

Pope, Orthodox patriarch express commitment for unity

By Laura Ieraci

Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis and the patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch expressed their desire to work toward full communion of the two churches.

The pope met with Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II at the Vatican June 19. This was Aphrem's first official visit with Pope Francis. The two church leaders spoke privately, after which each gave a public discourse.

"We express our desire and readiness to look for new ways that will bring our churches even closer to each other, paving the way for Antioch and Rome, the only two apostolic sees where St. Peter preached, to establish full communion," Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem said.

The patriarch also expressed his church's readiness to come to an agreement to celebrate Easter on a common date. He said the Holy Synod of Antioch, motivated by the Second Vatican Council, adopted a resolution in 1981, expressing "the eagerness of our church" to celebrate Easter "on a fixed Sunday in April" in common with other Christian churches.

The celebration of Easter "on two different dates is a source of great discomfort and weakens the common witness of the church in the world," he said, thanking Francis for recently "considering to take the initiative to lead the efforts on this matter."

Meeting a group of priests in Rome June 12, Pope Francis said the Catholic Church "is willing to establish a fixed date for Easter so that it can be celebrated on the same day by all Christians, whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox."

In the current situation, he said, being ironic, "A Catholic and an Orthodox meet. One says, 'Your Christ has risen? Mine rises next Sunday.'"

The patriarch also thanked Francis for “courageously” speaking of the Armenian genocide and “opening the way for others to do the same.” The patriarch said about 500,000 Syriac Orthodox died in the 1915 genocide, for which the community continues to seek healing and reconciliation.

In addition, he noted the loss of life of Christians and others in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, as well as the high number of refugees and the destruction of numerous religious buildings and monuments. He thanked Pope Francis for his prayers for the suffering Christians but urged the Vatican to engage in more diplomatic activity toward peace in the region.

“We believe that the Vatican can initiate dialogue with certain European countries (which) may have influence on the regional government that are directly or indirectly supporting and funding the terrorists in the region,” said Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem.

In his speech, Pope Francis urged the two churches to “further strengthen the bonds of friendship and fraternity” during this time of “difficult trial and suffering” for Christians and to “hasten our steps on the common journey, holding the gaze fixed on the day when we can celebrate our belonging to the one Church of Christ around the same altar of sacrifice and praise.”

The two churches should “exchange the treasures of our traditions as spiritual gifts because that which unites us is far greater than that which divides us,” he said.

The Syriac Orthodox Church, he said, has been “a church of martyrs” since its founding and is “still today in the Middle East” along with other Christian churches there.

“It seems that the powerful in this world are incapable of finding solutions” to such suffering, he said.

The pope asked Aphrem to pray with him for the two kidnapped Orthodox bishops of Aleppo, Syria, for the priests and lay faithful affected by the conflict and for the “grace to be always ready for forgiveness and to work for reconciliation and peace.”

Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna and Greek Orthodox Metropolitan

Paul were kidnapped in the province of Aleppo April 22, 2013. And as recently as May, Syriac Catholic Father Jacques Mourad was kidnapped. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of unity of the church and the tool for building the kingdom of God, which is the kingdom of peace and justice,” the pope said.

After their meeting, the pope and patriarch led prayers in the Vatican’s Redemptoris Mater chapel.

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