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Religious freedom synod's signature issue

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It's only day one of the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, but already its signature issue has come into focus: Religious freedom, seen as the cornerstone of a healthy democratic society, and as a universal cause rather than special pleading for the region's embattled Christian minority.

"Freedom of conscience is not so much a right to be claimed for Christians," said Patriarch Antonios Naguib of the Egyptian Coptic church this morning. Instead, he said, it's a universal right, which Christians and Muslims defend together for the common good.

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"We must emerge from a logic in defence of the rights of Christians only, and engage in the defence of the rights of all," Naguib said.

The heart of that effort, the Coptic patriarch suggested, is advocacy of a "positive laicity" of the state, which makes a clear distinction between religion and politics. He called the rise of political Islam across the Middle East "a threat which we must face together" — by which he meant not just the divided Christians of the region, but also Muslims and Jews.

While radical Islam is sometimes styled as a special threat to the embattled Christians of the Middle East,

It's worth remembering that in terms of raw numbers, the primary victims of religious extremism in the Muslim world are other Muslims. In that context, Naguib argued, "positive laicity" is a project that Christians and moderate Muslims and Jews can share.

Naguib is the "relator," or secretary, of the synod, a position that gives him wide latitude to shape the assembly's discussions. This morning he delivered the "report before the discussion," which essentially sets the table for the deliberations to follow.

Distinguishing between religion and the state was a key theme.

"A positive laicity would permit an effective and fruitful contribution of the church and help strengthen the idea of citizenship, founded on the principles of equality and democracy, for every person in the country," Naguib said.

The phrase "positive laicity" has been frequently used by Benedict XVI to invoke a form of secularism that recognizes the autonomy of the state from direct religious control, but without marginalizing religion or treating it as an exclusively private phenomenon. In turn, Benedict borrowed the idea of "positive laicity" from French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has argued for a stronger role for churches and religious believers in ultra-secular French society.

Repeatedly, Naguib urged the Christians of the Middle East to resist a "ghetto mentality," seeing themselves instead as the architects of a "positive laicity" in the states of the region.

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In making the case for religious freedom as "an essential component of human rights," Naguib said it includes both freedom of worship and freedom of conscience. That's an important distinction in many majority Muslim states, where Christians are generally allowed to worship openly, but where conversion from Islam to Christianity or any other religion is often prohibited. Even where there's no legal impediment to conversion, social and cultural pressures generally make it a perilous choice.

Those realities have turned the bishops of the Middle East into the most vocal and articulate advocates in the Catholic world for a strongly secular conception of the state, including a strong wall between church and state.

"Difficulties in the relations between Christians and Muslims generally arise when Muslims do not distinguish between religion and politics," Naguib said.

Christians sense an uneasiness at being considered non-citizens, despite the fact that they have called these countries "home" long before Islam. Christians deserve full recognition, passing from being merely tolerated to a just and equal status which is based on common citizenship, religious freedom and human rights.

Naguib warned that part of the problem facing Christians in the Middle East is a tendency in the Muslim street to identify them with the West and the policy choices of Western governments "despite the fact, he said, "these governments are secular and increasingly opposed to the principles of the Christian faith"

Naguib called for "education towards greater justice and equality under the law," while condemning all forms of "proselytism" "which is generally understood in Catholic speech to refer to pressuring someone to convert, as opposed to evangelization, meaning exposing someone to the Christian message and

allowing them to make a free choice as to how to respond.

In that effort, Naguib said, the role of laity must have a pride of place. He called for the role of women in the church, both religious and lay, to be "broadened and developed."

Naguib was not the only voice sounding the theme of religious freedom.

In remarks opening this morning's session, Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, the Vatican official who oversees the Synod of Bishops, recalled the slaying of Bishop Luigi Padovese in Turkey last June, which came just before Pope Benedict's trip to Cyprus where he presented the synod's working document.

Padovese, an Italian Capuchin who lived and worked in Turkey for much of his career, was murdered by his longtime driver. Though the motives remain murky, the driver had apparently fallen under the influence of extremist currents in Turkey.

"May his sacrifice open new paths of mutual understanding and collaboration in respect for religious freedom in all countries of the Middle East and the world," Eterovi? said, adding a prayer that those involved in Padovese's death will have a "change of heart."

Eterovi? urged the Christians of the region to act as peacemakers, and said "their human rights should always be respected, including freedom of worship and freedom of religion." He said that Christians want to help build "thriving, democratic countries."

Italian Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches and a co-president of the synod, added his voice to the chorus. In brief remarks to the pope this morning, Sandri called religious freedom a "fundamental right," and suggested that its absence plays a role in the "sad and persistent reality" of Christians migrating out of the region.

Naguib has a special motive for being attracted to the notion of a secular democratic state in which religious freedom is guaranteed, because Egypt is currently witnessing a rising tide of conflicts between its Muslim majority and tiny Coptic minority. (There are an estimated two million Orthodox Copts in Egypt, while the Catholic Copts number some 200,000. The overall national population is roughly 80 million.)

Recently a Coptic bishop has been blasted by Islamic media and targeted for street protests after reportedly saying that areas where the Bible and the Qur'an disagree represent later additions to the Muslim holy book. That was taken by some Muslims as a suggestion of corruption in the Qur'an and has stoked a strong public backlash.

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