

"THE CHANGING ECCLESIAL CONTEXT: IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON LIVING TOGETHER IN DIVERSITY"

The Beirut Conference of the World Council of Churches and of the Middle East Council of Churches.

Migration is indeed at the top of the agenda of every world organization. Beirut in Lebanon has been the site of the Public Hearing on Church and Migration organized as joint venture of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches (Mecc) which was held on 14, 15 and 16 of April 2008. The theme chosen for this year's meeting was: "**The changing ecclesial context: impact of migration on living together in diversity**". At the opening of the Public Hearing were present representatives of the Muslim Leadership as well as of the Christians Churches. The opening session was introduced by representatives of the six largest faith communities of Lebanon namely: the Muslim Druze, Shiites and Sunnites and the Metropolitan of the Maronite Christians Boulos Matar, of the Metropolitan of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antiochia George Khodr, and of the Catholicos His Holiness Aram I, Metropolitan of the Armenian Orthodox Church of the Holy See of Cilicia. His Holiness Aram I hosted the meeting at the Catholicosate of the Holy See of Cilicia in Beirut together with the Mecc's Secretary General, Guirgis Ibrahim Saleh.

The presence together around the same table of both Muslim and Christian Leaders witnessed to an important message: migration, it was said, is not a Muslim or a Christian phenomenon, it is, first of all, a human phenomenon and it can become an exemplary element of cooperation amongst the different religious communities on the practical level.

Amongst the participants were representatives of the academic and socio-political world of Lebanon who contributed their view of the causes and the impact of migration in the Middle East, of the peace process, as well as of the relationship between Muslims and Christians.

Particularly moving and meaningful the presence and witnessing of a group of young Christians from the Catholic Maronite Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church. They spoke about their situation as young Christians, their hopes for a future of peace and how migration is, at times, the only possible option they have. The debate had emerged issues such as the place of multiculturalism and diversity in the context of the peace process in the Middle East.

The place, problems and contribution of migrants to Lebanon was also touched upon during the Public Hearing with particular mention, but not, solely, of the largely Catholic Filipino community.

Following the Public Hearing, the annual meeting of the Global Ecumenical Network on Migration (GEM) took place in the same city of Beirut on the 17, 18 and 19 of April. This is the ecumenical network that gathers together regional ecumenical organizations and Churches' Offices that deal with the phenomenon of migration and its impact on the Church of today.

The Australian Catholic Migrants and Refugees Office (ACMRO) is an invited member of GEM and is represented by Fr. Maurizio Pettenà, CS, National Pastoral Planning Assistant who participated as a discussant during the Public Forum and gave a presentation on the strategies of implementing a national project for pastoral care to migrants on behalf of the Catholic Church in

Australia. The meeting encountered a wide resonance in the international media, including the Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano*.

The contribution from Australia was followed very closely as we are a Church diversified in more than one way: through the active presence of diverse migrant communities and the enriching and steadily growing presence of the Eastern Catholic Churches. These aspects make us particularly sensitive to the situation of Christians in the Middle East, making the visit to Lebanon a learning process in itself. Census data cannot tell us exactly the number of Eastern Catholics in Australia but it is estimated that they are close to five per cent of the total number of Catholics. They are heavily concentrated in the two of the three largest dioceses (Melbourne as Australasia's largest and Sydney as the third largest); as they have become more settled over the past three decades. These Churches include the Catholic Maronite Church as the largest, the Ukrainian Church, the Melkite Church and the Chaldean Church (mainly from Iraq) these all have their own Bishops, as well as priests and laity. Other Eastern Catholics in Australia include members of Churches such as the Coptic (mainly from Egypt) and the Syro-Malabar (mainly from southern India).

The Church in Australia can well be a "locus theologicus" from where we can contribute the witnessing that "the passage from monoculture to multicultural societies can be a sign of the living presence of God in history and in the community of mankind, for it offers a providential opportunity for the fulfillment of God's plan for a universal communion. This new historical context is characterized by the thousand different faces of humanity and, unlike the past, diversity is becoming commonplace in very many countries. Therefore Christians [in Australia, n. o. r.] are called to give witness to and practice not only the spirit of tolerance - itself a great achievement, politically and culturally speaking, not to mention religiously - but also respect for the other's identity" (*Erga Migrantes*, par. 9).

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