

Rabbi tells synod that Christians in Israel enjoy freedom, equality

VATICAN CITY – At a synod where the Israel-Palestinian conflict repeatedly was singled out as a source of problems for Christians throughout the Middle East, a rabbi from Israel told Catholic bishops that Israel is not solely responsible and that the attitude of some Catholics violates the church's own teaching about Jews and Judaism.

Rabbi David Rosen, a Jerusalem-based adviser to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, addressed the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East Oct. 13.

"Christians in Israel are obviously in a very different situation from their sister communities in the Holy Land, who are part and parcel of a Palestinian society struggling for its independence and who are inevitably caught up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," the rabbi told the synod.

He acknowledged that some Israeli Christian citizens, who live along the border between Israeli and Palestinian-controlled territories, "often bear the brunt of security measures which the Jewish state feels obliged to maintain in order to protect its own citizenry against continuous violence from within the Palestinian territories."

But, he said, Christian citizens of Israel are full, equal citizens under the law and deserve the support of other Israelis in claiming and protecting their rights.

And, he said, in recent months some progress has been made, for example, "regarding the free movement of clergy," who often come from outside of Israel.

"The situation of minorities is always a profound reflection of the social and moral condition of a society as a whole," he said.

The plight of all Palestinians should be of concern to Jews, who "brought the recognition to the world that every human person is created in the divine image," Rabbi Rosen said, and because they have an obligation to care for their neighbors,

especially “when suffering is born out of a conflict of which we are a part.”

Speaking more generally of Catholic-Jewish relations, the rabbi said the great strides made in Catholic-Jewish understanding in other parts of the world, especially in the United States, are not fully reflected in the Holy Land, partially because of the conflict, but also because of the traditional “sociological context” in which communities live in their own linguistic, cultural and confessional settings.

Still, he said, there are dozens and dozens of dialogue groups in Israel, fueled especially by the presence of Catholic institutes of higher learning. But, Rabbi Rosen said, “Israeli Jewry still has a long way to go in overcoming the negative past” and in recognizing how much Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism has changed since the Second Vatican Council.

Meeting with reporters before he addressed the synod, the rabbi said Christian citizens of Israel have benefited from Israel’s democracy and its education, professional and economic opportunities.

“I don’t for one minute wish to avoid the fact that there are serious challenges for Christian communities,” he said. But he insisted the situation of Christians in Israeli is “totally incomparable” to the challenges they face in other Middle Eastern countries where democracy and equality are weaker.

“Obviously, the situation for Christians in the Palestinian territories or in areas where they see themselves as part of a Palestinian nation in the making is much more complex,” he said.

“The Christian communities in East Jerusalem and in the areas under the Palestinian authority are in a very different situation; they are part and parcel of a nation struggling for its self-determination, often a violent struggle,” he said. “In a situation of conflict, Israelis – if they perceive a threat – are not going to ask Palestinians” whether they are Christian or Muslim, because in that case “they are all part of a potential threat,” he said.

Rabbi Rosen was also asked about an oath of loyalty to Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” that the government is proposing to ask of potential new citizens,

whether they are Jewish or not.

Some members of the synod had criticized the oath as “contradictory” and a sign that Israeli democracy may not be all that strong.

Rabbi Rosen said, “I don’t think everything Israel does is always right and I certainly don’t think that everything Israel does is always intelligent,” including the proposed oath, which “clearly is targeted at preventing Arabs coming into Israel and influencing the demographic makeup of the society and that seems to me to be problematic in a healthy civil democracy.”

However, he said, one also must recognize that Israel has always defined itself as a “Jewish state,” not in a religious sense, but in a cultural sense.