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Struggling to understand a bishop's murder in Turkey

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 11, 2010 All Things Catholic

Anyone with even a passing familiarity with Catholicism in the Middle East probably knew Bishop Luigi Padovese, an Italian Capuchin who served as the Vicar of Anatolia and president of the bishops' conference in Turkey. Gregarious and articulate, Padovese was a passionate advocate of the church's mission in the region. In terms of the Christian/Muslim relationship, Padovese was also one of those rare voices not easily classified as either a hawk or a dove ? hardly blind to the threats posed by Islamic radicalism, but still a man of dialogue through and through.

Given that reputation, news last week that Padovese, 63, had been murdered by his longtime driver and aide in his summer residence outside Iskenderun, on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, triggered shock waves across the Catholic world.

Coming on the cusp of Pope Benedict XVI's June 4-6 visit to Cyprus, the killing offered a harrowing reminder of the challenges facing the region's small, and rapidly declining, Christian minority. Padovese's death also inevitably stirred memories of the February 2006 murder of Italian Fr. Andrea Santoro in Trabzon, Turkey ? another Catholic missionary slain by a young Turkish man, in that case a 16-year-old who described the killing as revenge for insulting cartoons of Muhammad published by a Danish magazine in 2005.

As of this writing, explanations as to why Padovese was targeted remain conflicting and confused. In the meantime, the murder obviously raises hard questions about the situation facing Christianity in Turkey ? a country long held up as perhaps the last, best hope for carving out a genuinely moderate and pluralistic form of Islam, capable of protecting religious minorities and fostering dialogue with the West.

Below, I offer two takes on that subject.

One comes from an interview I conducted this week with American Jesuit Fr. Tom Michel, one of Catholicism's leading experts on Islam who currently lives and works in Ankara, the country's capital. The other comes from Padovese himself, in the form of an interview I had with him in Rome in 2006 shortly after the Santoro murder.

Taken together, the two perspectives illustrate the maddening complexity of life in the Middle East. Michel cautions against reading Padovese's murder as part of an anti-Christian pattern, insisting that there's strong grass-roots sentiment among Turkish Muslims in favor of tolerance. Yet in words that cannot help but seem chilling

now, Padovese warned four years ago that even isolated acts of madness in a place such as Turkey can be influenced by what he described as rising anti-Christian prejudice.

Among other things, fallout from the Padovese murder likely will color the conversation at the Oct. 10-24 Synod on the Middle East in Rome. (Benedict XVI presented the *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working document, for the synod during his trip to Cyprus.) Called to discuss Christianity's future in the region, the synod is an event where Padovese would almost certainly have played an important role.

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Here's what we know at the moment about the details of the June 3 attack on Padovese.

Witnesses reported that the bishop's 26-year-old driver, Murat Altun, shouted "I killed the Great Satan!" afterwards, adding "Allah Akbar!", leading some to suggest that Altun was motivated by radical Islamist ideology. Others say that Altun was struggling with mental and emotional difficulties. After his arrest, Altun reportedly told police that Padovese was a homosexual who had pressured him into a sexual relationship, although several local sources have greeted that claim with skepticism.

Some Turks believe that Altun was manipulated by ultra-nationalist political forces seeking to derail Turkey's candidacy to join the European Union and, more broadly, the country's basic pro-Western orientation.

In a still more bizarre twist, a well-known Italian priest and Vatican writer has claimed that at the last minute, Padovese cancelled plans to travel to Cyprus for the pope's trip because sources in the Turkish government warned him that Altun had embraced Islamic fundamentalism. According to Fr. Fillippo di Giacomo, Padovese was afraid his driver might try to kill the pope.

On Wednesday, Archbishop Ruggero Franceschini, another Capuchin missionary in Turkey and the Archbishop of Izmir, told media sources that church leaders have told the country's Ministry of Justice, which is overseeing the investigation into Padovese's death, that the church wants the "full truth," adding that "nothing must be kept hidden."

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Jesuit Fr. Tom Michel is a veteran of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, where he served as the resident expert on Islam. He later directed the interreligious dialogue office in Rome for the worldwide Jesuit order. Now based in Ankara, Michel teaches in several universities and also does pastoral work in the two Catholic churches in the city.

I caught up with Michel on Wednesday by phone in his native St. Louis, Missouri, where he was attending the funeral of his 83-year-old brother. Michel knew both Padovese and Murat well; in the very small Catholic community in Turkey, everyone pretty much knows everyone else, which makes the sense of shock and loss all the more acute.

The following are excerpts from our conversation.

How would you describe the situation facing Christians in Turkey?

I don't see what happened to Bishop Padovese as part of some sort of plot. I don't believe it reflects a broad anti-Christian movement or campaign. It seems like it's more explicable as a personal conflict on the part of Murat [the driver].

Christians in Turkey sometimes have differences with the authorities. The Greek Orthodox are still trying to get

back their seminaries, which were confiscated years ago by the state. In general, however, Christian life goes on normally. Our two parishes operate without any problems. People aren't afraid to come to Mass. On special occasions such as Palm Sunday, we'll do things outside without thinking twice about it. There's never any worry that something bad will happen. It just doesn't enter your mind.

Remember that there aren't that many Christians in Turkey. After the 1925 population exchange, Turkey ended up about 99 percent Muslim and Greece about 99 percent Christian. It's not like Syria, Lebanon, or Egypt, where there are sizeable local Christian populations. Most Christians in Turkey are localized in the cities ? Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. In Ankara, we get maybe 300 people on Sunday. There aren't any Orthodox churches, and there are just a handful of Protestant communities, which meet in hotels or other places.

The Catholics in Ankara are a fascinating mix. We get a number of ambassadors and other diplomatic personnel from the embassies, especially from Catholic countries such as Croatia, Chile, Spain, Ireland, and so on. Then we have a large number of Filipina domestics, who are really the backbone of many of our activities. There are a number of Americans, often defense contractors who have relations with the government and the military. We also have a number of African scholarship students. Turkey gives out a lot of scholarships, especially in fields such as engineering and medicine, and many of the Africans who come here to study are Catholics from places such as Angola, Rwanda and Burundi.

We don't face any real pressure or harassment, whether subtle or overt. I should add that since Bishop Padovese's death, I have been flooded with e-mails and phone calls from Muslims in Turkey, extending their condolences and expressing their outrage at his murder. This is as much a part of the reality of Muslim-Christian relations in Turkey as is the occasional violence.

Is the rise of a more openly Islamic government in Turkey a threat?

The present government is more open to religion and to religious views of the world. Turkey's previous governments were often explicitly anti-religious. There's always been a strongly militant secular movement in Turkey allergic to anything religious, and it would certainly be opposed to the present government. My sense is that society is always healthier when people of faith can play a positive role. I have the impression that the present government seems more honest and conscientious than previous ones, and I think that comes from the faith background of the people running it.

You believe the real worry in Turkey isn't militant Islam but militant secularism?

Ataturk was himself a military man, and the military has always played an exaggerated role in national politics. Over the years they've led multiple coups, seeing themselves as the protectors of Turkey's secular state. The present government seems to be trying to break the power of the military and to prevent it from meddling in national politics, so there is a sort of religious/secular struggle going on.

Most people in the present government are Muslims, but they're hardly "Islamists." They're not people who want to apply the *sharia* through the civil law. They're just not interested in that. Their project is to prepare Turkey to enter the European Union, which obviously takes the country in a very different direction.

You've said and written over the years that there are some promising moderate Muslim movements in Turkey which are more representative of grassroots Islam than the radicals.

One of the advantages we have in Turkey is that there are several strong communities of Muslims already committed to dialogue. We don't have to find people and convince them. The best-known examples would be the Nur Community, followers of Said Nursi, and their cousins in the Gülen movement, followers of Fethullah Gülen. Both are fully committed to dialogue with Christians and a pluralistic society.

Back in the late 1980s, I remember talking to people in the bishops' conference in Turkey about dialogue activities. They encouraged me to get involved with both of these groups, because, as the bishops put it, "They're on our side. They want us to have a good place in Turkish society."

What these movements are picking up is the traditional tolerance of Anatolian Islam. If you look at Nursi and Gülen in terms of who they quote, whose views they're carrying on, it's the great mystics and leaders of Turkish history who articulated a universalist and inclusive vision of Islam. They're strong, growing, vibrant movements, which reflect real grassroots sentiment.

You know Murat Altun?

Yes, I know him fairly well. I've had dinner with him and the bishop several times. I really liked him, and I always thought he did a good job. When I first heard the news that the bishop had been killed and people were saying Murat did it, I actually hoped it would turn out that the police were simply pinning the murder on the easiest suspect in order to solve the case quickly, because that has happened in the past. It doesn't look like that's the case this time, however.

One thing I can say is that Murat was more than just an occasional chauffer. He once drove Padovese to Italy and back to pick up some books. He was more like a member of the family. He and the bishop, along with the bishop's secretary, Sister Leonora, who's an American, spent hours and hours in the car together, talking about all kinds of things.

What was your impression of Bishop Padovese?

He was a breath of fresh air for the Turkish episcopacy. He brought a lot of new ideas, he was dynamic, and he launched a number of important initiatives. The other bishops saw him as a natural leader, which is why they made him president of the episcopal conference. For instance, one of his priorities was the preparation of catechetical materials. Because the Turkish-speaking Christian community is so small, they don't have many resources. He would take good stuff in Italian and other languages and publish it in Turkish, so his people would have a solid formation in the faith.

With regard to Islam, he was a real leader in dialogue. He had good relations with many Muslim leaders. He had a strong personal friendship with the Turkish Ambassador to the Holy See, and good ties with the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Turkey. They issued a glowing tribute to him after the news broke that he had been killed. More than any other, he was the bishop in Turkey who truly believed in the importance of dialogue.

Padovese was also a very good scholar, a Patrologist. He was an expert on the Capadocian Fathers, and for years he led Pauline tours of Turkey, preaching about St. Basil and the two Gregories. He wrote a pilgrimage guide to Turkey which is still a fine resource.

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Over the years, I had the chance to meet Padovese and to interview him on several occasions. (The fact that he was a Capuchin, and that I grew up in Capuchin schools and parishes, meant that we actually knew some of the same people.) I always found him to be a perfect expression of the Capuchin ethos: utterly unpretentious, a lively sense of humor, honest and realistic, and primarily concerned with ordinary people.

Back in February 2006, I sat down with Padovese in Rome after the murder of Santoro. As is the case today with Padovese's own death, initial reports as to why 16-year-old O?uzhan Akdin targeted Santoro were all over the map. Some suggested emotional instability (Akdin had apparently been seeing a psychiatrist), and others

pointed to the fact that Akdin received financial hand-outs from Santoro's parish, implying that perhaps the killing was a shake-down gone bad.

Eventually, Akdin explicitly linked his act to the Danish cartoon controversy, and his mother even described her son's slaying of a Catholic priest as "a gift to the state and the nation." Padovese and I didn't know that, however, at the time we spoke ? making his insistence that anti-Christian propaganda not be discounted as a motive seem terribly prescient.

Below is what I published at the time based on my conversation with Padovese.

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From "The Word From Rome," February 10, 2006

Murder of priest gives insight into Christian-Muslim relations [1]

I had the chance on Wednesday to speak with Bishop Luigi Padovese, a 58-year-old Capuchin from Milan who serves as the apostolic vicar in Anatolia, and who was Santoro's superior. Padovese was in Rome accompanying Santoro's body, and was set to return to Turkey after the funeral Mass Friday morning.

Listening to Padovese, the most chilling aspect of the story is perhaps how little indication there was that this young man harbored hatred strong enough to kill. The 16-year-old was not, Padovese said, raised in circles linked to any known radical groups or jihadist movement, although his brother has told Turkish media that the young man was influenced by an Islamic militant group he met on-line. His father was not an imam or a fundamentalist politician, but a local dentist. It was his father's pistol the teen used to gun down Santoro, and the father has said that his son was undergoing psychiatric care.

I asked Padovese what he believes the real motive was for Santoro's murder. He said he doesn't know what demons drove this young man, but said dismissing it as an isolated act is a mistake. Rising Islamic fundamentalism and anti-Christian prejudice, Padovese said, shaped the context in which the teen acted.

"It's the anti-Christian climate that has been produced in Turkey," Padovese said. "There's a strong current of religious extremism, and that climate can fuel this sort of hatred. It's passed along in families, in schools, in the newspapers."

Padovese said that every week the Turkish bishops' conference prepares a bulletin citing "denigrating comments" or "banalities" about Christianity that have appeared in the Turkish press.

"There's a false image of our presence that usually goes unchallenged," he said.

As one example of what Padovese has in mind, the Catholic news agency "Asia News" recently carried an essay by a Western academic who had been doing research in a small Black Sea Coast town last summer, near Trabzon. During that time he saw a local newspaper article titled, "A priest sighted." It reported that local children had seen a priest in the vicinity of the town, but chased him off, to the great applause of the locals.

The article quoted a local politician: "The priests who arrive in our area want to re-establish the Christian Greek-Orthodox state that was here before. There are spies among these priests, working for the West. They are trying to destroy our peace."

That's the sort of misrepresentation Padovese said he believes may well have shaped the context in which a young and emotionally pliable Turkish teenager chose to target a Catholic missionary.

Padovese stressed that he "loves the Turkish people," most of whom "are good people who want dialogue." At the same time, he said, "there are zones of Turkey which are completely 'Islamified,' where it is dangerous to be a Christian."

Padovese linked Santoro's death to the broader struggles of the small Christian population in Turkey, a country often lauded as a model of moderate, Western-style Islam, and currently a candidate for membership in the European Union.

"There were several million Christians in Turkey at the fall of the Ottoman Empire," he said. "How is it possible that in the arc of just 70 or 80 years we've become merely 60,000 or 70,000? The truth is that hundreds of thousands of Christians converted to Islam, taking Islamic names and hiding their identity, out of fear of persecution," he said.

"The Christian presence is still there, I know it's there," Padovese said. "Many of these people know that they are Christians, or come from Christian families, but cannot say so."

That fear, Padovese said, is part of the warp and woof of Christian life across the whole Middle East.

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