

Address to the Heads of Churches within the Middle East Council of Churches

Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan

World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches
International and Ecumenical Conference
Christian Presence and Witness in the Middle East

May 22, 2013

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it gives your Father great happiness to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)

Your Beatitudes,
Your Eminences,
People of God,
Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I greet you from Jerusalem, the city of the crucifixion and resurrection and the city that misses your presence among us. Secondly, I greet you on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation, for which I am honored to have been elected President. The LWF is a communion of 143 member churches with over 75 million members in the world. All of these churches are standing with us today. I ask: how can we support the witness of Arab and Middle Eastern Christians?

It is timely that we meet. It is Kairos that we discuss this issue today. We are living in a time of uncertainty, when the Middle East is boiling. It is imperative that we have made the effort to gather in this critical time. I am grateful for the leadership of both the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches for drawing us together.

My theme today is Christian *sumud*. *Sumud* is best translated into English as "steadfastness." *Sumud* is the strength of inner conviction, the confidence that one cannot be shaken, that we will not be moved. *Sumud* is also the steadfastness we commit to one another, our commitment to accompany one another even in the valley of the shadow of death.

This Christian emphasis on *sumud* is not a new message. But it is one that needs to be repeated in our communities today. Even though we are experiencing wars and rumors of wars we trust God who remains steadfast with us. Our steadfast commitment to remain in our lands and contribute to our societies is one expression of our witness, our *martyria*. This *martyria* we have witnessed for 2000 years because in any difficulty the church had a vision for the present and the future. And that vision continues to be that we give life and life abundantly for every human being.

We do not seek martyrdom, but we are willing to sacrifice. Our mission is not one that stands in opposition to any of our neighbors. We claim our vocation, with all our neighbors, to live and work as an integral part of the fabric of our societies, having their sorrows, their dreams, and their aspirations in our hearts as well. We do not live in the mentality of the ghetto, nor in the mentality of a minority complex, nor do we live as *dhimmi* people. We have always been,

as Arab Christians, building our societies, loyal to our countries and nationalities, bringing hope in hopeless situations, and guarantees of developing civil society that respects human rights, freedom of religion, gender justice, and freedom of expression. This process of reform continues to be on the heart of every Arab and Middle Eastern Christian until today. Our hope will not end until we see the Middle East transformed into the values we cherish. Our goal is not merely to survive, but to thrive. I will briefly discuss three of these themes.

Muslim-Christian Engagement

I say today that we Arab Christians have no choice but to be in conversation with our neighbors. I hesitate to use the word “dialogue” since that word could imply a detached, academic exercise. Dialogue is important in some contexts, but we need full engagement. We need engagement with all monotheistic faiths, especially Muslims. This engagement is not just for religious understanding, but to shape our shared political future. We must engage with our Muslim neighbors on the question of the proper relation between religion and state. We must advocate for equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities that can be secured by stable and secure states with reliable constitutions. We must advocate for religious freedom, freedom of conviction, and freedom of conscience. We advocate for these values for the sake of building pluralistic societies that respect all diversities. This is the reason we refuse today to continue to be divided into sects, or millets, or religious groups. We refuse that a state would be divided according to these parameters. This is not a political conversation alone, but a perspective established in our faith that all people are children of God.

Intra-Christian Engagement

In addition to engagement with other faiths, we are finding the need to strengthen intra-Christian engagement. It does us no good to have good relations if we do not address our responsibility for the common witness we have in the Middle East. Our ecumenical work should be strengthened today not for the sake of courtesy and protocol, but for the vital tasks that lie ahead of us.

I call on the leaders of the churches in the Middle East Council of Churches to be the living witness of the church. Our voice is missing at this time of Arab Awakening. Our silence has given the impression that we are afraid or that we simply accept recent developments. The future of Christianity in our region is found when we show a different way, the way of love to our societies along with *sumud* in our countries.

We must admit that, sometimes, there is a competition among churches, including some evangelical free-church groups. But it is time to honest, frankly face these things. It is true that many churches have been in the Middle East for centuries. These historic churches do indeed bear a true witness. But at the same time, we must ask how we can engage with every Arab and Middle Eastern Christian so we can together carry the torch of Christ for our people. I therefore propose two things: that the MECC develop a vision for our shared witness and that we MECC revive a program from our past, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding. We, the Evangelical Family, have a role to play in fostering engagement between us, the evangelical groups, and the member churches of the MECC.

This leads me to the point that we need to engage also with the complexities of the global church, especially in the West. Let me be frank. Sometimes we express disappointment with churches and church-related organizations in the West. We are tired of their speeches. We want action. How can we work with them and their institutions to support the Christians in the Middle East? It is true that Middle East churches bear responsibility to build this relationship. But there is also responsibility in the West to not abandon us in the Middle East.

Western churches do not always understand us when we speak with them. In the western world, conversations like what we are having in this consultation are too easily informed by forms of Christian Zionism, cheap Islamophobia or naïve commitments to academic dialogue to solve the world's problems. These approaches are not helpful to us. We Arab Christians refuse to be used as political commodities!

This is a vital moment for the renewal of intra-Christian engagement. Just as our engagement with Muslim neighbors is not about producing good feelings alone, our vital need for ecumenical engagement must today be pursued with urgency and purpose. This is a Kairos moment. Among Arab Christians, we need frank and open conversation about the challenges we face. We must share with one another our knowledge about the changing nature of political Islam in our various contexts. At the same time, we need to promote a global Christian conversation about this Second Arab Awakening.

Together, we need to strengthen our capacity to diagnose our current condition and then communicate our perspective to other Christians. I expect that the statement we produce at the end of this consultation will be a step toward addressing both challenges. When the two bishops were kidnapped in Syria, both Patriarch Iwas and Patriarch John X said that their answer was to stay in the country and combat every kind of extremism, because the suffering of our people is the suffering of the church. This is Christian *sumud*!

Palestine

When in 2001 the World Council of Churches wrote a letter to us in Jerusalem, asking how the WCC could help, we said "Come and see." Through this, we developed the EAPPI program. Further on, the WCC developed the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum, in which all the churches together, members and non-members of the WCC, develop a common strategy and plans of action for how Christians can raise their voice against the occupation while at the same time accompanying Palestinian Christians to strengthen their *sumud* to stay in the country. WCC staff members were very helpful in the process of developing Kairos Palestine document.

Today, the challenges are different. The world is less interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Maybe the priority is on other issues in the region. To be clear, the core of the problem in the Middle East is denial of the Other's right to exist. One of the political expressions of this problem is the illegal Israeli occupation. Once this conflict is resolved, there will be many other conflicts that can be solved. For this reason, we demand that Jerusalem, the mother of all religions and the city of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, must be on the agenda of every church in the Middle East and throughout the world.

One of my church members, as I was coming here, asked me, "Bishop, you are going again to a conference with good speeches but little fruit." I asked her what she meant. She said,

“Unless we the grassroots feel that the church has a serious plan of action for supporting the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East, then these meetings will mean nothing for us.” I appeal to you that our final statement should not be a good essay alone, but that we have a serious plan of action that will answer the needs of all the churches in the Middle East. Churches in the Middle East need empowerment, advocacy, and education. These are the transformative powers that continue to create leadership committed for its cause and committed for the Middle East.

This is a Kairos moment. It is a chance for us to remind the world that the conflicts in the Middle East are not religious. We know that extremism is not the monopoly of one religion alone and that more than just one people is capable of violence. The future of Arab Christians is not in war or in occupation. The Arab Christian future is in our participation in our societies as an integral part of our peoples, witnessing in every consequence alongside all our neighbors.

Do we seek to be subordinate subjects, or citizens with equal rights and responsibilities? Do we seek toleration and protection? Do we run under the skirts of a warlord? Are we weak and persecuted, and thus in perpetual need for other Christians to rescue us? No! We seek dignity. We seek equality. We seek peace based on justice for ourselves and for all our neighbors. And for this we stand up and speak out in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who affirms our dignity by joining our humanity.

May God bless you.