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At synod Mass, pope urges new pastoral energy for Middle East churches

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI opened the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East with a strong call to support the minority Christian population in the region, and said peace and protection of human rights were essential conditions for the church's survival there.

Celebrating Mass in St. Peter's Basilica Oct. 10 with more than 250 synod participants, the pope said the Middle East has a unique place in salvation history as the "cradle" of the church's worldwide evangelizing mission.

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

The synod's primary goal, he said, was to renew the pastoral energy of Middle Eastern church communities and strengthen their faith identity, so that they can continue to witness the Gospel to all peoples. That task, he added, goes hand in hand with the church's dialogue with Muslims and Jews.

The Mass featured liturgical elements from many of the Catholic rites of the Middle East, as well as prayers in Latin. It began with a long procession of 177 synod fathers, many of whom wore the distinctive vestments and headgear of their Eastern rites.

Prayers of the faithful were recited in English, Arabic, Turkish, Hebrew and Farsi, invoking the need for peace, the promotion of tolerance and the Christian duty to evangelize through example. The Eucharistic liturgy featured a hymn in Arabic and Syriac, sung by an inter-ritual choir of Eastern pontifical colleges in Rome.

The pope was joined at the altar by several chief concelebrants, including two honorary president delegates of the synod: the Lebanon-based Maronite patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir, and the Chaldean patriarch, Cardinal Emmanuel-Karim Delly of Baghdad.

In his opening remarks, Pope Benedict said the Mass would help them all spiritually prepare for "these days of intense work." The 83-year-old pope was to preside over most of the twice-daily sessions of the synod assembly, which was to conclude Oct. 24.

In his homily, the pope emphasized the synod's theme of unity in a land where the church has a rich variety of liturgical, spiritual, cultural and disciplinary traditions. Without church unity, there can be no real witnessing of the faith, he said.

The pope encouraged the Middle East church leaders to rise above their present difficulties with the same spirit of Pentecost that moved the early church.

"The first Christians in Jerusalem were few. No one could have imagined what happened afterward. And the church still lives with that same energy that made the early church arise and grow," he said.

The synod's role, he said, was to renew that sense of "permanent dynamism" among Catholic communities of the Middle East. In that sense, he said, the synod was primarily pastoral, although it could not ignore the often dramatic social and political situations in which Christians live.

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The pope said that in order to effectively witness their faith, the church's members need to strengthen their Christian identity through the word of God and the sacraments. Such witness is also a fundamental human right, and requires conditions of peace and justice -- a responsibility that implicates the international community as well as the majority religions of the region, he said.

The pope said the synod would promote ecumenism as well as interfaith dialogue. Jewish and Muslim representatives were scheduled to address the synod, and leaders of other Christian churches were also invited.

"This event is favorable for continuing constructive dialogue with Jews, with whom we are tied in a permanent way by the long history of the covenant, as well as with Muslims," he said.

The pope pledged that the Catholic communities in the region would continue to contribute much to their societies, not only in works of social promotion like schools and hospitals, but also by practicing the Gospel values of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In keeping up this social presence, he added, the Christians of the Middle East must rely on support from Catholic communities around the world, many of which also sent representatives to the synod.

After the Mass, addressing pilgrims who packed St. Peter's Square below his apartment window, the pope asked for prayers for the success of the synod. He said the church in the Middle East has been afflicted by the "deep divisions and age-old conflicts" of the region, but today is called to be an instrument of reconciliation, on the model of the first Christian community of Jerusalem.

Noting that October is the month of the rosary, which he called a "biblical prayer," the pope entrusted the

synod to Mary's intercession.

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