

# **The family tree: Catholics need to strengthen their Middle East roots**

VATICAN CITY - The Catholic “family tree” has its roots in the Middle East and the Vatican wants Catholics everywhere to remember that.

The special Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which will convene at the Vatican in October, obviously will be an opportunity for the region’s bishops to share ideas on how to strengthen their communities and their witness.

But the synod also will be a chance for Catholics around the world to get back to their roots as well.

One way Catholics keep in touch with their roots and help strengthen them is by supporting Catholic agencies that fund Catholic pastoral, educational and social projects throughout the Middle East.

Some of the funding is coordinated by a special group of donor agencies, known by the Italian acronym ROACO, which meets under the auspices of the Congregation for Eastern Churches.

The agencies include the Catholic Near East Welfare Association from the United States and Canada, the French Oeuvre d’Orient, Caritas Internationalis, the international Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem and others from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium.

The Eastern churches congregation, representatives of the agencies, church leaders from the Middle East and officers of the synod met at the Vatican June 21-25. They discussed the needs of Christians in the Middle East, projects to assist them and hopes for the synod.

Meeting participants June 25, Pope Benedict XVI said the future of the church in the Middle East depends on the region’s Christians “persevering in the faith and, despite numerous sacrifices, remaining in the land where they were born.”

Governments, too, have a responsibility to work for peace, to respect the right of each person to practice his or her faith and to work to end discrimination, he said.

The work of ROACO and its member agencies, the pope said, helps Christians in the region continue to live in hope.

“There is a strong link between ROACO and the synod, because ROACO supports projects and activities that demonstrate God’s love incarnated in love for one another,” said Maronite Archbishop Joseph Soueif of Cyprus, special secretary of the synod.

Christians in the Middle East, like everywhere in the world, are called to be a “quality, dynamic, creative presence” in their societies, reaching out with love to all people, he said.

“The synod is a call from the Holy Father to renew our commitment to living as a community with one heart and one soul, and it’s a call to the universal church to live this as well,” the archbishop said.

Through active parishes and by running schools, orphanages, hospitals and clinics, supporting interreligious dialogue and sharing resources with other Christians, “we realize the church’s mission to be a sign of love, reconciliation and peace – all things which this region needs so badly,” he said.

The projects considered by ROACO range from building churches and seminaries to buying school supplies and funding micro-credit programs to promote small businesses.

Franciscan Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, said, “We can live without ROACO – we have in the past – but its enormous support promotes the communion, collaboration and solidarity we are called to live.”

The Catholic Church in the Middle East – particularly in Jerusalem – is an overlapping mix of parishes under the Franciscan Custody and the Latin-rite, Maronite, Melkite, Armenian, Coptic, Chaldean and Assyrian Catholic churches.

Father Pizzaballa said ROACO, by working with and funding projects run by all those Catholic entities, will bring a global knowledge of the Catholic Church in the region to the synod.

One of the key messages in the synod's working document is an admonition to the overlapping Catholic jurisdictions in the Middle East to build a sense of communion among themselves and share their resources, just as they share the fate of being Christian minorities in the region.

Father Pizzaballa said ROACO can help in that process because "they have worked through all the elements of our jealousies," helping each community develop its potential and discouraging needless duplication of programs.

Another key concern of the synod is strengthening the awareness among Middle East Christians of their mission as signs of God's love in the region, a mission that often requires sacrifice.

The church recognizes, however, that if Christians cannot provide for their families and live in security, asking them to stay in the region to witness to the Gospel may be asking too much.

"We have to be realistic. We cannot speak of the future of Christianity in the Middle East if people cannot live there," Father Pizzaballa said.

The funding agencies not only help Christians financially, but they also help strengthen programs that demonstrate to their predominantly Muslim neighbors that Catholics want to contribute to their communities as well as their countries.

"The decision to leave and go somewhere else is easy, even when it's difficult," Archbishop Soueif said. "But in the long term, staying gives meaning to our church, which is a sign of God's love."

Christians always have been a minority in the Middle East, he said, "but they carried the Gospel to the whole world."