

# Mideast churches' leaders discuss Christian emigration

BEIRUT, Lebanon – An unprecedented wave of Christian emigration from Lebanon is upsetting the country's demographic balance, said participants at a conference of Christian leaders.

Approximately 35 percent of Lebanon's total population in 2005 was Christian; that number does not reflect the Christians who emigrated after the war between Hezbollah militants and Israel in the summer of 2006, according to the most recent statistics announced at the mid-March conference. In 1965, Christians represented 55 percent of the population.

The "weakness of the Christian presence in Lebanon today is a source of anxiety," said Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir, patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church.

"Lebanon as a message (of coexistence) is threatened," he warned.

"The presidency is vacant, the parliament blocked, downtown is vacant and the Christians are leaving the country," he said.

Lebanon's presidential post – reserved for a Maronite Catholic under the country's power-sharing system – has been vacant since November. Parliamentary sessions to elect a president have been postponed 15 times.

Cardinal Sfeir spoke at the March 11-14 conference, sponsored by the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops, at Our Lady of the Mountain in Fatqa, Lebanon. In addition to patriarchs, bishops, priests and nuns, laypeople also attended the conference, as well as representatives from the Muslim community – some 200 people in all.

Archbishop Luigi Gatti, apostolic nuncio to Lebanon, noted that the Christian presence in the country is "an essential and necessary aspect of Lebanon's identity."

Cardinal Sfeir reminded attendees of Pope John Paul II's declaration that Lebanon is

a “message of coexistence.”

“We know that there are 18 communities of religion coexisting in Lebanon in a spirit of coordination, understanding and peace,” Cardinal Sfeir said.

Catholicos Aram I of Cilicia, head of the Lebanon-based community of the Armenian Apostolic Church, pointed out that “interreligious dialogue in Lebanon is an existing reality and not just a theoretical concept,” experienced in both “private and public life.”

This “dialogue of life,” he said, “is a wealth that we should nourish on the basis of values and the common vision. We cannot imagine this country without coexistence between Muslims and Christians.”

About 1 million Lebanese, a large majority of whom are Christian, have emigrated.

“It’s a departure without hope of returning,” Cardinal Sfeir said.

Lebanon’s Christian emigration is rooted in domestic and international political causes, and Archbishop Gatti said such issues can be confronted if “we can be Christian in the most complete and profound way possible.”

In an apparent reproach to Lebanon’s feuding political leaders, he said: “In the political life there is no place for extreme egocentrism. The egocentrism should be limited by the common good, the fundamental of democracy.”

Catholicos Aram pointed out that even if the church does not identify itself with a specific political system, it has a “prophetic vocation” that requires it to “take firm positions, supported by the principles of the Bible.”

Ali Hassan, a representative of Lebanon’s Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue, told Lebanon’s Shiite Muslim community, “Do not have independent plans.”

Just as many Lebanese Christians as Muslims are anxious about their future, Hassan said.

“Yes, I’m (also) afraid. The first fear is for my country and for our coexistence,” he said.

Cardinal Sfeir said Christians in Lebanon “must stay attached to their faith in order to face all the difficulties and all the obstacles as they always did in centuries past.”

Christian emigration is a “heavy weight” on the family, the church and the community, Cardinal Sfeir said. If it continues, “it will provoke a modification to the demographic balance and will put in peril the presence of Christians,” he warned.

“The big challenge,” Cardinal Sfeir said, “is to be a true Christian” and to preserve the liberty that Christ gave to the Christians.

“It’s in this liberty that our values and destiny live,” he said.