

Synod report summarizes suggestions for strengthening church, dialogue

VATICAN CITY - Specific synod suggestions for a common Catholic-Orthodox celebration of Easter, wider authority for Eastern Catholic patriarchs - including participation in conclaves to elect a pope - and the need for local dialogue with Muslims and Jews were repeated in the midterm report of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East.

Coptic Patriarch Antonios Naguib of Alexandria, Egypt, the synod's recording secretary, presented his summary of synod speeches and suggestions Oct. 18 and gave synod members a list of 23 questions to discuss in their small working groups.

The questions were designed to help synod members draft proposals to be presented to Pope Benedict XVI before the synod formally ends Oct. 24 with a Mass.

The need for a common date for Easter, and also for Christmas, "is a pastoral necessity," especially because of the numbers of marriages between Christians of different churches and because it would be "a powerful witness" of Christian unity in the region, the patriarch said.

The continuing emigration of Christians from the Middle East, especially the emigration of the young and the well-educated, threatens the very survival of Christianity in the region in which it was born, the midterm report said.

War, conflict, economic and political pressures all have combined to urge people to flee the region, the report said. Christian leaders and all people of good will must pressure their political leaders to work for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and an end to the ongoing violence and instability in Iraq, it said.

However, Patriarch Naguib said, "the danger that threatens Christians in the Middle East comes not only from their minority status, or external threats, but above all from their distance from the truth of their Gospel, their faith and their mission" to be

Christian witnesses.

“The true tragedy of man is not when he suffers because of his mission, but when he has no more mission and thereby loses the meaning and purpose of his life,” it said.

Patriarch Naguib told the synod, “The number of persons in the church is not as important as their living their faith and effectively transmitting the message” of God’s love for each person.

The majority of Catholics in the Middle East belong to Eastern Catholic churches – the Chaldean, Coptic, Armenian, Maronite or Melkite churches – and for many of those communities, there are more faithful living outside the Middle East than inside the region.

Church law gives the patriarchs and synods of the Eastern churches a large degree of autonomy and decision-making power over the territory of their traditional homelands, but gives the pope power over the Eastern churches’ dioceses in the rest of the world.

In their speeches to the synod Oct. 11-16, members “emphasized the need” to extend the jurisdiction of the patriarchs to all members of their churches, Patriarch Naguib said.

“How can one be ‘father and head’ of a people without a head?” he asked, adding that “communion is a personal relationship, animated by the Holy Spirit,” and not a jurisdictional relationship dictated by geography.

The heads of the Eastern churches contribute to making the church truly catholic, he said, so the patriarchs should be automatic “members of the college that elects the supreme pontiff” without having to be named cardinals first, he said.

Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo, Syria, told reporters Oct. 18 that the patriarchs are not looking for power and influence, but for a better way to express to all Catholics the communion that exists between them and the pope and the importance of the papacy for Eastern Catholics as well as for those of the Latin rite.

Throughout the synod, members discussed the need for full freedom of religion and

conscience, for democracy and for a greater separation between government and religion throughout the region.

But members thought the synod organizers' use of the term "positive secularism" to describe religion-state separation was problematic, because secularism implies ignoring or even denying the religious values of a nation's people, the patriarch said.

"We prefer the term 'civic state'" to describe a political system based on "respect for each person and individual freedom, equality and full citizenship, the recognition of the role of religion - even in public life - and moral values," he said.

Despite the rise since the 1970s of "political Islam" in the region, Catholics must remember that Christians and Muslims lived side by side in the region for 14 centuries, often sharing the same challenges and tragedies.

"We must not argue with Muslims, but love them, hoping to elicit reciprocity from their hearts," Patriarch Naguib said.

At the same time, the synod called on Catholics to demonstrate awareness of sharing their destiny with their Muslim and Jewish neighbors by not focusing only on defending the rights of Christians, but engaging in work for the common good, he said.

The synod report called for continued support for Catholic schools in the Middle East, because the schools not only educate Catholics and give them the tools they need to survive in the region, they also are the primary place where the church shows that it is ready, willing and able to work with Muslims for the good of society and where Christians and Muslims learn to live and work side by side.

Cardinal John P. Foley, grand master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, told reporters the Catholic schools in the Middle East "make a great contribution to mutual understanding," and helping the schools is a powerful, concrete investment in a future where members of different religions work together.