

Patriarch's Christmas message offers hope to Middle East Christians

JERUSALEM - Amid continuing turmoil in the Middle East, Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem sent a message of hope and support to Christians of the region.

"It is a very difficult situation. We have to support them. They must not lose hope," the patriarch said at a Dec. 21 news conference where he delivered his Christmas message. "We are not alone, many people, including the Vatican, are concerned about the situation and this gives more hope."

Though he said he was concerned about the continuing struggle and bloodshed in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere, in his message, Patriarch Twal expressed support for the political changes occurring and urged Christians in the region to become involved so they are not excluded from the movements.

He defended "the changes taking place in favor of freedom and democracy."

"We want our Christian faithful to be involved and not feel foreign in this movement," he said. "They have full citizenship. It is their land, their country, their present, their future."

In his message, the patriarch emphasized the need for the protection of human rights and respect for the dignity of people during these times.

"I also hope and pray that competent authorities make every effort to calm the spirits, without violence, and to protect the minorities who are an integral part of the population in the region." Patriarch Twal's message said. "We must grasp this moment of opportunity to build a new society based on equal citizenship for all."

"We know how the change has started. But we don't know how it will be finished," he added, charging that purely political interests were fanning the flames in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.

He said the Catholic patriarchs of the East had asked their faithful to set a day of prayer for reconciliation and peace in the Middle East.

The patriarch also expressed support for the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations.

“We want a just and comprehensive peace to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We adhere to the position taken by the Holy See, clearly acknowledging the two-state solution with security and internationally recognized borders,” Patriarch Twal said.

“I often say that to be with one of the parties does not mean to be against the other. ... The journey has begun but the process is long and tedious. I firmly believe and even more today, that negotiation is the best way to resolve the conflict,” he said.

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