

Patriarch sends strong message to Palestinian Christians

JERUSALEM – A Palestinian Christian must be prepared to witness to the faith by submitting to daily difficulties “or even by sacrificing his or her life,” said Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem in a pastoral letter marking the end of his patriarchal ministry.

In his most strongly worded comment to date on growing Palestinian Muslim extremism, the patriarch likened such an era of Christian martyrdom to that suffered by first-century Christians under the Roman Empire and said it would “purify life in all of society.”

“It would strengthen the believers in their faith and would again give a new face to all society,” the patriarch added in his letter, dated March 1 and released to the press March 6. On March 19, Patriarch Sabbah turns 75 and, according to canon law, must submit his resignation to Pope Benedict XVI.

In the 40-page letter, Patriarch Sabbah noted that while good relations exist between Muslim civil and religious authorities and there is good “secular coexistence,” the situation “becomes explosive” when issues of dogma and family are involved. Mediation is needed, he said.

“But it should also be said that relations between Muslims and Christians have not yet reached their perfect equilibrium. This is a matter of a long and slow path that must be perfected every day,” he said.

Moderate Muslims and Christians must work together to counter the increasingly rigid worldview of Islamic political extremism, he said. He admonished Christians not to give up on their faith even if dialogue proves to be futile and to continue to demand their rights as citizens and proclaim their Christian faith.

It is vital, however, to look at why such extremism is increasing, he said, noting that it tends to be a reaction to poverty and injustice within Arab and Muslim society as well as an invasion of Western values and morality.

“These religious tendencies will end up by imposing themselves, if the policies within the Arab countries do not succeed in creating more just and secure societies, and if Islam does not succeed in renewing itself from within so as to respond to the religious need of the believers and to prevent the extremists from transforming religion into fanaticism and a source of violence, and if world politics do not end the various ways in which peoples are colonized,” he said.

Patriarch Sabbah urged Christians in the Holy Land not to remain spectators in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, but to take an active, nonviolent role in leading them toward peace in light of their Christian beliefs.

“To find freedom again, to pay the price and to resist, all that is certainly an obligation, but we also believe in the commandment to love,” he said. He urged “a nonviolent resistance, but one that is capable of leading the two peoples to enjoy in equal ways their freedom, their sovereignty and their security.”

The patriarch condemned the use of violence as a form of resistance, warning against being transformed into “an oppressor or a terrorist.”

Although the Christian vision maintains that the land belongs to two peoples, it first belongs to God, he said.

“The history that human beings make here with blood and hatred or with dialogue and collaboration is made ... under the watchful eyes of God, the master of history, who gave this land a particular sanctity,” he said. “In a land belonging to God, only the ways of God will lead to a resolution of the conflict.”

He called on the Christians to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and see the face of God in every human, no matter his or her religion or nationality.

“It is God whom we love in the friend or the enemy. When we love, we are imitating God in his love for all creatures,” he said. “Such love is stronger than violence ... it can drive back the hostility and end the oppression that is exerted over him.”

All of God’s children should live together in the same land, he said, but in order for that to happen all must be considered “equal with the same rights and obligations.”

Christian catechesis must give a clear message that “the other is not the enemy,” he said.

Addressing the small local Christian community, Patriarch Sabbah noted that Jesus and his followers also remained small in numbers.

“To be small in this land is simply to live as Jesus lived here. That does not mean having a diminished life on the margins or a life made up of fear and perplexity,” he said. “We know why we are small, and we know what place we should occupy in our society and in the world. We are part of the mystery of Jesus and we remain with him on Calvary, strong and supported by the hope and the joy of the resurrection.”

Christians must remain steadfast in their faith, he said, reminding his parishioners that Jesus told his followers they could move mountains with their faith.

“The state says with technology, with a quantity of weapons and of men, it can ... open roads and level mountains, but it remains incapable of finding peace. As for us, we keep meditating on the word of Jesus: ‘If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move. ... Nothing will be impossible for you,’” he said, quoting the Gospel of St. Matthew.

He also urged Christians to accept their vocation of a difficult life in the Holy Land and to resist the temptation of emigrating to other countries.

Reflecting on the events during his time as Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Patriarch Sabbah welcomed the growing ecumenical and interfaith movements in the Holy Land. He noted the role of Bethlehem University in the education of local Christians, the importance of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem and made special mention of the important and long-standing role the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land has played in the holy sites. Still, he said, there is a “need for renewal, for better insertion in the diocese and for dialogue ... in order to be better incarnated in the church of God which they serve.”

He specifically greeted the Hebrew-speaking community, saying he accompanied the community with his prayers.

“I wish it growth in the faith God wants for it, so that it might be a witness to Jesus in the Israeli society and that, with the whole church of the Holy Land in the political conflict that is tearing it apart, it might be an agent of reconciliation based on forgiveness, justice, peace and equality among all,” he said.

Alluding to Christian Zionist and evangelical groups, he said these new Christian movements have become a part of the local Christian and political reality, creating more divisions by using biblical arguments to support Israel and confusing the faithful by “exploiting their material and spiritual poverty.”

“This is another reminder to the Christians that they become more aware of the wealth and the demands of their faith and to the pastors that they respond better to the religious thirst of their faithful,” he said.

He reminded parish priests not to lose sight of their main duty of ministering to their parishioners by being overwhelmed by buildings and projects. Priests must remember their work is in the service of God and they must go where they are called, he said.

He expressed his gratitude to his parishioners, priests and all those he has worked with during his 20 years as patriarch.

He said he would remain in Jerusalem and, though freed of his administrative responsibilities, would “continue to accompany the sufferings and the hopes of the men and women of this land, of all the believers, of all religions, who dwell in it,” he said.