

The resistance of one of the oldest Catholic Churches: How Pope Francis is trying to push and to speed the Lebanese Maronite Church into change for the better

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If there is a subject that concerns the whole world today, leaving nobody indifferent, it is the persecution of Eastern Christians. Many people are discovering the existence of these Christians, their roots in countries where they believed that only oil, gas and war could interest the world. One of the most ancient Eastern churches is the Maronite church, this community still very powerful because it has never experienced a schism. It is rich in vocations. It has inherited a large of source of wealth through a great sacrifices and hard work of its people and clergy which resulted in a huge property portfolio. It has invested in educational, medical institutions, etc. It is also well established worldwide. Its expansion is still growing in the whole world as we can see it lately in France and in the whole of Europe.

This is the only Eastern church, indigenous and Roman whose patriarch, Bechara Raï, was appointed Cardinal. He may therefore elect the Pope of Rome or be himself elected one day. Pope Francis has not yet visited Lebanon, perhaps he will one day, as his two predecessors did. Lebanon is the historic homeland of the Maronite church; it is till today the land of Maronites “par excellence” so that. Lebanon is considered as the “holy land“ of the Maronites. The wealth of this church can be estimated by looking at some numbers: On a small scale country of just over ten thousand square kilometers and slightly over 4 million people, the Maronites are estimated to be 1.600 000 people. The Maronite Patriarchate has ten eparchies in its homeland. He has throughout the country, fifteen religious orders for women and men.

The social success of this church is highly due to its historical role and especially to its mission through the centuries. Besides the religious services, the church has always been marked by a duty to educate the population, in villages and in towns with no social and religious discrimination. Education is compulsory for girls and for boys. The church is the initiator in this field in the East and the West.

On March the 15th, in this great occasion of the Annunciation, which is considered a national feast in Lebanon, celebrated by Muslims and Christians, Patriarch Rai, addressed his clergy, as Pope Francis did when he addressed his Roman Curia; "We must return to theological foundations of our Antiochian traditions, Syrian, Maronite; we must highlight these traditions to renew and repeat this missionary dynamism and achieve our flock, push our institutions to

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renew and jump again. We must redefine our future in a troubled world today to meet our Maronite Mission in all areas and in all dimensions, whether educational, cultural, social, political or economic.” By these words the head of the Maronite Church calls for a renewal, a profound change, called in the theological term “metanoia” and calls for concrete action to help the people to overcome challenges and to face daily obstacles.

When Pope Francis spoke to the Roman Curia he enumerated fifteen diseases is suffered from, he should have included the Eastern churches among the recipients of his famous homily, especially the Maronite church. If Cardinal Raï had heard him, perhaps he would have felt targeted in the evocation of the "disease to accumulate", the "exhibitionism" and the "worldly profit." In order for his clergy and bishops in particular to make their self-criticism, it would have to feel itself targeted with papal admonitions. Is he ready to imitate the gestures of Pope Francis whose detachment from material wealth surprised the world? He sells gifts offered to him, distributes the money he received to charities? The white cassock of Pope Francis calls for humility. It is so simple, devoid of gilt brocade or dazzling ornaments. How different is the luxury of jewelry, gilding and also the heavy gold cross conspicuously worn by Patriarch Raï!

In each of the homilies the Maronite Patriarch addresses Christian families who are devastated by the social crisis and the war next door, impoverished, with children to educate, with teenagers and young graduates who do not find any work, he begs them not to sell their land, their homes, not to flee far away but to resist. He urges them, to stand firm and remain attached to their land, their origin and not to give into exile. But he fails to convince these people, and the young who are so numerous to apply for exit visa. These young people are most, often accompanied by their parents when they are old enough to work, and we see a line out the various embassies of America or the Gulf oil countries, seeking visa immigration, employment contracts, and a better future.

Like so many other things, the Lebanese war that shook the country for several decades, has inevitably influenced the clergy of this church. Allegiances, policy recommendations to the faithful, the lack of interest in the fate of the youth and some real scandals have greatly tarnished the image of the religious authority and this powerful community reference. Not to

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mention the various conflicts and the Cold War between related parties, both left and right, sometimes fights between Christians. Memories are still vivid of Arafat's famous speech during the Palestinian war in Lebanon, in which he formulated the wish to "throw Christians overboard all."

After all kinds of wars, the Middle East is now upset and its borders are being questioned. Pope Francis multiplies religious initiatives to help and defends the persecuted Christians population in this region in torment. He decided to reform and dust off a worldwide Catholic church and some local Churches, frozen in its material wealth, its political stubbornness and his selfish comfort. He repeats every week that much of the Catholic clergy betrays the teaching of Christ in its exercise, willfully ignores the wishes of his Christian mission, etc.

Pope Francis sympathizes with Eastern Christians and at the same time, speaks regularly with their authorities to monitor the situation and urges their leaders to the renewal in Christian charity which is supposed to serve even their enemies. In the Roman Curia, Maronite Cardinal Rai is not forgotten by the Pope and he is received in the Vatican regularly.

The Lebanese Constitution requires the election of a president chosen among the Maronite Christians. Yet that the country has been for more than one full year without a president because the Maronites cannot agree on one single candidate. This vacancy arouses particular concern among Maronite authorities' policymakers. The Maronite politicians fight over this position, they consult with internal forces, also external to the country, trying in vain to meet to elect a new president.

The Maronite bishops, meanwhile, meet once a month with their patriarch. They discuss the priority issues of the community, talk of political power that is hidden beneath their feet, complain of having their hands tied for some reason, and then they give a press conference before dispersing and regain their eparchies.

Yet earlier, ten years ago, they had managed to be among the main initiators of the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon there. Thus, why are they so powerless today? Is it a lack of courage? Are they victims of hidden internal divisions? Or does the problem lie in the western world which would refrain from supporting their initiative, just as the West

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declined to resist the hegemony of ISIS and other extremist movements in Iraq or in Syria. Yet, it's still easier to blame someone else for being passive while you are not even acting.

Maronite universities, such as high schools and colleges throughout Lebanon, had played and still play an important role in educating each generation. Educating children in Lebanon falls within the obstacle course. The quality of teaching is recognized worldwide, but at what price? Religious missions have made up for the lack of public education, yet this religious education is very expensive. Lower class families pay exorbitant tuition fees. Whether they have a child or more, regardless of their academic level and quality of their work, these families never receive tangible incentives like financial aid or various benefits. But no initiatives such as school or at university scholarships were established to push forward young people who stand out intellectually, whether from a privileged background or not. It is only in the case of orphans, that sometimes these Catholic institutions support them for free.

The Maronite Church has also invested in the medical sector. Thus it runs hospitals, retirement homes backed and often dependent convents. We count also building complexes to help, according to church, the young people who want to settle down. Nothing is left to chance, preaching the social and family development. The simultaneous marriage grouped several couples spread in Lebanon today. Young are seeking to reduce their expenses. The church sponsors and blesses these initiatives but the does not engage its own finance, in fact it is largely funded by wealthy Lebanese diaspora or by some notables who are looking to buy a local power.

The real scandals, especially in predominantly Christian areas are numerous. In Lebanon a foreigner can appropriate land or apartment without a local sponsorship difficult to acquire. The State, still prohibits the Palestinian to become owners in and out of the camps. What can today the Lebanese state, while 25% of its population is foreigners?

The Maronite Church also refused to sell Palestinian but in the case of foreigners, she closed her eyes and agreed to sell. It was seduced by the UAE and Saudi petrodollars. The scandal broke out when it is too late and the population finds a palace or a mosque erected in his everyday life.

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The Maronite Order has a university in the most beautiful area of the country, in Kaslik, a print shop, several publishing houses, bookstores, a renowned hospital, working with the brightest doctors.

Pope John Paul reproached the Lebanese clergy, when he visited Lebanon, not to exercise charity as his wealth should permit it: why would its hospitals not treat his parishioners for free? Why doesn't it offer any rebate in university fees? Why doesn't it proceed with a distribution of books? Why doesn't it hire for jobs that had to be filled in its hospitals, convents, schools, graduates of its universities and its own parishioners? It preferred to recruit an extremely cheap foreign labor, mostly Asian or Indian.

Pope Benedict XVI came on a pastoral visit to the seat of the Patriarchate in Bkerky, to encourage Christians to cling to their land and to abandon the project of exile. He was annoyed by the plethora of luxurious cars in the courtyard of the Patriarchate, by the vanity of churchmen, portly, proud of their luxury. He wondered aloud - thinking journalists would hear and report it in the press: he said he wondered if it was a pastoral visit or if he had come to attend car show¹.

When Pope Benedict XVI met the Maronite and Christian youth in Beyrouth he spoke clearly to them about the bitterness of emigration. The challenge of the oldest Christian catholic Maronite church in the Middle East is huge. Surrounded by adversities, persecuted by divisions within and with lack of courage from their part, made them fail there great mission to help each other and to promote a culture of peace and justice.

This year, it has a huge significance in their collective conscience because it is the commemoration of the centennial of the famine wagged over them by the Ottoman Empire, governed by the "Young Turks". About two hundred fifty thousand people died from that famine in Mount of Lebanon. The Maronite Patriarch Hoayek at the time, with the Lebanese Maronite order, tried to help the face of their people by going out in the whole world seeking

¹ Pope Benedictus speech from Bkerki in Annahar News Paper , September 11, 2012.

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help, and aid to their needy people. They succeeded. They sold most of their “wakfs” properties and possessions to save their faithful.

Today, where the shadow of Daesh is overshadowing the Middle East and surrounding the borders of Lebanon, the Maronite Patriarch and all his council of bishops are called to make radical operations of charity of unity and of modesty to save their existence and themselves from the sword which is poised over their neck.

The Maronite Church has always be known being always close to her people in the liturgical life, as well as in the economic life. We can hope that as in the history of the Maronite Church, the changes and the transformation within its structure will finally change its current policy and bring more justice, more liberation, and a continued hope to the whole Arabic world.