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Does benign neglect spell the 'Death of Christians of the East'?

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It usually marks the opening stages of a Synod of Bishops, as participants use brief speeches to raise a bewildering variety of topics, and common threads can be hard to find. Attempts to identify key ideas too early in the game risk jumping the gun.

That said, yesterday's first round of speeches in the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East repeatedly seemed to flag a threat facing the churches of the region, less visible than the rise of radical Islam or the war in Iraq, but potentially no less fatal: A sort of "benign neglect" across the Catholic world, which could mean acquiescence as the spiritual and social capital of the churches of the Middle East ebbs away.

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That neglect seemed especially acute when it comes to the six Eastern Catholic churches of the Middle East (Armenian, Chaldean, Coptic, Maronite, Melkite and Syrian) vis-à-vis the dominant Latin tradition within global Catholicism.

Ironically, one of the strongest expressions of concern came from a Latin rite bishop from the United

States, Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, who spoke on behalf of the U.S. bishops' conference.

Focusing on immigrants from the Middle East who have arrived in America and who belong to an Eastern church, Mahony ticked off a variety of ways in which they're often subtly encouraged to become absorbed into the Latin mainstream. For example:

Many Catholic elementary schools in the U.S. offer discounts for parishioners, which means that parents may face a choice between joining a Roman Catholic parish in order to afford Catholic education, or remaining loyal to their Eastern Church.

Eastern Churches often admit children to communion beginning with baptism, but when those children attend a Roman Catholic Mass, they're not allowed to come forward. The not-so-subtle suggestion can be that Eastern traditions have to be checked at the door.

Mahony also observed that many Catholic universities across the United States have made significant investments in studying other religions, such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, but pay relatively little attention to the diversity within Catholicism, especially its Eastern traditions. That's the case, Mahony suggested, even in urban settings with sizeable communities of Catholics from one of the Eastern churches.

All of that, Mahony argued, points to the need for a more deliberate effort on the part of the Roman Catholic establishment to foster "unity in diversity" with regard to the Eastern churches.

Coptic Bishop Kyrillos William of Egypt focused on a particular form of "benign neglect" which he feels is sometimes exhibited by the Roman tradition: A lack of regard for the Eastern liturgical heritage.

In the Middle East today, William complained, Catholics from the Latin branch of the church are increasingly translating the Roman Catholic liturgy into Arabic. While the motives for doing so may be noble, William charged, its impact often is not: "Helping [Eastern Catholics] to separate from their churches and to weaken their belonging to them."

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William noted that historically, the Coptic church in Egypt "did not wait for Vatican II to translate our liturgical texts into the current language of our people." Instead, he said, the Coptic liturgy from the very beginning was celebrated in different regional dialects in Upper Egypt, and in Greek in the big cities, both of which represented "the language of culture and of daily life" at the time.

Since the tenth century, he said, the liturgy has been mostly in Arabic. Allowing worship to be expressed in the language of the people, William asserted, helps explain why Christianity has endured in Egypt while it largely disappeared elsewhere in North Africa.

In words that may have echoes in today's liturgical debates in Roman Catholic circles, William warned that Christians went into decline in the area because "a foreign liturgy in a little-known language had been imposed upon them."

All that led William to issue a practical plea: Stop translating the Roman liturgy into Arabic, at least in Egypt.

"If there are Latins, it is their right to celebrate the [Roman] Mass," he said, "but in a language other than Arabic, because this attracts our faithful and helps in their dispersal."

tMelkite Archbishop Elias Chacour of Israel raised yet another kind of benign neglect in Catholic attitudes: Affection for the sacred sites and shrines of the Middle East, which sometimes seems greater than concern for its actual flesh-and-blood Christians.

t'For sure the shrines and the holy places are important,' Chacour said. 'But ... I insistently invite you, and plead with the Holy Father, to give even more attention to the living stones of the Holy Land.'

tChacour invited Catholics in other parts of the world to 'reconsider your priorities.'

tThough Chacour did not develop the point, Christian leaders in the Middle East have long complained that when Western pilgrims come through, they often have little contact with local Christians, and as a result the experience has little impact on their perceptions of the challenges facing the region. As a result, bishops and other church leaders have called for a different type of pilgrimage, one that exposes visitors not only to the Christian past of the Middle East but also its present.

tFinally, Archbishop Boutros Marayati of the Armenian Catholic Church in Syria suggested there may be some not-so-benign neglect about the root issue of Christianity's survival in the Middle East.

tProvocatively, Marayati asked aloud: 'Is there a plan to evacuate Christians from the East?'

tHe said that Christians have been propelled out of the region for at least the last one hundred years 'martyred, forced to emigrate, forced to leave from all the Churches without distinction.'

tHe ticked off a series of examples.

t'In 1915, hundreds of thousands of Armenian Christians were deported violently, from their countries, and they faced the first genocide in the 20th century, by the Ottomans,' Marayati said. 'The same thing occurred among the Chaldeans and the Syrians' Many Christians were sent from their villages and cities. These acts continued with the Palestinian events, the civil war in Lebanon, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, [and] the invasion of Iraq.'

tMarayati concluded with a dramatic rhetorical question: 'Are we waiting for the day where the world, as a spectator amidst the indifference of the Western Churches, will sit back and watch the 'Death of the Christians of the East''?

tGenerally speaking, Synods of Bishops are better at diagnosis than cure, meaning that they usually identify problems fairly well but don't always offer compelling solutions. Having sounded an alarm over benign neglect, the synod now faces the challenge of figuring out how to convert that neglect into active commitment.

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