



Conflict in the Middle East

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As the Middle East continues to be shaken by instability and chaos, the only Christian antidote to fear is faith. Christians are named for their Master who did not promise a bed of roses. Christ said to his followers: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (Mk 8:34–35). Those that inspire by their courage, determina-

tion and faith are those who stay in their ancestral homelands, knowing that it is their vocation and mission to bear witness to Christ in the lands he knew best. They do not fear nor accuse, they do not isolate themselves behind denominational walls nor remain paralyzed in bitterness. Rather they look ahead, attempting to discern the way forward. Faith is

the only sure way beyond fear and isolation to openness and service, seeking Christ and following him as he goes out in ever widening circles. Faith is the deep-rooted sense that the victory has already been won in the resurrection and that no matter what crosses are encountered on the way, extremism, hatred and rejection, the forces of death have been overcome in Christ's cross and life reigns supreme.

Hundreds of Christian schools, universities, homes for the elderly and the disabled, hospitals and other institutions offering social and educational services are spread across the face of the Middle East. They are characterised by their devoted service to the societies in which they were established and by their openness to all, Muslim and Jew as well as other minorities. These institutions represent a very important Christian outreach beyond the hold of fear and isolation provoked by the present situation of war, instability and violence that has characterised the Middle East in recent history. Christian institutions, particularly schools, universities and hospitals, are often

Pope's Intention (universal): that a spirit of dialogue, encounter, and reconciliation emerge in the Near East, where diverse religious communities share their lives together.

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places where Christians and Muslims (as well as Jews in the Holy Land) not only rub shoulders but where relationships are established and discourse on diversity and respect is developed. It is through these institutions that Christians can and do leave their mark on society. The Christian presence in the Middle East cannot be measured by statistical importance but rather by the significance of the contribution to society, particularly in the service of education, health and relief work and in its language of love.

The continued promotion of Christian institutions at the service of all must go hand in hand with the development of an appropriate Christian discourse about the contemporary world. This discourse must distinguish Christians as voices for justice, peace, equality, pardon and selfless love. Fear often provokes the development

of a discourse that is insular, closing Christians off from their neighbours and others with whom Christians share their daily lives. Faced with Muslim or Jewish extremism, the Christian must discern, making distinctions between extremists and those who are friends, neighbours and compatriots, between extremism and those manipulated by the extremists. Christians must also remember that they are no strangers to extremism, the toxic confusion of religion with political interests and the manipulation of God talk in order to justify self-interest and greed. The renewal of faith passes through a commitment to dialogue with Muslims (and Jews in the Israel-Palestine arena) in a frank and honest call to mutual respect and shared labour in building up a society free from oppression, ignorance, violence and fear. ❤️