

# At Easter, Middle Eastern patriarchs encourage hope despite turmoil

**By Doreen Abi Raad**

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BEIRUT – Catholic patriarchs of the Middle East in their Easter messages urged the faithful to cling to the hope of the risen Christ amid raging wars, human suffering, and the uprooting of Christians from their homelands in the region.

“We have spent 40 or even 50 days in fasting and prayer, that God may remove from our Eastern countries, especially Syria and Iraq, this evil spirit that can only go out through prayer and fasting,” Syrian-born Melkite Catholic Patriarch Gregoire III Laham said.

“We say to everyone in the East and in the West: dismiss any idea that this conflict is over religion,” he said.

“When I look at what is happening in our countries, it seems to me that Daesh (the Arabic acronym for Islamic State) has nothing whatever to do with religion. ISIS is rather an instrument which takes on, very foolishly and insolently, the outward aspect and show of a religious movement. However, in reality they show Islam in a most hideous, deceitful, and fraudulent guise,” he said.

The conflict, Patriarch Laham said, “has become a tool and a cover for proxy war in our region and at the cost of all its citizens.”

“Religious conflict has become marketable. Killing the innocent has become a commodity and instrument, and slaughtering Christians has become a tool,” he said. Despite the violence and death, he called on the faithful to “strengthen (their) faith in life, in the risen Christ who has conquered death and bestowed life and calls us all to be children of the Resurrection and life, to be bearers of the Gospel of Life and work for success and the conquest of death by life, enmity by love, and hatred and revenge by forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignatius Youssef III Younan acknowledged in his Easter message the years of suffering of Christians caused by the turmoil in Syria and Iraq.

“We, however, sons and daughters of the Syriac Catholic Church, are so proud to model ourselves to the one who suffered carrying his cross, died, and was risen for our salvation,” the patriarch said.

“We mean it when (we) recall the very words of our savior to the disciples of

Emmaus,” he said, citing Luke 24:26: “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

“Christ’s Resurrection from the dead is the basis of our faith, the pillar of our hope,” Patriarch Younan said. “It gave us a firm reassurance and a strong reason for our own resurrection.”

Cardinal Bechara Rai, Maronite Catholic patriarch, called attention to the “enormous economic and social challenges” facing Lebanon, noting that one-third of Lebanese live below the poverty line, and that the number is increasing.

Lebanon’s population stands at about 4 million, of which about 33 percent are Christian. The country has faced an influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees and thousands of Iraqis, overwhelming the country’s economy and straining social relations.

Furthermore, Lebanon’s presidential vacuum has created a “political death” in the country, crippling the government and the parliament, Cardinal Rai said.

The presidential post is reserved for a Maronite Catholic under the country’s power-sharing system. Legislators have failed to agree on a successor since the term of President Michel Suleiman ended in May 2014.

As for the raging conflicts in the region, Cardinal Rai urged world and Arab leaders to stop supporting mercenaries and fighters with money and weapons, appealing to them to find peaceful solutions.

“And do not forget the suffering of our people in the Holy Land, Iraq, Syria and Yemen,” he continued. “We seek for us and for all of them the peace of Christ.”

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