

## Cardinal Sandri's Intervention at Conference on Christians in Middle East

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Below is the Vatican Radio-provided translation of the address given by Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, on Thursday to the international conference, titled ‘The International Conference Between World Society and Regional Transformations: Christians, Christian Churches, and Religion in a Changing Middle East.’”

The three-day conference concludes today. It was organized by the German Episcopal Conference and the University of Munich. Many Catholic and Orthodox leaders from the Middle East took part in the event.

The cardinal gave his address at a roundtable, titled “A multi-confessional Christianity: Dialogue and relations between the Christian churches in Arab countries:”

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Excellencies, Esteemed Professors, Reverend Fathers and Students,

I thank you for the invitation to participate in this conference. I welcome the occasion to extend through the organizers, and in particular through H.E. Archbishop Schick, my lively sentiments of gratitude for all that the German Episcopal Conference – especially by means of the Catholic aid agencies – has done and is doing to assist in the dramatic situation of our Christian brothers and, more generally, of all those suffering in the Near and Middle East, due to war, violence and persecution. This Conference represents an effort related to that of managing the emergency of refugees and asylum-seekers, and to attempts to obtain respect for corridors for humanitarian aid and relief for the hardest hit areas. All of this increases our desire that the agreements for a cease-fire discussed in recent days might be effective in the field, on pain of the complete destruction and total emptying of certain centers which have already been tried to the extreme.

1. The theme of today’s Panel asks us to reflect on the multi-confessional presence of Christians in Arab Countries. In this regard, I would like to underline certain aspects from the point of view of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, which does not have competence over all of the regions under consideration by this Conference. For example, the Countries of the Arabian Peninsula, which are under the jurisdiction of the Apostolic Vicariates of Northern Arabia and Southern Arabia (Bishop Ballin and Bishop Hinder), belong to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. This division is an object of study and debate on account of its multiple implications for interreligious, diplomatic and political dialogue. At the same time, it characterizes the Catholic Church in the region, to the degree that a decision of the Supreme Pontiff Saint John Paul II, later confirmed by Pope Benedict XVI, limited even the competencies of the Catholic Eastern Patriarchs (for example, the Melkites should have an Exarchate which is still found in the *Annuario Pontificio* with its See in Kuwait). In the Orthodox sphere, a different perception of the territory is found, as is seen through the still unresolved controversy between the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchs of Jerusalem and Antioch regarding the appointment of a Metropolitan in Qatar. Despite these distinctions, the presence of Catholic Christians in various parts of the Persian Gulf is extraordinary (reaching, certainly, to more than one million faithful). Many come from the Philippines, from Sri Lanka, from India, carrying their own patrimony of faith. When inserted into a very different culture a difficult situation is created: in demanding work conditions, often without their family, which has remained in the motherland, they must seek to retain their roots, also with regard to cultivating their faith. It is a common experience which I hear recounted by the Pastors of the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches, who together have nearly 400.000

faithful in the region.

A similar challenge is experienced in the Patriarchal Diocese of Jerusalem of the Latins. To its Vicariate for Hebrew speaking Catholics (Saint James Vicariate) is entrusted also the care of migrants, who are becoming ever more numerous. Insofar as they also have come seeking work, one could, with the passage of time, see the consolidation of an ecclesial reality which can no longer be defined merely as Arab or Hebrew speaking, but as much more diverse: in fact, Jerusalem, as Mother Church, becomes ever more a true reflection of the entire world.

If we turn our minds to Lebanon and Jordan, we see also there hundreds of thousands of refugees who have been welcomed, and each camp corresponds to different phases of the more or less recent history of the Countries concerned: there are camps for Palestinians, for Syrians and now also for the displaced persons from the Plane of Ninevah. The welcome guaranteed by the two national Caritas organizations, in addition to all of the support networks which form part of the governmental efforts, could legitimately be included in the “identity card” of these Countries: “Welcoming Country”.

I do not wish to omit a small mention also of Egypt, which I visited in January of 2013, and which I well remember not only for the Christian communities historically present, but also for the participation of young people who originated from sub-Saharan Africa, from South Sudan and Eritrea at celebrations.

2. Why this long introduction? I consider it necessary that one grasp the complexity of the realities in these territories, characterized by presences and challenges both “ancient and new”. Ancient are the roots of Christianity; more precisely, there the story of salvation has its beginnings and its full expression. Ancient are the Churches, which arose from the preaching of the Apostles: to them, we are all debtors for the Gospel. Ancient are the divisions which have developed through doctrinal controversies and also due to political factors in diverse epochs; equally ancient is the coexistence which developed with the arrival of Islam, in addition to that with the Jewish communities, which survived in the centuries before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. History has also run through not a few periods of violence, of living as a minority and sometimes of genuine persecution. In light of these complex factors, we are also confronted with new elements: the ecumenism of blood, anticipated by Saint John Paul II with the shared remembrance of martyrs during the Jubilee of 2000, was taken up again strongly by Pope Francis. It serves as a frame for truly historical events in the life of the Churches, including the non-Catholic ones, and in ecumenical relations. I think, for instance, of the Pan Orthodox Synod which will take place in Crete in June of this year, of the meetings between Pope Francis and the Patriarch Bartholomew, the great prayer for Peace in the Holy Land in the Vatican Gardens in 2014, and the recent event of the embrace in Cuba between the Holy Father and the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill.

I would like, however, to cite two additional events: first, the presence in Rome, last April 12th, beside Pope Francis, of the three Armenian Patriarchs, Catholic and Apostolic, for the proclamation of Saint Gregory of Narek as Doctor of the Church and in order to commemorate the victims of the tragic deeds of 1915. And second, the election of the new Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, which occurred in September of 2015. This marked an historic step, namely, the return of the See to Iraq,

after decades in which it had been moved to the United States of America. These facts bear witness to the reality of Churches that have set themselves in motion, which do not only go out to the existential peripheries as Pope Francis has urged us, helping the displaced and the refugees, but which seem together to recognize that their only center is Christ, in Whom all equally believe and profess as the only Lord of history and Savior of man. With His Name on their lips, 21 Christian Copts died, slaughtered on the bank of the Mediterranean just over a year ago. With His Name in their hearts, our brothers fled the Plane of Nineveh in August of 2014, and, united by all they have in common, began to collaborate on assistance projects in Erbil which transcend the distinctions between Syro-Catholic, Chaldean or Syro-Orthodox.

3. If the first part of our reflection emphasized the key word “welcome”, the second underlined the movement towards unity among the Churches and the Christian confessions. It is significant to pronounce these two key words here in Rome, in close physical proximity to the Domus Sanctae Marthae transformed by the Holy Father into a House of welcome and unity. These words are thereby recalled to the Church and to the world, and in the first place they are lived in the concrete events of each day. The very existence and collaboration between the Churches in the Middle East raise very precise questions at multiple levels. To the world of international politics: every attempt more or less veiled to break up and rearrange the institutional equilibriums in the Region on the basis of agreements of convenience for economic or strategic interests must be exposed. Christians should not be moved about by planners with their own objectives but rather recognized as citizens of equal dignity with the possibility to remain and become agents of unity and reconciliation. Only extraordinary shortsightedness fails to recognize them as leaven of societies, capable in time of causing an increased orientation towards the best aspects of democracy, rather than having to import and impose it with force from without, something of which the last decades have given us sad experience. Christians should be able to remain or to return, if they have had to flee contrary to their will: as human beings, they are worth more than any deposit, known or unknown, of petroleum, gas or arms for trafficking! At seeing the Christian presence weakened or even extinguished relative to its historic configuration, I have the impression that this will only contribute, unfortunately, to the further aggravation of the intra-confessional tensions of the Islamic world, which seemed dormant for some centuries.

A question arises also for the Churches of Europe, more so even than for those of the “New World” – the United States and Canada, or even Australia: how capable are we of thinking of ourselves as Churches genuinely in communion, having to share spaces and see an increase of jurisdictions, as may be required for an adequate pastoral assistance and a common evangelizing effort in societies that are already secularized? If a stable welcome among us has been given to tens of thousands of Syro-Catholic, Chaldean, Melkite, Armenian, and Maronite brothers (to cite only the Catholic Churches of the Middle East), how well are we providing for them by asking the respective Patriarchs for priests to be sent? And if the personal parishes, called for by the law of the Church, for the Oriental faithful become insufficient for an adequate service, are we disposed to collaborate sincerely towards the erection of structures such as Apostolic Exarchates, or do we rather run the risk of understanding ourselves as the unique custodian of the Ecclesial Institution? I think of what Aleppo used to represent: the Christian capitol of Syria, as it were, with six Catholic cathedrals and other Orthodox ones. I can imagine such a reality reproducing itself in our countries, without scandal to anyone, as long as the primacy remains with Christ, Who is the One known, announced and celebrated, although in various

rites and languages.

Here I have made only some suggestions, which, together with the expert contributions of the other speakers, might give a start to our discussion. Thank you.

**[Courtesy of Vatican Radio]**

Zenit Staff