

The New Global Strategy of an Old Local Church: Church Planting in the Maronite Diaspora

Mouna Ghossain Zaiter, CESNUR, Waco, 4-8 June 2014

On July 21, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI announced the creation of a Maronite eparchy in France and asked the Lebanese Patriarch, Beshara Raï, to appoint a bishop for this country. The bishop will also be in charge of 15 others European countries that he will have to visit regularly. Bishop Gemayel was nominated in 2012. The eparchy will be headquartered in Paris. Up until this historic date for Maronites and the Eastern Church, Maronites only had two parishes in France: one in Paris, the other one in Marseille. A study was subsequently conducted at the behest of Vatican authorities to evaluate the real situation of Eastern Christians, their numbers in Europe, and their social status. The results conveyed the presence of a “terrible pain”, in the words of Monsignor Gemayel, and that the Roman Catholic Church had to show, through an emphatic gesture, its solidarity with and benevolence towards these Middle Eastern Christians dispersed all across Europe. The Vatican decided to give the Maronites in exile this representative and unifying role. However, there was a need for the French Catholic Church to conduct its own study to evaluate the real needs in order for it to accept this papal proposition.

These past few years, the number of Maronites has increased significantly in France and in Europe (of course there are already numerous in North and South America and in Australia, but we will only speak of France). We inventory about 80 000 Maronites in France. The majority of them are bilingual (Lebanese Arabic and French, or English mostly), influenced by two cultures, which renders it easier for them to socially integrate the French and European melting pot. They have fled war, insecurity, in addition to economic, political, and social destabilization in their country, in order to resettle in Europe to find a job, and build a brighter future.; some of them hope it will only be temporarily with the hope of one day going back home. It seems a majority of Maronites have chosen to settle in France probably because of the historical bonds between France and Lebanon and perhaps also because of the social security system and free education including at the university level. One must note that a lot of these people have been raised in Catholic schools where French was the major language.

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The Maronites and other Arab Christians started immigrating to Europe as the Middle East was mired in war in the 1980s and political instability caused little hope for a better future. The population's pessimism grew as sustainable peace in the whole region is still facing successive failures.

Since his nomination in 2012 as Maronite Bishop for France, Monsignor Gemayel is very active in France and Europe, striving to get acquainted with his dispersed Maronites and to evaluate their numbers. He resides in Paris and tries to acquire a location that would become the Maronites' eparchy, which still does not possess any official headquarters. As of now, a building has been found and the purchase is under way.

Towards the end of 2013, the bishop summoned the priests and laymen who are under his jurisdiction, and invited bishops from the United States and Canada to take part in a synod. There was a need to establish something concrete to guide these Maronite priests and those few Lebanese laymen who want to help in organizing and unifying the Maronite Church in Europe. A road map and an organized movement were needed, in order to be able to showcase and promote the interests and issues of this project. The witnesses who came from different continents, testified and explained the difficulties encountered when it was time for them to start out their unifying endeavor, how they overcame obstacles, and through what means were they able to unify and build Maronite Churches across the world!

My point here is to try and see how such an endeavor can operate here since French society is so radically dissimilar to societies in other countries. France is not the Americas. It facilitates the settlement and assimilation of individuals, defends their rights, helps them on the social level, provides them with free healthcare, educates them as the majority of its universities are free; but when it comes to brandishing one's religion, secularism is swiftly pushed to the front rows. We simply don't talk about it.

I have invested a lot of my time in closely following this challenge first launched by the Pope in Rome, and now spearheaded by Bishop Gemayel. How will he be able to draw his Maronites

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back to the parishes he is currently founding in French cities? How will he lure them away from Latin/Roman Catholic Churches? During his inauguration, the bishop announced his mission's slogan in Arabic: « أصالة ورسالة, Authenticity and mission ». He explained this choice as due to evangelical engagement, but mostly due to the Maronites' own cultural and ecclesiastical heritage: one had to work with the authenticity and mission drive of the first apostles, one had to be borderless with a universal goal. He said he understood how this is hard to achieve, as hardened hearts need to be transformed, pushed towards breaking the routine of life in exile, and staying away from weariness and oblivion. Dissoluteness, dispersion, and most of all indifference to the heritage Maronites possess should be stopped. There needs to be a return to this universal mission and to the Maronite identity. Striving is needed in the hopes to unite the community here in the present and in the future.

As a member of the newly founded Maronite parish in Bordeaux, France, and as a scholar trained in political science and with a doctorate on Christian and Muslim relations, I am building a data base of all the Lebanese Maronites in the area, first to help the church get in touch with all of them, and second to ground my own analysis of an original church planting experience. The different points I am going to develop here have been raised by this collaborative work in progress between the priest and myself.

To give a concrete explanation of how this can operate, I will explain the case of Bordeaux, the city where I live. I have been able to closely follow the beginning of the implementation of these episcopal recommendations which began when the first priest was appointed to serve the Arabophone community, especially the Maronite community. I will explain how he plans to run his mission while also helping the French Catholic community (that is to say the regular parish).

The appointed priest is Father Nabil Mouannes. He arrived last November, after been served 21 years in the USA: in San Diego and in other cities in the United States. I asked him to explain what differences he saw between the two countries. He explained to me that in San Diego he started his mission with six people. But because the religious landscape is so intense in the USA, these people were quickly persuaded to give money to build their own church. It might have

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been also more important for them to start a parish since they were so far away from their home land. Over the years he succeeded in planting one in San Diego area and one in Las Vegas and four in other cities as Sacramento, Stockton, Denver and Phoenix, etc. He turned one of his parishes into a popular pilgrimage center, St Ephrem in El Cajon. Even though such operations were time and energy consuming, parishioners were enthusiastic and the parishes grew regularly and steadily. Of course, Father Nabil is proud of such an accomplishment and, even though, he will not admit it publicly, one can feel that he misses the excitement all these parishes generated in the USA, because the contrast with his new mission is quite striking, as we are going to see.

Indeed, here in France and in Bordeaux in particular, there is a bigger Lebanese community than the one he started with in San Diego, but these people have become “very French”, so that his engagement in this new parish proves to be difficult.

For a start, building on his experience in the United States Father Mouannes, he distributed a questionnaire asking people what they expected of him and whether they were ready to take part in an activity that could be constructive and would endow them with a responsibility in the process of establishing a new Maronite church in Bordeaux. For example, he suggested creating a choir, serving in the mass, organizing pilgrimages or youth meetings, Arabic and Syriac courses, etc. Approximately 70 people answered this questionnaire, all of them choosing one, two, or more proposed engagements.

Yet, for Father Nabil, once the questionnaires were returned, things weren't running so smoothly; attendance was not guaranteed. Father Mouannes was surprised as the number of attendees was declining every Sunday. Father Mouannes, tried to inculcate in their spirit the sense of being instituted by a special mission. The explanation is that usually in France, parishes will not ask you to do too many things, though this is slowly changing, but in any case few people will get involved. If you ask too much, they will not come back.

The father was upset, he felt the ritual was not mastered, nor were the hymns, since of course the parishioners had not attended a Maronite mass outside of their holidays in Lebanon. He

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strenuously work to structure the community on organograms and on modern means of communications as, Facebook, emails, texting messages, etc.

Another major point is funding. In France, because of the confiscation of Church properties at the end of the 19th century, the State made amends with the 1905 law of separation of Church and State that provided that church buildings would be maintained by the city, and cathedrals by the French state. Thus, the Catholic Church does not need to maintain its buildings, except the few built after 1905, and consequently it does not ask too much money from its members. The “*denier du culte*” which means tithing, that in the old days meant the dime, 10% of revenues, now is barely at around 1%. So that Catholics are no longer used to giving a lot of money to the Church and the Church dares not ask for too much for fear people will just flee...

We can then understand that for the new Maronite parishioners, aiding financially the parish is not their priority: when asked to contribute, they complain of unemployment, the economic crisis, and that the cost of life in France is very high. For them, the Maronite Church is here to help them and not to ask them for money. If Father Nabil asks again, they will not show up.

Linked to all these problems is the major issue of the relations with the local Catholic Cardinal Ricard, bishop of the diocese of Bordeaux, who is the only authority able to grant a church building to various communities. So far, a church has been lent to the Maronite parish, but it might be temporary only if the ongoing testing period proves a failure. Father Nabil must prove that more and more people attend mass and are involved. The cardinal said it from the start, first I watch you, and then we'll see if we give you a church or not. How to entice the cardinal to grant the church permanently if there are too few people engaged who want a church of their own? Father Nabil is thus trying his best to reach out to other Middle Eastern Christians and also to Roman Catholics as well to swell the ranks of his little parish.

The church, St Victor, is currently located in downtown Bordeaux, but it is already a more or less active Catholic parish and the two communities must share services. Father Nabil often says two masses on Sundays, one for the regular Catholic, then one in the Maronite ritual. The church sits

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in the middle of a nice green park with trees and adjacent rooms set to be revamped. A house at the end of the park is shared between three retired French priests and the Maronite priest. Several public institutions and private firms are interested by this piece of real estate because of its central location. Some are hypocritically proposing to only buy the rooms and the park, implying that the church itself does not interest them. Others want to buy the whole complex, which is the case of an adjoining private hospital which plans to expand and needs the land. Bordeaux's municipality also has a project involving the construction of a school on the premises, etc.

What we need to know is that Cardinal Ricard authorized the sale of two churches (built after 1905) in Bordeaux (either forced to do so or of his own will) for the sum of 1.5 million euros. The churches were misused, there were no priests to conduct masses and not enough faithful to fill the pews. They needed to be sold to refloat the diocese's funds.

On the good side of the game, one must say that Cardinal Ricard (who was for several years the president of French Bishops) has been a major defender of Middle Eastern Christians for many years now. He makes sure that this issue is frequently discussed, and that the French people are aware of the tragedy of their exile and persecution. He has happily come to all the feasts organized by the Maronites: for example for the celebration of St Maroon (February 9), and for Palm Sunday April 13 when Bishop Gemayel came to Bordeaux: he has then celebrated mass with them, shared their feasts and meals.

Yet, we have the sense that he is hesitant, or rather biding his time to see and evaluate the engagement of the Maronites. When Father Nabil broaches the issue of the church, he cuts it short and answers that for the time being he doesn't have one that he could give them entirely, that is to say one that would be unoccupied one. He says that they must keep sharing a church with French Catholics which as we saw is their current situation.

Well aware of this challenge, Father Mouannes works tirelessly to come up with new ideas to mobilize his parishioners in order for them to help him seize this opportunity, and show the Cardinal their religious fervor, their attachment to a place that brings them together to worship in

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Arabic and in Aramean, talk about their country of origin, their traditions, their plans for the future, etc. He visits families who want to welcome him. He visits the sick in hospitals and prays with them. He blesses and wishes success to children and students while setting up sporting activities and discussions involving current matters affecting them and that are happening in the society they live in. He has formed prayer groups composed of men and women who congregate with him once a month. The elderly appreciate him a great deal; he reminds them of Lebanon and the fact that they pray in their mother tongue moves them a lot. He hopes he will soon be able to start officiating at weddings, christenings, and hopefully much later, at funerals. But one of the things that Father Mouannes has a hard time understanding or pushing his parishioners to overcome, is the fear they have that through their diligence and loyalty to this temporary Maronite church, they will be branded as “communitarians” and find themselves in some kind of ghettos. Of course there’s a comparison to be done here with the United States: Where all the communities can freely practice their faiths and above all self-manage it and proclaim it publicly without worrying about what the government has to say about it. France, since the separation of state and religion, the radicalization of Islam, and the emergence of other radical religious movements, has become very vigilant and aggressive towards what we call here communitarian ghettos.

Lebanese Maronites don’t want to be branded as “communitarians”. They fear sectarianism. Besides, their origin in these Lebanese mountains pushed them later on towards coastal cities, across the seas, and all over the world. They spread out, immersed themselves, and embraced their new adoptive countries. Maronites adapt easily to new societies, which is where they draw their strength from. But the fragility of nostalgia for Lebanese roots and traditions, the Christian mission that they claim, that they carry with them, starts to wane and become precarious. The differences between the Lebanese experience in the USA and in France are striking, we must stress this again.

Here, in the United States, Maronites are surrounded by so many religions, free to proclaim their faith and mission from the rooftops. They draw strength from this environment; they are not

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disturbed by living in a community or in a ghetto. On the contrary, they feel more powerful, enjoying growing visibility as they come together. Belonging to a specific religious group is a positive identity marker. Not so in France.

Traditionally, secular France is easily shocked when it comes to religion and one needs to be aware of our own form of political correctness when it comes to religions: there are religions that cannot be attacked: for example, even if one may sense some growing anti-Semitism, the general feeling is that one cannot attack the Jewish community due to the guilt the country carries from the past. Also, regarding Islam, even though a lot of people have problems accepting it as the country's second religion, nobody dares publicly attack it for fear of being labelled "islamophobic". However, you can shoot the Catholics and desecrate churches, not many people will mind. Perhaps this is the result of centuries of rivalry between the state and the Church or simply because any given society likes having a scape goat and who is going to be offended if one beats the Catholics who keep a low profile. For example, a socialist MP who was running for election last April publicly attacked the French Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, who represented France in Rome for the canonization of John Paul II and John XXIII. He cried that "the Republic has no business being" in such places. What is worse is that nobody dared to respond to or confront him and defend Catholics who still constitute France's first religion. The Maronite, who of course belong to the general Roman Catholic Church suffer undoubtedly from such a situation, since they fear they may be attacked for being plain Catholic.

What conclusion can we draw from this short survey of the Bordeaux Maronite parish? First we can say that such church planting is not easy. Interestingly, there are more and more Evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist etc churches being planted in the country and they do meet with success, with large assemblies etc. Ironically it might be easier to start a radically different type of religion than trying to dynamize, boost, an old institution that is facing quite a lot of problems of its own.

The challenges the Maronites face in Europe and in France in particular are clearly understood by Patriarch Raï and Bishop Gemayel. In the Synod in Paris in December 2013, they explained

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that the Maronites have to see their role as that of Christian missionaries who must evangelize the people they live with. Bishop Gemayel refuses to use the term “diaspora” that too many people now use also to describe the Lebanese in exile. He said “We are not Jewish, we do not share the same history.” Rome is expecting us to revitalize Christianity in the West, we must be witnesses of our faith to encourage the other Catholics to do the same. Our mission as Maronites is to show the world the rites of these early Christians that we have preserved as faithfully as possible, including the Aramean language, to keep talking in this big village that is the Earth, as Jesus did.

Such a strategy implies that the Maronites in exile retain their identity as Maronite and even strengthen it instead of diluting it in their acculturation to a culture they already shared to a large extent back home. In my data base, I do have a fair number of mixed families about 70%. The challenge of the new parish is to keep being rewarding enough in terms of reciprocal benefits (sociability, spirituality etc.) to make sure the Lebanese member of the couple will bring the French born member so that the children will be raised within the Maronite parish. Many children fear to be labelled “communitarian” as we saw above. Yet, we do start seeing more and more non Lebanese people come to the church.

This phenomenon has already been observed in Chaldean parishes near Paris. Through friendship networks, more and more French born Catholics are attracted to the Chaldean services because they enjoy there rituals that link them closer to the early centuries of Christianity. To some extent, the Oriental Churches in the West may indeed be on the path of revitalizing Roman Catholicism, not by antagonizing it as non-Catholic religions are felt to do, but on the contrary by returning it to its very sources. If this proves a long term process, the strategy of the pope and of the Maronite patriarch and bishops will be successful.