

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 13, 2012 at 12:53pm

Christians in the Middle East: 'Something to be cherished'



Msgr. John Kozar, President, Catholic Near East Welfare Association, meets with Ignatius Joseph III, Syriac Catholic patriarch of Antioch.

Pope Benedict XVI travels to Lebanon, Sept. 14-16, in part to deliver his exhortation on the 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East. Another key aspect of the trip is that the pope's presence reflects his desire to stand in solidarity with Christians and others, as the civil war in Syria shows no signs of ending and has begun to spill over into neighboring countries.

Msgr. John Kozar, president of the New York City-based Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), will be in Lebanon this week. *NCR* sat down with Kozar to discuss this trip and the work of CNEWA in the Middle East.

Kozar's predecessor, Msrg. Robert Stern attended the 2010 synod as an expert on the Middle East. *NCR's John Allen will be traveling with the pope this week and will be reporting from Lebanon.*

NCR: You are traveling to Lebanon this week. What are your aspirations of your trip?

Kozar: Yes. I am attending at the invitation of Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai, head of the Lebanon-based Maronite Catholic Church. He is in the coordinator's chair for the visit in Lebanon itself. Not only do we have a great working relationship with the Maronites, especially in his person, but I have developed a personal friendship with Patriarch Rai. I've visited him in Lebanon and he's visited here, including in our office. So I am very honored to have received an invitation from him. I very much consider myself a neophyte in terms of the Eastern churches and the reality in the Middle East, the Holy Land. I'm really going in an ongoing role as a student. I want to learn. Of course, there are huge implications when the Holy Father who is coming with a mission, a mission of solidarity more than anything. Solidarity with the church, the Christian churches in the Middle East and in a special way with the Eastern churches because there's so much history and so much of their identity is found in these venues. There is a formal aspect to it as the process of a synod draws to its completion, it is this formal exhortation, and in my words, the Holy Father has convened the synod and the bishops have come and shared their experiences and with the Holy Father's prayerful reflection and insight, this is the end product of a number of years of collaboration and dialogue.

Now we look to the Holy Father. He has given us hints, I think. He does want to demonstrate this great solidarity with this part of the world, especially the Christian dimension. I want to feel that. I want to be there as this exhortation unfolds as he shares his insights. I would imagine that he really wants to show not only to Christians in the Middle East and others there, that the presence of the church is something to be cherished. To be cherished not only by its own membership, but by others of other faiths, such as Muslims, that the church historically has great gifts to share. And I think he's reaching out to the diaspora where the Christians from the Middle East, from these very historic churches, very cherished, that he looks to the diaspora to continue the great legacy of these churches, whether it's the liturgical, the spiritual, the devotional realities that are found there.

There is also a dimension that I am very interested in. The Holy Father is going to stress the need for good formation. This pertains to everybody. If we look at Europe now, if we look at the United States, that's a need that's always there, to evangelize ourselves. If we emigrate, we want to bring the best of our faith tradition and we don't want it to either slip away or be assimilated into something else. You always want to relate to another culture and community, but you don't want to lose what you should cherish.

When the Holy Father convened the synod he invited some of the diaspora leadership to come. Another piece of this is personal. I've been able to meet a lot of the players in my visits in the Middle East. I call them friends. Some I have not yet met but they are in partnership with CNEWA. We work for them and through them. It's nice to be back with the family so to speak, my Eastern family. So this is my broad impression from my heart and my longing to be there and the experience I look forward to.

NCR: Being with the Holy Father will be the highlight. What else will be included on your itinerary?

Kozar: There will be a number of ancillary events, which I believe I will be invited to attend. There's going to be a meeting with youth. Another part of the trip is attending the visits the Holy Father will make to Eastern churches and patriarchs and so forth. I look forward to that because in their diversity is a unity. I am coming to appreciate that more and more. In addition, it's sort of a coming home because CNEWA has a very active office in Beirut and presence in Lebanon, in Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine. I will be with Issam Bishara, the head of our office and the other part of our team there, our family. I'm hoping to have a brief opportunity, maybe one day and half and visit one or more of our projects and institutions in order to give me a better appreciation of the great partnership we have in

Lebanon.

NCR: One can't speak about a trip to Lebanon without speaking about Syria. CNEWA is active in Syria. Can you speak to the day-to-day reality of CNEWA in Syria?

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Kozar: We serve the church in Syria and others through our office in Beirut, Lebanon. It hasn't been expedient. There's already a spill-over of violence in Lebanon itself. To be honest, there is a concern for the Holy Father's safety. I've had people express to me a concern for my safety. That's understood. People historically take sides. You are either with us or against us. Which side of the line are you on? I know this exists. One nice thing is that I spent some quality time with the Archbishop Mario Zenari, the papal nuncio in Syria [during a recent trip to Rome]. He categorically stated that up to that point, late June 2012, there was no documented incident of anti-Christian, anti-Catholic events transpiring in Syria. And so, conversely, he went out of his way to share with me and some others, that in fact the presence of the church there even though it is dodging bombs and mortar shells, crossfires, that the church has a very historic and enduring presence and it has a very important role of peacemaking. It was even accepted by the two conflicting sides. He gave us a couple of illustrations and he was in daily contact with some of these parties. A lot of what CNEWA would like to do, we can't do. Things are in a war zone. We can't actively talk about reconstruction. We're very strongly committed to helping with emergency relief for the refugees.

With respect to the refugee programs, we always try to partner with the local church that is on the scene, whether it's in Syria or in Lebanon or in Iraq. In Syria, you can imagine, it's most challenging because refugees are on the move. In Lebanon, there are thousands of refugees. In Iraq, there are thousands of refugees.

NCR: Is CNEWA involved in Jordan or in Turkey where most of the refugees are located?

Kozar: In Lebanon especially and we are in a supportive role in Jordan. We have been for a long-time in a supportive role with the Iraqi refugees coming into Jordan. We in the U.S. think the Iraq conflict is over, but there are huge movements of people who end up in Jordan in large part. We are there in a supportive role. Always wanting to do more. Importantly, we seek the guidance of the local churches. Sometimes the supportive role might be in financially assisting them or offering a different dimension of planning, sometimes it's maybe in a technical way in which we might connect them with other agencies or governments that might be able to offer some kind of material program support. What we try to stress that what we do is in partnership with the local church.

NCR: Is CNEWA activities in Lebanon affected by the spill-over of the Syrian violence?

Kozar: Practically, the violence limits our mobility to get to some of the venues where we help. It limits some of the institutions which we support. There are strains because of the refugees fleeing the violence. They need more help, such as housing. It hasn't impeded us from or prohibited us from working. CNEWA and the Catholic church have a good name in the country.

NCR: Will the Holy Father offer concrete strategies for Christian leaders to take a leading role in developing a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria?

Kozar: The Holy Father's choice of Lebanon is important. Lebanon is like a bright light in my mind.

Lebanon has, despite all of its civil wars, all of the clashes and all of the suffering and armed encampments, and all of the signs and symbols of this bloody past, Lebanon through the grace of God put together an environment of not only tolerance, but really of an environment of mutual respect and even mutual support. I don't think there is anything else like it in that whole part of the world.

All of these religious families, all of these different faith dimensions, many Christians, some non-Christians, and a government, somehow they demonstrate a respect that they have to if they are to move forward. There has been a really compelling example. I think the leadership of Patriarch Rai has been important. I've heard first-hand stories of him coming into Muslim villages and staying until midnight in order to speak to every single person who wanted to come and talk to him. The personal attention given to everyone [by Patriarch Rai] and the respect given to him reflects the spirit of Christians, especially the Maronites, because they are the big Christian group, they can demonstrate the role of peacemakers, that we have to love everybody. We have a great heritage there. Christians go way, way back.

NCR: Can you discuss the need for formation while at the same time the need to avoid the sense of becoming tribal?

Kozar: From my experience, the tribal reality is very much part and parcel in rural circumstances. We don't want to assault the best of 'tribe' as family, as history, as customs, as faith, we don't want to assault that. But, I think we have to maybe elevate it sometimes that the expression of their faith, whether it is their liturgical presence and participation, their spiritual participation, their devotional practice, their social realm, that we always want to, using the overriding principals that the church can offer, we want to invite people to learn a little bit more. Maybe one's history has been short-circuited. To be able to cherish and really celebrate with not just nostalgia but with being well-informed. To celebrate your identity. And on the other hand, you are part of this great family of God, part of the Christian family. There are issues of governance and how that plays out. I think the Holy Father being there is a sign of unity. It's no secret whether it's in the Catholic-Christian dimension, or the Orthodox dimension, there's internal tensions, governance issues, how bishops and patriarchs come to their office. You bring in the diaspora here in the U.S. or Canada or Europe. Some of these Eastern traditions are really growing quickly because of the immigration in places like Paris, Stockholm, London. Canada has big, relatively new congregations of immigrants from some of these areas. We want them to cherish, maintain and celebrate their heritage, while at the same time that they are Canadians now, they are citizens to be in this country or in Europe, but we want them to become well-informed because they become missionaries. This is a blessing of the emigration. These people who have suffered or felt there was no future for them, they become emissaries for the faith. Another piece to me that is surprising is that there are vocations in the actual historic venues and in the diaspora. In Canada, these churches have vocations.

NCR: Is CNEWA connected to the diaspora?

Kozar: Yes, for example in Canada. The CNEWA office in Canada has a very strong working relationship with the diaspora communities, especially the Ukrainians, the Chaldeans, Maronites. They are all in the process of being visited by the patriarchs, the major archbishops, and even from Southern India with the Syro-Malabars. The Canadian bishops of the Eastern tradition are a little more directly connected, as they are recent immigrants themselves. They bring a dynamism there.

NCR: What is the scope of CNEWA in the region?

Kozar: We're talking about being invited to respond to the needs of thousands of people in many ways in educational support we give, in healthcare support, in the formation of clergy, sisters. In community development, in humanitarian aid, in catechesis, a whole realm of service typically how the church serves all over the world. We mirror that on behalf of the Holy Father in this part of the world.

NCR: The 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East, there is a balance of rights for religious minorities and for citizenship, which seems to be a new concept in the Middle East. What does CNEWA encourage, especially for Christians in the Middle East in terms of their role in their communities?

Kozar: We want to inspire Christians to look upon anything they say or do as a vocation. The vocation to be a Christian is first of all a vocation to follow Christ, and that implies immediately all of what Christ has shared with us, which would be people of peace, to be people who are kind and forgiving and reaching out and not vindictive and not an angry people, a generous people, but a people that can correct and be able to speak in the public forum who can offer fraternal correction and good example. All of those things. It's the vocation of the Christian. We are trying to say that by your lives you are Christians. We have some heroic examples of that of people who have given their lives in martyrdom.

NCR: Is it fair to say that CNEWA's clinics, services and different kind of activities are areas where there is not confrontation, Christians and non-Christians can actually engage one another.

Kozar: I'd say that where we might support a clinic or a hospital, it's not that we have to see a baptismal certificate. No, we do what Christ himself would do. We reach out to everyone without distinction of class or religion and a consistency in doing that. That isn't a new twist. It's been part and parcel of the missionary outreach of the church and we help to fill peoples' stomachs or cure their ills, and we might in the process mention the name of Jesus or we might not, but we are always representing Him, always we are who we are. I've had experiences in the Middle East where Muslims would come up to me and say that we love you, we love the sisters or talk about our church as their church, our school is their school. Our clinic is their clinic.

In every venue I visit, I can't sing enough the praises of the religious sisters. They are the heroes. They are the foot soldiers so often. Singling out the sisters for a minute, their abiding gentle presence really demonstrates in the most human way what peacemaking is all about. There is no greater security than when a baby is held in the arms of their mother. I would say that what I have seen so many times with sisters, that there is no greater security than when a sister holds someone in their arms either literally or figuratively. That's when the Catholic church really shines.

[Tom Gallagher is a regular contributor to the NCR and lead writer for the newspaper's Mission Management column.]

Online Resources:

To read a recent CNEWA report about its efforts in Syria, click here.

To learn more about Patriarch Rai and the form of government in Lebanon, click here.

To learn more about the 2010 Synod of Bishops on the Middle East, click here.

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