practice, typical of the Christian East, unite fidelity to the Holy See."

"I am sure that through this path it will also be possible to make progress in ecumenical dialogue," he added.

"We are different churches, but my feeling is something is moving inside the churches by the Holy Spirit," Iraqi Cardinal Louis Sako, patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, told OSV News at the assembly.

"We have to update many, many things: the discipline, the liturgy, the vocabulary, and how to speak with our young people, because the world has changed. Otherwise, we will have no future if we stay the same," he said when asked about the hopes of the assembly.

He pointed to the beginnings of the church as a model. "There was enthusiasm and working together as a church, without thinking, 'We are clergy -- they are faithful,'" he said. Instead, he stressed, "we are people of God, as one entity."

During the assembly, participants broke off into working groups where patriarchs and laypeople from all Eastern rites worked together.

"I think this is a great beginning. It's a new day in the life of the universal church," Lebanese Maronite laywoman Suzy El Hage told OSV News. "I think the sun is rising on all of us and the Holy Spirit is very happy because this is what God is awaiting from us all."

"I really feel we are all involved," El Hage said of the participants. "We are from different countries and many churches (rites), but we have many things in common." The overall theme El Hage said she observed during the synod was "Unity. A united church."

Fr. Khalil Alwan, a Lebanese Maronite priest, who is secretary-general of the Council of Patriarchs of the East and coordinator of the Middle East Continental Assembly, said in the opening address that "in the East, either we are Christians together, or

we are not."

An atmosphere of prayer prevailed throughout the assembly, and each day Mass was celebrated in a different rite with the respective patriarch as the main celebrant.

In their closing statement, the assembly urged "fellowship and hope in suffering: toward a church as humble as a mustard seed, called to grow and flourish amidst the challenge of survival and the rejection of emigration."