

Cry from Middle East synod: 'Power to the Patriarchs!'

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 14, 2010



Observers watch during morning prayer at a session of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East attended by Pope Benedict XVI in the synod hall at the Vatican Oct. 14. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

ROME -- Ferment around defending the heritage and prerogatives of the Eastern Catholic churches continues to swirl at the Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, as yesterday a Lebanese prelate proposed launching a Vatican commission to study ways of revitalizing the office of Patriarch.

In broad strokes, Eastern bishops typically have two reasons for wanting to emphasize the role of the patriarchs. Internally, it's an argument for greater collegiality, or shared decision-making, in Catholicism, as a corrective to what is perceived as excessive papal power; externally, it's a way of giving the patriarch a higher international profile as a way of insulating their flocks in the Middle East against possible pressures and attacks.

Auxiliary Bishop Guy-Paul Noujaim pointed to Pope John Paul II's invitation to study new ways of exercising the primacy of the pope, "inspired by the ecclesial forms of the first millennium."

The office of patriarch became a pillar of Christianity's structure during its first 1,000 years, but Noujaim suggested that the traditional "privileges" of the patriarchs went into decline during the second millennium.

Noujaim conceded, however, that several developments in the meantime complicate efforts to elevate today's cluster of patriarchs.

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