

Synod Notebook: Africans push for balance on Islam

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 19, 2012 NCR Today
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At a synod of bishops in which there's been considerable angst about the rise of Islam, including the radicalism of some currents and its strong missionary drive, three African voices Thursday underlined that things aren't always so bad, and made a strong case for Christian/Muslim cooperation.

Two came from an especially unexpected locale: Nigeria, a country rocked by serious Muslim/Christian tensions fueled by the militant "Boko Haram" movement, which is allegedly responsible for some 10,000 deaths over the last decade, including an estimated 620 during the first six months of 2012. It's made a specialty of attacking Christian targets, including churches during Sunday services.

The comments came in written interventions submitted yesterday, meaning speeches that weren't read from the floor but are nevertheless part of the record. Sometimes these written interventions come from bishops who weren't necessarily planning to speak, but feel compelled to respond to something that's emerged in the synod discussions.

It's not that the Nigerian bishops are in denial about the perils of Islamic radicalism. Bishop John John Ebebe Ayah of Ogoja said yesterday that sometimes Christian life in his country, given the menace from Boko Haram, is "a pilgrimage of faith with the Lord Jesus to Calvary."

Yet Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja insisted that contrary to media images, "Christians in Nigeria do not see themselves as being under any massive persecution by Muslims.

"Our population of about 160 million is made up of Christians and Muslims in equal number and influence. We have not done too badly in living peacefully together in the same nation," Onaiyekan said.

Arguing that Nigeria has learned some lessons about Christian/Muslim relations that may be useful for the rest of the world, Onaiyekan said that key among them is the realization that "there are many kinds of Muslims."

"We need to know our Muslim neighbors and keep an open mind to those who are friendly," Onaiyekan said, adding "they are in the majority."

"We have to work together to make sure that the fanatics do not dictate the agenda of our mutual relations, pushing us to be enemies of one another," he said.

The core challenge, the Nigerian prelate said, is reconciling the global missionary aspirations of both Islam and Christianity with the reality of being destined to live together, and needing to find ways to do that peacefully.

"Most of our problems," Onaiyekan said, "are caused by the reckless utterances and activities of extremist fringe groups on both sides of the divide."

Ayah echoed Onaiyekan's argument, pointing out that "not only Christians have lost their lives from the bombs

and bullets unleashed by Boko Haram, but a good number of Muslims too.?

“Not every Muslim cherishes what Boko Haram is seeking to perpetuate in Nigeria,” Ayah said. “Many admire the Christian virtues of love and peace, which they claim are equally enshrined in the Koran.”

Faced with threats from radical currents such as Boko Haram, Ayah called on Catholics “to exercise patience in our dealings with those who oppose and fight against our interests, as well as not resorting to violence as a retaliatory measure.”

That said, Ayah also underlined the difficulties of living cheek by jowl with a sizeable population of Muslims that other speakers have accented.

“Many of our Muslim brothers and sisters long to convert to the Christian faith, but cannot achieve this for fear of losing their lives,” he said.

Bishop Charles Mahuza Yava of the Comore Islands, which he said is “99.9 percent Muslim,” said that in his country Christians are considered “Kafirs,” an Arabic pejorative term meaning, he said, a “miscreant, an unbeliever, an ingrate or more an infidel.”

The Comore Islands are an archipelago off Africa's south-eastern coast, with a population just under one million.

“We are more tolerated than accepted,” Mahuza said. “The Catholic Christian religion is considered like the Western religion.”

In that context, Mahuza said, inter-religious dialogue is essentially impossible, so the challenge is simply to build friendships with Muslims.

“These relationships of friendship are possible and do exist,” Mahuza said. “This is where we can discover that Islam is tolerant. It is fanaticism and fundamentalism that give it a completely different appearance.”

Like the Nigerians, Mahuza made this case for friendship at the same time he acknowledged its perils. For instance, he said, when a Catholic woman on the Comore Islands marries a Muslim man, her new family often won't permit her to practice her faith or pressures her to become a Muslim “with the result, he said, that “many end up practicing neither of these religions.”

The Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization is now in the stage of working in small language groups, charged with preparing draft propositions to the pope based on the discussions so far.

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