

## In Middle East, democracy is the 'Great Jihad'

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 13, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

*Rome*

There's nothing like the realistic possibility of extinction to push people beyond euphemisms, forcing them to lay it on the line. That was the spirit of several presentations yesterday afternoon during the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, as Catholic leaders from the region described a future that might be paraphrased as "democracy or death."

The disappearance of Christians from the Middle East also poses the real and present danger, speakers said, of exacerbating a "clash of civilizations" between Christian and Islam.

The Synod of Bishops for the Middle East is being held in Rome Oct. 10-24.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: [Index of stories from the Synod](#) [1].

Greek-Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III Laham of Syria offered perhaps the most forceful diagnosis, warning that the steady migration of Christians out of the region poses a whole series of worrying consequences.

"It will make Arab society a mono-color society, exclusively Muslim, facing a society in Europe that's said to be Christian," Laham said. "If that happens, and the East is emptied of its Christians, it could mean a new clash of cultures, civilizations and religions, a destructive conflict between an Arab Muslim East and the Christian West."

In order to convince Christians to stay put, Laham said, it's time to speak frankly to Muslims about why Christians are afraid.

That, he said, means talking bluntly about "the separation between religion and the state, 'Arabness,' democracy, whether the nation is Arab or Muslim, human rights and laws that propose Islam as the lone or principal source of legislation" which constitute an obstacle to the equality of Christians as citizens before the law.

There are also fundamentalist parties, Islamic integralism, to which are attributed acts of terrorism, killings, burnings of churches, extortion, all in the name of religion, which rely on the strength of being a majority to humiliate their neighbors.

All of that, Laham said, makes peace-making the great challenge of the region "what he called its *Great Jihad*."

Archbishop Georges Casmoussa of Iraq struck a similar note, warning that increasingly Christians are seen in

the Muslim street as 'troops led by and for the so-called Christian West, and thus considered a parasitic body within the nation.'

'Places where Christians have been present since long before the rise of Islam, Casmoussa said, are becoming a 'Dar el-Islam' where Christians feel unwanted.

'Too often, Casmoussa said, Christians living in an Islamic nation feel compelled to choose between 'invisibility or exile.'

Harés Chéhab, the secretary general of a national committee for Islamic-Christian dialogue in Lebanon, insisted that the exodus of Christians out of the Middle East cannot be understood solely as a function of the region's economic problems.

'If that were the case, the entire region would be depopulated,' he said. 'It's obvious that discrimination, persecution in some places, fear in other, the absence of freedom, [and] a disparity in rights are at the basis of this movement.'

Chéhab spelled out the challenges: 'The relationship between religion and the state, in other words between what is spiritual and what's temporal, secularity, extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism.'

He called for a more direct language in discussing these realities with Muslims, in order to 'make them aware of the reality of our problems.'

In that regard, Maronite Bishop Nabil Andari offered one creative idea: The creation of a new group of Christian intellectuals in the region, who could make the argument for a genuinely democratic culture with space for religious minorities.

Andari called such a group a 'permanent cenacle of Arab Christian thinkers.'

Archbishop Youssef Bechara, a Maronite, suggested that in making the case with Muslims for democracy and a separation between religion and the state, Christians should avoid the terms 'secular' and 'secularism,' because Muslims generally associate secularism with irreligiosity and immorality.

Instead, Bechara said, it's better to refer to 'citizenship' and a 'civil state,' because those are the terms used by reform-minded Muslim writers.

That language, he said, would allow the reform movement to 'go beyond the level of the elites, for whom citizenship, dialogue and even freedom are allowed, in order to be able to reach the masses which can be manipulated and turned towards any sort of extremism.'

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