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Liberating the Christian voice in the Arab Spring

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

On a slow summer day, it might be fun to compose a list of dubious distinctions for Catholic clerics. No-longer-excommunicated Bishop Richard Williamson, for instance, might get the prize for most famous interview ever on Swedish TV. (In 2009, he set off a cause célèbre by denying that the Nazis used gas chambers). Bishop John Magee of Cloyne, Ireland, now retired in disgrace for his mishandling of sex abuse complaints, might claim top honors for creating the biggest mess in the smallest diocese.

At the moment, Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, an Italian Franciscan who's served as Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli in Libya since 1985, is flirting with adding his name to that list of unsavory accomplishments, under the following heading: "Muammar Qaddafi's favorite guy in a Roman collar."

Last Sunday, *The New York Times* carried a feature on the Anglican parish in Tripoli, one of the few venues in the Qaddafi-controlled capital where dissent can be heard. (Both the Protestant and Catholic communities in Libya are tiny, composed almost entirely of foreign ex-pats.) In passing, correspondent David Kirkpatrick noted that the regime basically ignores the Anglicans, preferring to direct foreign visitors to Tripoli's Catholic church instead.

Kirkpatrick wrote: "Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, in Tripoli for decades, appears to have made his peace with the Libyan leader. Bishop Martinelli has sometimes parroted uncorroborated state television reports about civilian casualties, and he has condemned NATO's bombing as immoral and pointless. A few weeks ago, he told a group of foreign journalists that he thought Colonel Qaddafi might find a place in heaven. 'Why not?' he said, according to journalists present."

Kirkpatrick more or less has Martinelli pegged. When asked once about Qaddafi's approach to Christians, Martinelli replied by recounting how Qaddafi welcomed Italian nuns into Libya because two Franciscan

sisters cared for his dying father. The impression was that Libya was a safe haven, overlooking the fact that one of Qaddafi's first acts after seizing power in 1969 was to close the country's churches. Over the years, Qaddafi has been more than willing to play the Islamist card when it serves his interests.

Keep that in mind as you ponder an Aug. 9 report on Syria from "Asia News," a Catholic media agency based in Rome that specializes in coverage of the developing world. The heart of the story was the following: "So far, all the heads of Christian churches in Syria have united in support of President [Bashar] Assad."

Among other things, "Asia News" cites Fr. Elias Zehlaoui, a Greek Melkite Catholic described as "one of the most respected priests of Damascus," as having recently addressed an open letter to French authorities complaining about their statements that Assad has lost legitimacy. (More dramatically, the report claims that a Greek Orthodox auxiliary bishop recently kicked U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford out of an ecumenical prayer service for his defense of anti-Assad protestors. A State Department spokesperson, however, told NCR that didn't happen.)

"Asia News" notes that much like Qaddafi in Libya, Assad likes to trot out his Catholic friends. When heads of state visit Syria, Assad often shows them the Greek Melkite cathedral in Damascus. In turn, the country's Catholic leaders often have Assad's back. In April, for example, Greek Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III sent a letter to Western leaders praising Syria as "a model of faithful and open secularism" and pleading with them not to encourage an anti-Assad revolution.

In May, amid a bloody crackdown by Assad's forces against protestors -- who, according to media reports, were mostly unarmed -- Gregorios III went on Vatican Radio to express condolences for losses "on both sides, the demonstrators and the army."

In fairness, experts often say that Christians in Syria are better off than other spots in the Middle East. Even so, it's striking that in both Libya and Syria, the official Christian response to pressure for reform is, at least in some cases, to make excuses for the regime.

Of course, this is an old story. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Christians generally preferred the devil they knew to the one they didn't, and events have proven them sadly correct. Prior to the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq had one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East, estimated at over two million. Today it's around 400,000, meaning that in just two decades, Iraq has lost two-thirds of its Christian population.

Christians elsewhere are deeply worried about becoming another Iraq, and it's tough to call that fear irrational. For instance, a survey in Egypt shortly after Mubarak's ouster found that only one-third of Egyptian adults believe it's important for the country's Coptic Christians to be able to practice their faith freely. In such an environment, can you really blame some Christians for being reluctant to see the old guard go?

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Yet the tragedy is that Christians could be among the most important architects of a new order in the Arab world.

The most positive vision of secularism in Catholic thought today, anywhere on the planet, percolates in the Middle East. For the region's Christian minority, democracy, the rule of law, and distinguishing

religion from politics amount to a survival strategy. As one Arab Catholic recently put it, "In the Middle East, we don't need liberation theology. We need liberation from theology."

In effect, Catholicism in the Middle East is the 21st century's most passionate heir to *Dignitatis humanae*, Vatican II's declaration on religious freedom, and the vision of healthy secularism it represents. I'm reminded of the famous line from sociologist Peter Berger, who once joked that given the parallels between the growth of Protestantism in Latin America and the spread of Capitalism, "Max Weber is alive and well and living in Guatemala City." In a similar vein, Catholics might say that "John Courtney Murray is alive and well and living in Beirut."

In October 2010, just weeks before pro-democracy movements broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, the Catholic bishops of the region gathered in Rome for the Synod for the Middle East. They laid out this compelling vision: "Together we will construct our civil societies on the basis of citizenship, religious freedom and freedom of conscience. We wish to offer to the East and to the West a model of coexistence between different religions."

To liberate the potential Christian contribution to the Arab Spring, action is required on all sides.

First, Western governments should make it clear that protection of religious minorities, including Christians, is a *sine qua non* of diplomatic recognition and material assistance. Defense of religious groups and institutions should be a cornerstone of security priorities.

In that regard, the record in Iraq is not encouraging. In fact, if the United States would like to embolden Christian leaders in Libya and Syria, the best thing it could do would be to improve the lot of Iraqi Christians -- because at the moment, Iraq looms in the collective Christian imagination as the nightmare scenario of what a future beyond a police state looks like.

Second, Muslim proponents of the Arab Spring should make the defense of Christian minorities a far more explicit element of their program.

Anti-Mubarak forces in Egypt like to boast that after the regime withdrew its protection from Christian churches at the height of the protests in Tahrir Square, not one was attacked. That's no longer the case, as assaults on churches and other Christian targets have escalated in the current security vacuum. Even if it were still true, however, the mere absence of violence is hardly enough. Christians need to be assured that they'll have a place at the national table.

Third, Christians in the West need to train a far more intense spotlight on the fate of their coreligionists in the Middle East. Church leaders in Libya and Syria might well be more outspoken if they sensed a vast network of international solidarity at their back, rather than fearing that once the regime collapses, they're basically on their own.

In particular, it's simply galling that American Catholics seem far more interested in debating the fine points of the new Missal, or whatever the latest outrage from the bishops happens to be, than in mobilizing to help the Christians of Iraq. Given the responsibility the United States bears for Iraq, the welfare of Christians there ought to be a towering priority, not an afterthought.

Bottom line: It's easy to mock Martinelli or Gregorios III for being soft on dictators whose time looks to be up. For sure, it's not exactly a boost to Catholic pride to see our man in Tripoli painted as the last remaining apologist for Qaddafi, or to see our leaders in Syria beg the West to get off poor Bashar al-Assad's back while his tanks roll in to crush protest movements.

If we want that tune to change, however, we need to make it clear that the new music won't fall on deaf ears.

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Two weeks ago, I reported on an ecumenical conference at Lambeth Palace, the headquarters of the Anglican Communion, on the fate of Christianity in the Holy Land. I led off with a provocative warning from Catholic Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem that the Holy Land risks becoming a "spiritual Disneyland," with great historical attractions but empty of a living Christian presence.

First, a correction is in order. I wrote that the Christian share of the population of British Mandate Palestine in 1948 was thirty percent, but that was the result of my conflating two different statistics given at the London conference. One speaker said that the Christian share was 30 percent in the late 19th century, and another that it was 22 percent in 1948. I confused the two, and regret the error. (As we will see below, even that 22 percent figure is contested.)

Much of the reaction to the piece came from friends of Israel, concerned that the crisis facing Palestinian Christians is being exaggerated in order to vilify Israeli policy. Notably, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs sent along a draft of a forthcoming background paper on the Palestinian Christian population.

The paper soberly acknowledges that Palestinian Christians face real pressures as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including restrictions on visas and travel, family reunification, a lack of economic opportunities, and residential separation from places of work due to the security barrier.

Nonetheless, the JCPA paper makes the following claims:

- The actual number of Palestinian Christians is not presently decreasing. A decline began several generations ago and accelerated after 1948, but the population has stabilized since 1967.
- Numbers given to support the impression of dramatic decline are often distorted. For instance, the Christian share of Palestine under the British mandate, according to United Nations figures cited by the JCPA, was closer to 7.8 percent -- not 22 percent, and certainly not 30 percent. Hence the drop in percentage terms since the creation of the state of Israel is not as sharp as some suggest.
- Decline in the Christian share of the Palestinian population is due to three factors: emigration, a low birth rate among Christians, and dramatic growth in the surrounding Muslim population. The last two are basically beyond Israeli control.
- Israel itself has a growing Christian population, up 346 percent since 1948 and 114 percent since 1967. In many years during that span, Christian growth in percentage terms outpaced Jewish growth.

In conclusion, the paper calls the idea that Palestinian Christianity is on the verge of extinction a "myth."

It's beyond my capacity to evaluate differing statistical estimates of the Palestinian Christian population, or its trend lines; I can only note that the realities, both historical and current, are to some extent debated.

Two other notes suggested by the JCPA background paper.

First, the paper asserts that both Palestinian Christians themselves, as well as their supporters among liberal Christian churches in the West, are often reluctant to attribute any of their difficulties to Islamic extremism. When they do, the paper says, they often blame Israel for radicalizing their Muslim neighbors.

As it happens, the letter I mentioned above from Patriarch Gregorios III to Western leaders offers a case in point. In it, he asserts that if Western authorities want Christians to remain in the Middle East, they should pressure Israel to get out of the West Bank.

A widespread perception that Muslim countries face sanctions but never Israel, Gregorios writes, "feeds fundamentalism and extremism and in turn rebounds on us as Christians, especially in Iraq and Egypt."

Second, Israel is not the only country in the Middle East where the Christian population is experiencing growth.

Statistics provided at last October's Synod for the Middle East show that of the sixteen nations that make up the Middle East, seven have seen spikes in their Christian population since 1980: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Yemen. All are part of the Arabian Peninsula.

In some cases, the new Christians in these nations are refugees. That's true in Kuwait, for example, where many Chaldean Christians have fled the upheaval in Iraq. More often, the rise in the Christian population has been driven by a significant influx of new migrants from Asia and Africa (notably, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, and Nigeria), drawn by opportunities for work in the service sector and in the oil industry.

In general, these Christian émigrés are not considered citizens of the states in which they settle, but "guest workers," and they often face significant restrictions in their ability to practice their faith openly. Nonetheless, they're part of the mix in today's Middle East.

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