NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Embattled Syrians hope Argentine pope can broker peace

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 21, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis
Rome

Catholics everywhere are holding their breath to see what Francis might do as pope, but arguably nowhere is the sense of expectation more intense than in Syria, where the country's small Christian minority is literally fighting for its life.

On Thursday, the Chaldean Catholic bishop of Aleppo floated the idea that perhaps a pope from Argentina, who isn't perceived as aligned with any of the major parties to the Syrian conflict, could be the one to cajole major powers such as the United States and Russia to get serious about peace.

"What we want is for the fighting to stop and reconciliation to begin, and if he can help us, it would be a great gift," said Bishop Antoine Audo in an interview with *NCR*.

On Wednesday, Patriarch Gregory III Laham of Antioch announced he'd written Francis to warn him that violence across the Middle East, especially in Syria, is putting the region's Christian minority at risk.

Few Catholic leaders are better positioned to understand that threat than the 67-year-old Audo. Aleppo lies smack in the middle of the conflict zone, and its Christian community has been especially devastated by the violence. Audo estimates that to date, roughly one-quarter of his faithful have fled the country.

According to U.N. estimates, 70,000 Syrians have lost their lives since the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad began two years ago, which works out to 149 Syrians killed every day. On March 6, the number of Syrians who had applied for refugee status hit 1 million, while 2.5 million people are thought to be internally displaced.

Audo, who has led the church in Aleppo since 1992, is a Jesuit like Pope Francis. He's currently in Rome for meetings with Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based federation of Catholic charities, which has launched an appeal for $7.7 billion to support humanitarian programs in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

On background, Vatican sources told *NCR* that Pope Francis may shortly dispatch a senior cardinal as his personal envoy to Syria, in part to promote a negotiated settlement among the warring parties and in part to reassure the local Catholic community of the pope's concern.

Audo is scheduled to take part in a Mass on Thursday night at the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere to pray for peace in Syria. He sat down Thursday morning for an interview at the Vatican offices of Caritas Internationalis.

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As a Jesuit, do you know Pope Francis personally?

I've heard about him over the years, but I've never met him personally.

What do you know about his background on the Middle East?

I think that he has some links with the Middle East through the presence of Middle Eastern Christians in Argentina. As archbishop of Buenos Aires, he was responsible for the Catholic Oriental churches there. He knows some bishops and priests, some families. Of course, you saw that bishops from the Middle East were with him for his inaugural Mass as he went down to the crypt of Peter. As a Jesuit, he also has an awareness of the Middle East because of the society. He knows there are Jesuits in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, in the Holy Land and Iraq, and so on. Every Jesuit knows that.

Does this pope bring anything special in terms of an ability to help the Christians in the Middle East?

I hope that he will do something directly for us. Of course, every pope has his own personality, his own originality. This pope is very concerned for the poor; he's very simple; he's a man of peace. On the other hand, the Catholic church is more than a pope. It's a tradition, including the Second Vatican Council and its theology. The pope works inside this tradition, adding his own personality.

Today, what is the situation facing Christians in Syria?

Like all Syrians, we're facing the problem of massive insecurity. Every day there's fighting, bombing, kidnappings, car bombs and so on. It creates a situation of fear, and Christians face that as a minority and so they feel themselves to be very weak. We live in a tribal society, so when there's no state, no government to defend the principle of citizenship, the people organize themselves by family groups. Christians don't generally have that form of organization because they want to think of themselves as citizens. The result is that they're leaving, thinking about immigration. That's our biggest problem and source of sadness about the situation.

How many of your people have left?

I can give you some examples. There's a town in the northeast of Syria where we have a Chaldean parish with around 200 families. The parish priest told me a few days ago that 50 families have left the parish, which means roughly one-quarter of the people. That's probably a good percentage estimate for other places ... Aleppo, Damascus, everywhere, for all the Christians in Syria.

You've been quoted as saying that Christians are not being specifically targeted for attacks, but we read reports from Christians who say they do feel singled out for religious reasons. What's the reality?

We have to make a distinction. At a general level, Christians are not persecuted for the fact of being Christians. There are cases, however, when they do become targets. For instance, armed groups sometimes kidnap Christians because they think Christians have got money, and so they can demand ransom. One month ago, two young priests were kidnapped on the way from Aleppo to Beirut, and the kidnappers have asked for money to let them go. Right now, they're still being held.

Are these Catholic priests?
One is Orthodox and one is Armenian Catholic. This event has really troubled Christian society in Syria, because everybody knows that two priests have been kidnapped. There's another priest who was kidnapped in Horan, near Damascus, and I met him just two or three weeks ago after he was freed. He told me what happened ... his family paid something like U.S. $100,000 to get him back.

The kidnappers were factions within the rebel forces?

Yes, armed groups among the rebels. It's easy to target Christians for this sort of thing because Christians are not organized as fighting groups or tribes that will take revenge. They also think that Christians have a lot of money, that the church can ask for help from the outside. It's not really a war against Christians, but in this general situation of war and insecurity Christians [are] a weak people and can be exploited.

Another situation came up in Homs, where rebel forces took up positions in the Christian neighborhoods in the center of the city. The army launched an attack, and there was tremendous destruction. Something like 50,000 Christians in Homs and the surrounding region were obliged to flee. It was a catastrophe for these Christians and for the church. Is that fanaticism against Christians? Was it just a political or military decision? We can't say.

As the church, we don't want to speak about persecution. We avoid this interpretation of events.

Why?

Because we want to stay. We don't want to give the impression that Muslims in Syria are persecuting Christians because that's not the tradition inside Syria. Perhaps there are influences from the outside promoting fanaticism, but that's not the general mentality of the Syrian people.

The rebels are made up of many different forces in addition to the Free Syrian Army.

There's al-Nusra, Al-Qaida, a lot of them.

Are Christians especially afraid of these other groups?

I can say that we want to live in peace with the Muslim people, and there's a long tradition of understanding and mutual respect. We don't want the fanaticism these groups promote. We're not used to it. Generally, Christians fear the domination of this kind of people. Our view is that they don't come from a Syrian tradition, but they're being exported here.

What's the solution?

It's got to be dialogue, a political solution. The two sides have to sit down together and to choose peace in Syria, not just the domination of one group over the other. It's the only way to reconciliation. At this stage, I think only the world's major powers -- Russia, the United States, China and Europe -- can broker a solution. They've got do it, however, by not acting just on the basis of their political and economic interests.

Can you envision peace in Syria if Assad remains in power?

For some people, the answer may be yes. It's still a possibility. Personally, I don't know. I don't defend any individual or any regime. I choose Syria, meaning reconciliation. We have to support the sense of citizenship, including freedom of religion, to resist this tribal mentality and hatred in the heart. That's the vocation of Christians in Syria.

What concrete can the church accomplish in Syria? Can you help bring about peace?

Honestly, we can't do a lot. We're a small minority and nobody really listens to us, although everybody wants to use us. What we can do is to give a good example, first of all in terms of citizenship, respect for everybody. All Syrians know this is the attitude of Christians, without personal interests. Also, we can give good information to the Holy See, the United Nations, for embassies when they ask us for objective information. In turn, we can ask them to do something for Syria.

What can the church outside Syria do to be of help to you?

The war is producing an economic crisis, which means that everybody is becoming poor. Support from the different organizations such as Caritas, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and Aid to the Church in Need is very important. Inside Syria, we coordinate this work to make our work precise and to support the poorest among the people.

So if a Catholic in the United States asks what he or she can do, the answer is to support one of these organizations?

I think so, yes, support these Catholic organizations. Also, it's important to have good information about what's really happening in Syria. One should avoid acting out of emotion and really seek the truth.

Where should we go for that information?

Ask the Syrian people, those inside the country.

Don't trust the media?

Yes!

As a fellow Jesuit, have you thought about asking to see Pope Francis while you're in Rome to share these things with him?

As a Jesuit, I don't want to impose myself on him. Somebody told me yesterday I should ask to see him, because as Jesuit he would see me. I don't want to do that. If he wants, he'll ask me, and I'll certainly be ready anytime, but I don't want to pressure him. It's not in my nature ... as Jesuits, we respect each other.

I want to say that Benedict XVI did a lot when he went to Lebanon [last September]. He spoke three times about Syria: on the airplane, at the youth rally and during the Mass. I met him a week before his resignation in the Vatican, at the time of the election for our patriarchate. I thanked him for all he was doing for Syria, and he said: "*Magari! Se poteva fare di più*." ("Oh my! I wish more could have been done.")

Would you like to see Pope Francis come to Syria?

Yes, of course, but we have to wait and prepare. For a visit of the pope to be realistic, there has to be some reconciliation and some stability. I hope that one day it's possible.

Right now, what's more important is that the pope be very well informed about what's happening in Syria by the church itself, as well as his contacts with the Jesuits and the Father General, who knows the situation very well.

Beyond physically going to Syria, is there something else dramatic the pope could do right away to raise awareness?

If he speaks about peace in Syria, that would be a very big sign for us. In addition, he could invite the patriarchs of the Middle East or the bishops of Syria to a meeting to ask for our reflections, which could move something in the society. He could also send an important cardinal to represent him in Syria, to visit communities. It would help Christians to stay, to no longer feel that they're alone. That's very important.

Patriarch Gregory III said he's written to Pope Francis to say that Christians across the Middle East are at great risk. Are you glad he did that?

Yes, because if the insecurity continues, Christians will leave just as they have in Iraq.

Is it fair to say that Christians in the Middle East are waiting for Pope Francis to do something big?

What we want is for the fighting to stop and reconciliation to begin, and if he can help us, it would be a great gift. Of course, we're in a situation that depends heavily on political decisions, especially by the United States and Russia, with Israel in the middle.

Maybe an Argentine pope could be the one to bring these parties together?

I hope so.

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