



THE MIDDLE EAST SYNOD

POST-SYNODAL THOUGHTS

DIAGNOSIS OR CURE?

It feels almost like an eternity, and yet it was only two short weeks ago that I wrote my commentary entitled Christians, the Middle East and a Synod. I set out the regional background to this 23rd Synod (since 1967) that had brought together at the Vatican some 270 bishops, priests, religious men and women, auditors and lay experts to discuss the communion and witness of Christians in the Middle East. In my piece, I also wondered whether the delegates - who in their majority were from the Eastern Churches - would simply rehearse those facts that have become quite familiar to many of us, raise more questions than answer them and then indulge in generalisations rather than in serious analysis. Or would they surprise us and propose a lofty vision for the Christians of this conflict-infested region and couple it ably with a robust long-term strategy for action.

In the end, I believe the two-week assembly failed to meet the highest hopes of some over-optimists whilst at the same time it disproved the lowest expectations of some over-pessimists. In fact, it strode a middle ground of pragmatism and realism, and ventured quite proactively - vocally at times - in some areas, pulled back in others and became risk-averse when the direct political heat became too sensitive. In short, it managed to reflect the chequered realities of a whole region.

The daily debates themselves - focusing simultaneously on ad intra (internal) and ad extra (external) issues - were quite useful in pooling the participants' hopes and disappointments. For one, this synod was distinctly ad orientem in its overall ambit and as such gave a strong platform to the different Eastern Churches in terms of their own rights, identities and issues. In short, the opinion of those church leaders region-wide assumed due weight, time and space within the larger universal realities of the Roman Catholic Church. Equally importantly, the daily interaction facilitated the physical meeting of all those church leaders who do not always communicate well or who fail to share their concerns due in some measure to the anaemic nature of ecumenical institutions such as the Middle East Council of Churches or the frail structures of their own churches. Finally, the presence of a number of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant as well as Muslim and Jewish observers or contributors, opened the space of the assembly to a wider - and more critical - outreach. I suppose that some of the credit for this goes to the many organisers themselves who toiled to put together such an august gathering, but it also goes inter alia to Patriarch Antonios Naguib who served as relator, or general secretary, of the Synod.

One veteran commentator, John L Allen Jr. from the National Catholic Reporter, briefed his readers regularly with insightful reviews during the whole synod and provided both substance and colour to the overall proceedings. On 17th October, in Ecumenism a survival strategy in Middle East, he summarised the four-stage strategy of this synod for local Christians:

- To overcome the ‘denominationalism’ that at times mars relations among the Eastern Catholic churches;
- To cajole the dominant Latin tradition within Catholicism to show greater respect, and greater theological and canonical deference, to the Eastern churches;
- To build ecumenical unity with other Christians, especially the Orthodox - partly as a show of unity vis-à-vis both Jews and Muslims, and partly as a way of resisting what are deemed as US-backed “sects” of Evangelical and Pentecostal movements across the region. In fact, it was made implicit that the path to unity between Catholics and Orthodox lies in ‘separating communion from authority’ - a common Orthodox talking point in dialogue with Catholicism that refers to unity in faith but not submission to the jurisdiction of the pope;
- To mobilise Catholics elsewhere, especially in the West, to greater investments of time and treasure in aiding the churches of the Middle East.

But let me start off by reminding readers that the indigenous Christians of the Middle East constitute today 5% or perhaps 6% of a population in excess of 300 million. In many countries, they are challenged by different hardships and quandaries whilst in others they are relatively leading more peaceful and convivial lives. Jordan and Syria always come to mind when referring to this latter category, but it is equally interesting that many Gulf States, where it used to be prohibited even to edify Christian churches, now have fourteen such buildings - most of them on land donated by the rulers of those states.

So where did the Synod go in its overarching direction after two weeks of talking, lecturing, conferencing and conferring with each other as well as with other experts? To begin with pan-regional issues, it condemned violence and terrorism as well as all forms of religious extremism. It also denounced racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Christianism and Islamophobia and called upon the three monotheistic religions to shy away from the notions propagated by the likes of Samuel Huntington or Francis Fukuyama and assume instead their responsibility to promote dialogue and peace between cultures and civilisations.

Crucially, the participants also distinguished - quite correctly and necessarily in view of regional realities - between ‘religion’ and ‘state’. They stressed upon the notion of “positive laicity / laïcité positive” that is often underlined by Pope Benedict XVI - and by French President Nicolas Sarkozy before him - to invoke a form of secularism that recognises the autonomy of the state from direct religious control but that does not necessarily marginalise religion or treat it as an exclusively private domain. In other words, the delegates at the Vatican called for a secularism premised on justice, peace, and respect for the human rights of all peoples and all religions in the Middle East. Interestingly enough on this point, whereas men and women of faith in the West often speak out against a sense of secularism overtaking and diluting their faith-centred precepts, the religious leaders of the Middle East clearly advocated a reverse standpoint that actually encourages secularism. Why? Well, in so doing, they also perhaps sent out a subtle message that secularism is a concept understood and applied differently by Eastern and Western Christian communities. In the West, secularism might denote a marginalisation of clericalism, religion and perhaps even faith. After all, Pope Benedict XIV himself speaks of an “aggressive secularism” in parts of Europe. Conversely, secularism in the East is considered differently as a real-value guarantee of the rights of local Christians within a largely religious and cultural Muslim context.

Going past those broad brushstrokes that are somewhat epistemological, what I believe interests most Middle Easterners - Christians as much as ultimately Jews or Muslims, let alone Europeans - are not so much the detailed minutiae of those debates. After all, they were hardly covered by most

major media outlets anyway. Rather, what matters much more directly to those men and women are the final Nuntius (Message to the People) and the forty-four Propositions that emerged on 22nd October in the XIV General Congregation and the way they could impact their own lives and livelihoods. After all, this Message addresses the aspirations and challenges of many Christians in a region riven by conflict and tensions.

So let me try to lift up succinctly some of those concerns by focusing - for the purposes of this piece - on a few realities in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine in order to provide a modicum of understanding about them.

In Egypt, it has been evident to many observers that there are raw and unresolved tensions between the state and the church. This was put in relief almost three decades ago when the late President Anwar Sadat described himself as the Muslim president of a Muslim country (and therefore appeared to overlook in one swoop the presence of the Copts) and when he also banished Pope Shenouda III to the Monastery of Anba Bishoy in Wadi el Natrun (Nitrian Desert) in September 1981 (he was released by President Hosni Mubarak in 1985). But those tensions are not solely between the state apparatuses and a church, but also between some Muslim and Christian (Coptic) groups. There are occasional flare-ups and demonstrations hither and thither that are ignited for credible or not-so-credible reasons and often lead to violence. Perhaps Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace at the Vatican, articulated one practical consequence of such tensions when he pointed to the fact that some Coptic churches are crumbling but that local political authorities have so far refused to issue permits for building or repairs - something that cannot be said equally of Muslim places of worship or institutions. As such, Turkson's words possibly melded with many other minds in the synod by suggesting that there seems to be a conscious policy to allow the church, and eventually its faithful, to disappear from the country. During some of the side-meetings at the assembly, one fresh example often came up in the conversations. It was the controversy surrounding Anba Bishoy, the patriarchal vicar of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who had reportedly said that the Christian Bible and Qur'an are in basic harmony, and that differences are due to later additions to the Qur'an. His words were however spun in the press as being a hostile suggestion by a Christian prelate that the Qur'an was corrupt. This led to violence on the Egyptian streets - pretty much in the same way it does every time that there are rumours - of forced conversions or marriages or blasphemous practices - that are allowed to spread like wildfire and that stoke further tensions.

Lebanon was another country of particular concern for the participants. In fact, so critical a locus and so symbolic a compass of faith is it for the Christians of the whole world that the late Pope John Paul II had already assembled a special Synod of Bishops from 26 November till 14 December 1995 under the theme of Christ is our Hope: Renewed by His Spirit, in Solidarity We Bear Witness to His Love. During his visit to the country in 1997, he had also stressed that Lebanon is more than a country, Lebanon is a message. In fact, no religious leader receives as much attention as Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, whose leadership is viewed at times as much politically as it is religiously and whose every word is nuanced by the media. In fact, this occurred again during the synod proceedings when he - amongst many other church leaders - was interviewed exclusively by Al-Jazeera at the Maronite College in Rome (broadcast on 30th October) whence he focused on the one million Lebanese Christians who have already emigrated from the country and articulated his concerns about the future of the country. This is perhaps why the Synod participants weighed the challenges facing this tiny country and voiced in their final message the hope that it will be able to enjoy sovereignty over its entire territory, strengthen its national unity and carry on in its vocation to be the model of coexistence between Christians and Muslims, of dialogue between different cultures and religions, and of the promotion of basic public freedoms.

Iraq was of particular concern to the Synod. In fact, one immediate signal of alarm for the country is the fact that the Christian numbers have been decimated in real terms. A community that together constituted roughly 1.5 million faithful in 1991 can hardly speak of more than half a million followers today - be they Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. In other words, Iraq has lost almost two-thirds of its indigenous Christian population since 2004. But Iraqi Christians are also internally displaced, with many of them who hail from Baghdad, Mosul or Basra are now living in the northern Kurdish-controlled parts of the country out of concern for their lives and in quest of their livelihoods let alone for fear of being kidnapped by extremists who often demand - largely unaffordable - ransoms for their release.

This phenomenon of death, violence and kidnapping spares no person or creed and also happens against Muslims - particularly in view of the sectarian tensions - but Christians often feel more affected and disempowered in the face of such adversities due to their numerical weaknesses and lack of adequate protection. Meeting the press in a session organised by CNEWA during the synodal meetings, for instance, Iraqis offered as an example the Dora neighbourhood of Baghdad, which used to be known as the "little Vatican" because of the proliferation of Christian churches and families. It once counted seven churches, two seminaries, and the Pontifical College. Now, all of them are either closed or located elsewhere.

In fact, only today, scores of Iraqi Christians were held hostage during holy mass at the Sayedat al Nejat(Our Lady of Salvation) Church in the Karada neighbourhood of Baghdad (close to the [secure] Green Zone) by a group believed to be affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq, a militant organisation connected to Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. According to the SITE monitoring group, they demanded the release of Al-Qaeda prisoners in Iraqi gaols as well as what they termed female captives held by the Coptic Church in Egypt. The rescue operation resulted in a high toll of deaths from all sides. No wonder then that the synod had called upon the Iraqi authorities to ensure the security and freedom of worship of Iraqi Christian citizens but this is also why a number of Iraqis (at the Vatican, but also on the streets of Baghdad or Mosul let alone in the UNHCR-led camps in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon) felt that the assembly did not go far enough in its emphasis on the future well-being of Christians and that it balked from politicising what they perceive as an inherently religious-political issue. Finally, much concern was also raised about the fate of the Christian community in Israel-Palestine. A truly tiny community that hardly exceeds 1.5 % of the overall population, it is of special significance because it lives and witnesses in the land where the story of the Bible unfolded through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, it is the vignette that highlights the fragilities of a whole region. But this community is equally important in that, unlike Egypt, Lebanon or Iraq, it is a land that is under occupation [by Israel] and therefore its dynamics are centred largely round this oppressive occupation. In fact, some Vatican officials had been quite apprehensive that the church leaders in Rome would focus entirely and too forcefully on the Israeli occupation and in the process jeopardise the tenuous links that draw the Holy See and Israel together on matters ranging from diplomatic relations to the Fundamental Agreement (that has not yet been approved by Israel). Some of those Vatican officials had also quietly admonished the assembly against using the forum for Israel-bashing.

However, the concluding message of the synod referred amply to the deleterious consequences of Israeli occupation: it spoke out against the separation [security] wall, military checkpoints, political prisoners as well as the efforts to alter the demographic balance of Jerusalem. The assembly also called for an independent and sovereign homeland for the Palestinian people where they could live with dignity and security. Correspondingly, it also stressed that Israel should enjoy peace and security within internationally-recognised borders, that the holy city of Jerusalem would acquire its proper status, which respects its particular character, its holiness and the religious patrimony of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions. Finally, it re-affirmed the long-standing commitment of

the Holy See for a two-state-solution. Besides, Proposition 41 also rejected “anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism,” albeit adding the need to distinguish again religion from politics.

However, there were also sprags in the wheels in relation to Israeli-Palestine. One such point of discord emerged because the final message stated that “recourse to theological and Biblical positions which use the Word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable.” This line came in the context of a paragraph on relations with Judaism - which ipso facto intimated that it was exclusively targeting Israel and traditional Jewish claims to the “Promised Land.” But to muddy matters further from an Israeli perspective, one prominent Greek Catholic (Melkite) Archbishop, Kyrillos Salim Bustros, commented on this sentence by stating that Christians cannot speak of the ‘promised land’ as an exclusive right for a privileged Jewish people. In his opinion, he then added, this promise had been nullified by Christ. In other words, there is no longer a concept of one chosen people, but that in Christ as the New Temple all men and women have become the chosen people. For Jews - and many Israelis - this is a political as much as religious taboo and the Jewish reaction was sharp. A number of its religious leaders or commentators focused on this line as an expression of theological supercessionism in that the coming of Christ had ‘cancelled’ God’s covenant with Israel. Daniel Horowitz, for instance, commented that Israelis understand that the Vatican is trying to save oppressed Christian communities that find themselves in an intolerant Islamic milieu, but that must not come at the expense of Israel. In fact, this was a spin in itself too since it was an inaccurate assessment.

Another potential area of dispute during the side meetings of the synod was the promotion of the Kairos Document that was compiled in 2009 by a number of Palestinian Christian clergy and laity and which is critical of Israeli policy. The document suggests that the occupation of land is a sin and that the international community should pursue a disinvestment strategy against Israel that is similar to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. It goes without saying that Israel looks unfavourably upon this document - whose chief authors include the Latin Emeritus Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah. Moreover, this document has been endorsed - but not officially adopted - by the leaders of the thirteen traditional churches in the Holy Land and by a number of churches or church-related organisations in the West.

But with the Synod now over, the different leaders have returned to their countries and are possibly contemplating on the deliberations of those two weeks. Middle East Christians - both clergy and laity - also await the Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation (al-irshad al-rasouli) that usually comes out a year after any synod and that would in this case elaborate upon the Propositions handed to Pope Benedict XVI by the participants as much as point to the way forward for all the churches. In the meantime, what are the larger conclusions that I can draw personally from this special meeting?

- In one sense, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In other words, the success or failure of this synod will depend to some extent on how the local churches will apply its lessons in their own countries since the realities challenging one country could be different from those in another. For instance, I would follow with particular interest the particular consequences of this assembly upon Lebanon, Iraq and Israel-Palestine to assess whether it will have any real and viable impact or whether it will turn into another - largely forgotten or ignored - event not unlike the previous synod on Lebanon that excited initial expectations but eventually led to disillusionment. Yet, the challenge is huge since it became evident during this synod that the local Christians are also increasingly drifting away from their Christian roots. A renewal and re-awakening of the faith and its institutions become quintessential - perhaps similar in substance and mission to the Vatican-based Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelisation - known as a dicastery - that is also meant to trigger a Christian renaissance across the West.

- There were ample debates during this assembly - with almost 3000 written interventions - that distinguished between variables such as 'religion', 'state', 'arabness' and 'democracy'. In my opinion, this sprang from a desire to underline the fact that the Christian regional communities belong to the region and have been part and parcel of it for over two millennia - an accurate descriptive word in Arabic is aqah. In other words, those local Christians are not guests to the Middle East but its original stewards. So any discussion about the 'orthodoxy' of the indigenous Christian presence becomes disingenuous: as part owners of those lands, they must enjoy equal rights and share equal responsibilities as their fellow Muslims and Jews. Bluntly put, they should not be compelled to make draconian choices between invisibility and exile. Nor should they be used as scapegoats or easy preys by some Arab regimes that increase the pressure upon the Christian communities in their own countries or limit their rights and freedoms in order to pander to those radical Islamist groups that are inherently unfavourable to Christians and regard them as infidels. Currying favour with such salafist jihadists that distort Islam for the sake of safekeeping their own political rights and privileges is an abhorrent policy.
- It is also clear that this increasing numerical weakness of local Christians across the whole region is due largely to an emigration that traces its roots as much to an occupation of land or socio-economic conditions as it does to the rise of radicalism and to prejudices and discrimination against Christians. But emigration also reflects a lack of clarity in the collective Christian mindset about the nature of their mission. This festering uncertainty is not entirely new and has been growing slowly ever since the days of the Ottoman Sultanate and later Mandatory Powers and has peaked toward the end of the last millennium. Christians were vital constituents of civil society in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine and other countries from the 1950's till the early 1980's, and they contributed immensely to the Arab Nahda of the region at the time. Yet, their role is no longer evident - to themselves, at times to their Muslim neighbours, and certainly to the West whose Christianity does not always agree with that of the East and who often actually facilitates let alone encourages their emigration for political reasons.
- If emigration were to be reduced - let alone stopped or countered - it is vital that Christian institutions mobilise their resources to provide younger local generations with the possibility of staying in their home country. Words of encouragement are helpful, and pastoral care remains indispensable, but more than anything else - more than steady employment even - is the need to secure accommodation for those young Christian families. This is why I would also encourage the Catholic churches and their institutions to re-double their efforts in securing young couples with flats on the basis of emphyteutic leases that would encourage them to improve their investments. At the moment, need hugely outstrips supply across the Middle East and much more work is necessary.
- Much as this synod was a golden opportunity for the - largely - Eastern Catholic Churches to come together at this late stage in order to stem the tide of emigration, retrenchment and debilitation, it is equally imperative to consider for the future a much wider assembly of bishops that would also include the majority Orthodox churches of the region as well as the smaller reform churches. Then, the ecumenical message and political impact of such an assembly would become more united, the strategy more unified and the outcome less dim.
- Hand in hand with an ecumenical response, it is imperative that Christians and Muslims who in their large majority are peaceful men and women seeking co-existence also re-double their efforts to strengthen the channels of dialogue between them so they understand each other better and then pass on this understanding to their peoples. The same would be true of the Jewish rabbinical authorities in Israel and Palestine in the context of trilateral faith forums.
- The domestic challenges facing Middle East Christians notwithstanding, the premise of the Christian faith is also built upon a universality of our fellowship. Consequently, if witness and communion are meant to become the flag-bearers of the future, it is important not only for Middle East Christians

to sit up and take account of their realities. It is equally important for the Western churches to go beyond blandishments, paper-peddling conferences and suitable biblical quotations and assume their responsibility of helping re-awaken the churches of the Middle East and re-strengthening their witness and communion in a tough region. But whether for political or other reasons, the Church in the West still does not pick up the gauntlet, or is frightened to do so, it will be depriving itself of the outreach that is part of our mission as followers of Christ. Besides, it would no longer have the immediate prerogative to call the Christians of the East its sisters and brothers in Christ ... because Christ himself would have acted otherwise.

Martin Luther King Jr once stated that the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The problems besetting the Living Stones of a whole biblical region are complex, manifold and not resolved over a two-week synod. They range from emigration and radicalism to political obnubilation and socio-economic disempowerment. They require persistence and I hope that this synodal event will mark a new departure whereby the churches and their agencies or international partners will re-double their efforts at helping give meaning to the Christian communion and witness in the Middle East. One immediate - and fairly easy - way is to adopt the idea that was proposed for setting up a permanent cenacle of Christian thinkers who would work together in order to strive toward a genuinely democratic culture with space for all religious peoples in the Middle East.

Making a diagnosis is helpful, but not following it up with a cure makes the diagnosis redundant and the patient weaker.

Eppur si muove (Galilei Galileo, 1564-1642)

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