



THE MIDDLE EAST SYNOD

CHRISTIANS, THE MIDDLE EAST AND A SYNOD!

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Admittedly, and perhaps also fortunately in some cases, not too much media hype has yet surrounded what is formally described as The Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops. But this synod, whether in its original Greek significance of syn-hodos (a way together) or in its more vernacular understanding of an ecclesiastical council of bishops, is now well under way at the Vatican in Rome and will last for two weeks until 24th October. It is being held under the theme “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness” and draws its scriptural inspiration from the Acts of the Apostles that ‘Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32).

If one wishes to acquire more specialist knowledge about the way synods are held, as well as refer to the initial guidelines and stated aims of this particular assembly, I would suggest an Internet search in order to explore further how the Lineamenta and Instrumentum Laboris qualify this event and the manner in which they enunciate its background let alone its objectives.

But let me first start off with a few short lines of history. The original seed for this event was sown on 19 September 2009 when Pope Benedict XVI announced the convocation of a special assembly for the Middle East that would demonstrate the interest of the Universal Churches in the Churches of the Middle East as much as address the anxiety that the Pope felt for those Christian communities in the Middle East. His decision was made public after he had completed his pilgrimage to the Holy Land (Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories for the purposes of this article). And as Archbishop Nikola Eteroviç, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, wrote later in the preface to the Lineamenta, this assembly taking place at the Vatican [this week] underlines how many people consider that “the present-day situation in the Middle East is much like that of the primitive Christian community in the Holy Land”, which had to face difficulties and persecution. So the first focus of the synod is meant “to confirm and strengthen the members of the Catholic Church in their Christian identity, through the Word of God and the Sacraments” whilst the second one is “to foster ecclesial communion among the sui juris Churches, so that they can bear witness to Christian life in an authentic, joyous and attractive way”.

Indeed, the initial guidelines in the Lineamenta initially set the ground for a series of responses and feedbacks from both the church and political leaders of the Middle East and led to the subsequent Instrumentum Laboris that Pope Benedict XVI presented on 6th June to the representatives of the Catholic episcopate of the Middle East in Nicosia during his apostolic visitation to Cyprus. The document suggests the five challenges facing Christians in the Middle East, namely political conflict, freedom of religion and conscience, Christians and developments in contemporary Islam, emigration from the whole region and finally the immigration of Christians to the Middle East from the rest of

the world. The aims of the synod are perhaps simultaneously given an upbeat as well as downbeat dual impression since the document concludes with an exhortation for local Christian believers, "Do not be afraid, little flock. You have a mission; the growth of your country and the vitality of your Church depend on you. This will only be achieved with peace, justice and equality for all citizens!"

So will this special assembly resolve the problems, concerns or issues bedevilling Christians across a whole region? As someone who hails from the region itself and who has worked for long decades with most churches of the Middle East let alone with many of their affiliated institutions, I would like to place this whole event in its more pragmatic context.

Beginning with a few seminal impressions, let me say that this assembly reflects a veritable Who's Who of the Catholic Church in the Middle East - including delegates from Turkey and Iran. Perhaps this impressive presence was to be expected since the host is no more a distinguished person than the Pope himself. But what was equally eye-catching for me is that additional to the Catholic delegates with all the hierarchs, experts and auditors, there also are regional representatives - decidedly as observers - of Orthodox and Reform Churches such as Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Lutheran as well as Muslim and Jewish representatives the likes of Ayatollah Sayyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Ahmadabadi from Iran, Dr Mohammad Sammak from Lebanon and Rabbi David Rosen from Jerusalem. Moreover, there are representatives from many other Catholic conferences of the world - including Archbishop Patrick Kelly of Liverpool from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) in view of the annual efforts of coordination that this conference deploys in Israel-Palestine as well as its solidarity with Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region.

But let me go behind the scenes awhile and overtake all those who are busily praying, meeting, talking, discussing, contradicting, strategising, worrying, organising and equally enjoying the various ancillary programmes of the synod as well as the redoubtable delights of the Eternal City. What are they exactly hoping to achieve come the 24th of October when the assembly reaches its conclusion? Having reflected upon their communion and witness over a span of two weeks, will they be faithful to the multiple and variegated realities of the region? Will they have dealt with the deep fissures within the different societies? Will they have got a handle on the haemorrhaging of indigenous Christians from almost every Middle Eastern country represented at the Vatican assembly today? And having achieved all this, will they then still succeed in proclaiming in one confident voice - as did the apostles before them - that 'they are all of one heart and soul?'

If I look at the Middle East today, I can detect signs of hope and despair in equal measure. So let me share some of those signs with my readers and strive to incarnate their relevance to the communities of the faithful in the region.

- I am acutely conscious of the encouraging fact that indigenous Christians - overwhelmingly Arab in their ethnicity, but with some Iranians, Turks, Jews, Armenians and Greeks amongst others too - have continued their faith-centred presence and witness in the region. Granted, most commentators worth their salt have already pointed out that the number of Christians has dropped dramatically over the past few decades from just under 25% to just over 5% region-wide. Yet, despite those dwindling numbers, alarming as they are in some instances, Christians are still very much present in the biblical land where their faith was born over two millennia ago. Moreover, their institutions - hospitals, schools, old peoples' homes, hospices, charities, missions or ecumenical organisations - continue their labour to date.

- I am equally aware that this synod is strictu sensu a Catholic one and that the larger number of Orthodox Churches and the much smaller numbers of Reform Churches region-wide are not participating proactively in the deliberations or recommendations but are nonetheless present as observers, auditors or ecumenical fellows.
- It is also important to underline that local Christianity in the region is decidedly not monolithic. Whilst it is true that there are some core tenets that unite most Christian churches, there are also large divergences in the overall positions of those communities from country to country. The concerns - and thereby priorities and orientations - of a Lebanese Christian today are not necessarily similar to those of a Palestinian, an Egyptian, an Iraqi or other Christians from the region. This is why it might be possible to emerge from the synod with some broad brushstrokes but each country and community must nevertheless address its own specific fears, concerns, hopes, needs and wants.
- One common denominator that most certainly runs across all Christian communities is that of emigration. This phenomenon which has witnessed countless papers and conferences is largely - though not exclusively - due to the regional socio-economic conditions affecting all its peoples. Christians, with their own sense of universal fellowship or umma, as well as contacts and networks, are able to emigrate to the West (largely North America, Australia and Europe) where they have many relatives and friends who would facilitate their transition to a newer world.
- But apart from socio-economic conditions that affect Christians and Muslims alike in many cases, there are also other factors. With Palestinian Christians, for instance, the major compelling force for emigration is an invidious Israeli occupation with its increasingly colonialist let alone racist policies against all non-Jews. For Lebanese Christians, it is the realisation that they have gradually lost their erstwhile dominance within society since the Sykes-Picot partition, let alone the suppurating tensions roiling within their various sectarian communities. Egyptian Christians face problems with a number of Muslims on the one hand and with the state on the other and are disallowed from practising their faith freely and without religious-political interference. But they also have a problem of defining their identity in relation to the whole country and their sense of almost being meta-Arab. In fact, some Egyptian Copts (mostly within the dominant Coptic Orthodox Church) have Pharaonic pretensions just as some Lebanese Christians still retain Phoenician ones. As for Iraq, the socio-economic meltdown goes hand-in-hand with an insidious persecution against all minorities - including Christians - by followers of a small but powerful brand of radical Islam that is politicised, rearing its ugly head everywhere in the region, and which does not subscribe at all to a sense of tolerance or inclusiveness but tries instead to impose a Muslim caliphate in the region that would exclude all infidels.
- Given those divergences, the synod must deal with those communities both individually and severally. However, there are promising examples of conviviality and coexistence in the region - irrespective of the reasons - and I would single out Syria and Jordan as two states that have structured the assenting veneer of a national sense of togetherness.
- When discussing Christians, it is equally helpful to keep a distinction between those of the region and those in the region - those who trace their roots by birth to the land of the Bible and those who come from abroad as missionaries, workers, visitors, tourists or individuals. Much as open hospitality must be shown to the latter group, it is vital to stress that an Englishman who comes to, say, Amman cannot be expected to impose his views upon locals - be they Christian or Muslim - but would rather join with them in a larger Christian fellowship of equals whose centre remains Christ Himself. In other words, a koinonia of believers working together, not a colonisation by religion or confession. This is why I posit that the Gulf - with its growing expatriate Christian communities - should have been represented in the synod. After all, Qatar is an aquiline albeit timid sign of hope and a potential exemplar for Gulf countries.

Those are some of the many truths that should inhabit the daily consciousness of those delegates meeting in the Vatican for the next few days. After all, if we cannot be truthful to ourselves, surely we cannot be truthful to others either. Yet, apart from those signs of hope and despair as I perceive them, I would now also like to propose a few thoughts - not necessarily only for the Living Stones or participants themselves but perhaps much more so for the larger Eurocentric readership of my article.

- As Christians, is our grave concern for the dropping numbers across the region relevant let alone justified to our understanding of our faith? Or is it the quality of our witness that should matter much more? After all, the Early Church consisted of a motley bunch of unsophisticated and largely illiterate followers of Jesus who managed to evangelise huge parts of the world. So do we need to be fixated on numbers? The answer perhaps lies in the middle ground between an 'aye' and a 'nay' since numbers are not the essence of Christianity but when those numbers are reduced due to extrinsic factors - from occupation to harassment - it behoves the synod to ring one or two alarm bells - just as the Middle East Council of Churches has done without much effect for the better part of four decades.
- The numbers also go hand-in-hand with the very ministry of those Christians. Our teachings - drawn largely from the Bible and patristic writings (let alone the Second Vatican Council and the Papal Encyclicals for Catholics) - focus on diakonia and social justice, reconciliation, bridge-building, dialogue, peacemaking and peace-building. The essence of our faith does not lie in an over-inflated sense of piousness - or worse piety - but finds its definition in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So what we Christians do - our witness - defines how we are - our Communion - as part of a wider reality whose real kingdom draws its essence from a power that transcends borders, identities and diversities.
- It is crucial to underline that this synod is not a platform against Islam - whether one borne out of fear and paranoia or based on dogmatic grounds. In fact, I was quite irked by some media coverage on the opening day of the synod when few journalists strained every sinew to lead their interviewees toward admitting that Christians - at least the Catholics amongst them, although this subtlety got lost in the translation! - are huddling together in Rome to protect themselves from a seemingly rapacious Islam. In fact, I even watched Hiwar Maftouh, a programme on Al-Jazeera with the usually impressive anchor Ghassan bin Jiddo, in which one disappointing subtext of his interview with HB Patriarch Gregorios III Lahham (of the Greek Melkite Church) and the two other Lebanese lay experts was an endeavour to probe the issue of Islamophobia within Middle Eastern communities. So let me reassure Al-Jazeera and other media outlets that the real fear within many Christian societies and communities is definitely not about Islam as a faith but about a brand of political Islam that frightens many Arab Muslims as much as it does many Arab Christians. In fact, there is also a realisation that those forces are often used or manipulated as political pawns by different regimes. However, this is not equivalent to a crusade against Islam - as the likes of Osama bin Laden would malevolently wish to portray for their own sinister designs - nor is it a stand against Muslims. In my opinion, it simply wishes to bring support to those regional communities so they continue their life, presence and witness with freedom and dignity.
- Let me also add that most Christians at times run the risk of allowing themselves to be transported into a heady world of religion that defines, and then feeds and sustains, on power. Power - whether exercised over others or upon oneself - becomes dubious if it is the dominant prism through which we witness to our faith. Power is useful; it is even quite helpful at times to create order, but with it also come responsibilities and an awareness of how or when to exercise it. To bemoan a loss of power in a secular world is wholly justifiable. But it becomes double-edged when applied with impunity in a religious setting. We Christians in the East have harshly suffered throughout history the consequences of the quest for power by Western Christianity. Today, we are witnessing similar - albeit diametrically

opposite - quests for political power by some Jewish and Muslim groupings let alone by some US Evangelical Christians who dismiss Eastern Christianity as faulty or redundant. So the synod has a duty to channel away from the theme of post-modern critique thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault who suggest that all claims to truth, including those of theology, are merely secret bids for power. Instead, it should channel the truth toward an apolitical appreciation that real power lies in powerlessness and that the cross gives value to the weaker and poorer brother, for whom Christ died - as St Paul also makes clear in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 8:11).

- Finally, let me end with a theological question that often confronts me. What is the real significance of the land to Christians? How important is it for our faith, and how organic is it to an understanding of faith? How do we as Christians distinguish ourselves from Judaism and Islam in our perception of land? What is our Temple? And what are the ramifications of the answer to that question as we turn the Holy Bible from the Old to the New Testament?

Although I believe this synod is occurring a tad too late, it is still per se a sign of hope. But will it just be a chattering - and fairly costly - forum? Or will its recommendations usher in a true sense of renewal that is not only quintessential to faith but one that would also contribute toward a qualitative difference for all the ordinary men and women of the region and in the process sensitise the foreign policy decisions of major policy-makers so they act accordingly? Or will it merely end with the realisation that the temporal realities of our world today are stronger than all our divine or spiritual realities put together?

In his Letters and Papers from Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "We have learned, rather too late, that action comes not from thought but from a readiness for responsibility."

Are we collectively ready to assume this onerous responsibility?

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