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On Israel, synod walks line between criticism and bashing

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From a PR point of view, one quietly expressed worry by Vatican officials heading into the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East was that it not turn into a platform for bashing Israel. The concern is based on the fact that the tiny Christian minority of the region, anxious to prove its Arab credentials, is often outspokenly supportive of the Palestinians and thus critical of Israeli policy.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: Index of stories from the Synod.

Fixing where legitimate political criticism of the State of Israel ends, and where anti-Israeli and/or anti-Jewish prejudice begins, is a notoriously difficult enterprise. The Vatican's main concern has been that criticism of Israel not hijack the broader story the synod is designed to tell: That of a frequently forgotten Christian presence, struggling against all odds to contribute to a democratic revolution across the Middle East.

†The Vatican also does not want the appearance of a one-sided treatment of the Israeli/Palestinian problem to complicate efforts to cajole leaders on both sides back to the negotiating table. Talks between Israel and the Palestinian authorities stalled last week after Israel declined to extend a moratorium on new settlements in the West Bank.

tAlready on day one, there are indications that striking the right balance will be a challenge as the synod unfolds.

tThis morning, the spotlight belonged to Patriarch Antonios Naguib of the Egyptian Coptic church, who is serving as the ?relator,? or secretary, of the synod. Naguib met with reporters after the morning session, and was asked to comment on a recent vote by the Israeli cabinet to require a loyalty oath to Israel as a ?Jewish and democratic state? of all new non-Jewish citizens.

tThe measure now goes before the Knesset. It has drawn strong protests from Israel?s Arab minority, estimated at roughly 20 percent of the population, as racist and anti-democratic.

tThough saying he was merely expressing a personal opinion, Naguib didn?t pull any punches in blasting the new oath.

tSpeaking in French, Naguib called the oath a ?flagrant contradiction, something that?s not logical, and contrary to the democratic principles it claims to affirm.?

tNaguib added that it?s ?very strange? the oath is being proposed in a nation that claims to be the ?lone democratic state in the Middle East.? In effect, Naguib seemed to suggest, the oath moves Israel closer to the kind of theocracy long associated with the Islamic states of the region.

tEarlier in the morning, Naguib also addressed the Israeli/Palestinian conflict during his formal ?report before the discussion,? which is designed to set the agenda for the synod?s deliberations.

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t?While condemning violence whatever its origin and calling for a just and lasting solution,? he said, ?we express our solidarity with the Palestinian people, whose situation today is particularly conducive to the rise of fundamentalism.?

tNaguib called life in the Palestinian Territories ?very difficult and often unsustainable.?

tTo be sure, Naguib was equally unstinting in his criticism of what he called ?political Islam,? meaning attempts to enforce Islamic law through the power of the state.

t?It wants to impose an Islamic model of life on all citizens, sometimes with violence,? he said. Christians often find themselves essentially ?non-citizens,? he said, because Muslims often ?do not distinguish between religion and politics.?

tNonetheless, the commentary on Israel in the synod is likely to be especially closely tracked, especially because some commentators in the Jewish world have already expressed reservations on other fronts.

tFor example, Lisa Palmieri-Billig, a Rome-based correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post*, recently suggested that the documents for the synod reflect a ?Supercessionist? theology in which the Old Testament is read largely as an anticipation of Christianity.

?Theologically, the post-Vatican II era of respect for the intrinsic value of the Jewish Bible seems to have vanished, overshadowed by the Christological ?Salvation history? thrust of this Synod, which defines the Old Testament mainly in its function of ?prefiguration? of the New Testament ? sadly reminiscent of the

Supercessionist theology of the past that effectively delegitimized Judaism,? Palmieri-Billig wrote on Oct. 10.

Israeli sensitivities about the synod bubbled to the surface in a six-page news release issued by the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See last week, containing data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics showing that the Christian population inside Israel is actually growing, not getting smaller.

The release said it was responding to ?repeated insinuations? about a Christian exodus from the Holy Land, which it said is unjust with respect to both Israel and Jordan.

Among other forces driving the growth, according to the news release, was the immigration into Israel of a large pool of Russians during the 1990s, many of whom are Christian and have decided to remain in Israel. Overall, the report says that the Christian population of Israel has climbed from 34,000 in 1949 to 150,700 in 2008, with the bulk being ethnically Arabs.

For the record, statistics presented this morning by Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, the Vatican official who oversees the Synod of Bishops, assert that in percentage terms, the Catholic share of the Israeli population fell from 3.8 percent in 1980 to 1.82 percent in 2008.

Israeli concerns probably will not be assuaged by the fact that on Oct. 19, the former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, is scheduled to present a document titled ?Kairos Palestine? as part of a series of events alongside the synod. Produced by Christian groups in the Middle East, it defines Israel?s ?occupation? of the Palestinian Territories as a ?sin against God and humanity,? and calls for disinvestment in Israeli companies.

Among other things, this perceived pro-Palestinian tilt is sometimes cited by American Catholics as a challenge in mobilizing grassroots U.S. support for the church in the Middle East, especially because many American Catholics most likely to feel concern for Christians in the region are also generally sympathetic to Israel.

In this context, many synod observers are pointing toward Wednesday as a key moment, because that?s the day Rabbi David Rosen is scheduled to speak. Rosen, a longtime veteran of Catholic/Jewish dialogue, serves as an advisor to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Rosen has said he intends to address ?significant differences in the situation of the Christian communities within Israel and those considered part of a Palestinian polity in the making,? as well as ?recent changes in perceptions of Christianity in Israel.?

The following day, two Muslims will address the synod: The Grand Mufti of Beirut, Mohammed al-Sammak, a Sunni, and Ayatollah Sayed Mostafa Muhagag Ahmadabadi, a professor of Islamic Law at Teheran University and a Shi?ite.

Those invitations were obviously calculated to project an image of balance and openness to all the peoples and faiths of the Middle East. As the rest of the synod unfolds, it will be fascinating to track how well that balancing act is maintained ? especially as participants begin to veer ?off script? during open discussions in the evenings.

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