Remember the Exiles

The problem of refugees facing the churches in the Middle East

Joseph Cornelius Donnelly and Drew Christiansen | OCTOBER 11, 2010

Being a refugee should be a temporary condition. Under international law, people who have fled their homes out of fear of persecution should be able to return home once conditions improve or, when they are prevented from doing so, make a new home elsewhere. To be uprooted from one’s home is especially traumatic in the Middle East, where family, home and ancestral ties to the land are essential to one’s identity. People hold on to their house keys years after they have been expelled or taken flight.

Once a year, for example, Palestinians forced from their homes in West Jerusalem in 1948 recall their old homes by shaking their keys in a public display of dispossession and longing. Exploring that attachment, the Israeli daily Haaretz published on July 23 a profile of Claudette Habesch, the president of Caritas Jerusalem, who was evicted from her Jerusalem home during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. “I am prepared to forgive them,” Mrs. Habesch told reporter Akiva Eldar, referring to those who took over her childhood home, “but I will never forget the years of suffering of a little girl of 7, in whose bed another child was sleeping and whose bicycle another child was riding.”

Generations of Displaced

Today in the Middle East, living as a refugee has become a permanent condition. More than four million Palestinian refugees from the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1968 are scattered across the region. The Lebanese civil war (1975-90), the 2006 Israeli war against Hezbollah and ongoing internal and regional tensions have led hundreds of thousands more, both Christian and Muslim, to emigrate from Lebanon. The 1990–91 Persian Gulf war and the subsequent sanctions against Iraq sent tens of thousands of Iraqis in flight to neighboring countries, where they eked out an existence at the edge of society. The chaos that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 also led hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in search of asylum from religious and political persecution.

Because of the vagaries of international politics, few in these waves of “displaced” Iraqis, unlike the Palestinian refugees of 1948, ever received official recognition. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated in 2008 that across the Middle East more than two million Iraqi refugees were under its mandate, but only some 300,000 were officially registered. The unregistered hid in urban slums, fending for themselves in the gray economy. A large portion of the Iraqi refugee population is Christian. As of 2007, there were an estimated one million refugees in Jordan alone and an equal number in Syria, with an additional 2.8 million internally displaced persons in Iraq proper, with most of the remaining Christian population clustered in the autonomous Kurdish zone in the north of the country. Maryanne Loughry of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College, summarizing the view of many who have studied the situation, describes the plight of the Iraqi refugees as “a crisis that is deepening and without an end in sight.”

The upcoming Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East (Oct. 10-24) will consider both emigration and immigration as matters of special pastoral concern, and well it should, because the numbers of Catholics involved are significant. (In Saudi Arabia alone, for example, an estimated two million Latin
Catholic immigrants are without pastoral care and are denied the right to worship.) It seems, however, that in the Paul VI Synod Hall, the auditorium where members of the synod will make their addresses and take their votes, the uninvited guest that has gone unacknowledged is the refugee church: the Christian refugees, especially from Iraq, and the larger refugee population that the local and international church have served for so long.

Reasons for Silence

The Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East, at its congress in 1999, gave barely a nod to the refugee issue. The congress made many recommendations about the emigrant Eastern Catholic communities and their links with their communities of origin, but it spoke not at all of refugees, only of “the displaced” (Proposition 82). That characterization avoided legal entanglements that could have required host countries to accord to the so-called displaced the rights of refugees and so the council recommended that political authorities try to return them to their countries of origin “by all the means available.” The recommendation was not a harsh demand for forced repatriation, but it seemed to be a way to say the displaced were unwelcome. In the case of Palestinian refugees, it was also a way to make a political statement: that under international law the refugees had a right to return to the homes in Israel from which they had been driven.

The Eastern churches, including the Latin church, and the countries in which they reside face a difficult dilemma: Deny the reality of the refugee population and retain the existing political and social arrangements of the host countries; or demand that host countries accept and integrate them and thus invite disruptive, very likely violent social change.

Church social teaching would seem to urge the integration into new lands. Levels of acceptance without formal integration vary from country to country. Refugees of long standing live normal lives in Syria and Jordan; Jordan grants passports to many. In Lebanon, refugees have only lately been granted the right to work, but outside the professions. More recent refugees frequently live in the shadows because an acknowledgment of their presence would upend local political balances.

If the churches openly support full integration of newcomers into their host countries, delicate religious and political settlements will be upset. In Lebanon, for example, the religious balance of the country would tilt heavily to the Muslim side, giving greater weight to the Shiites and thereby placing in jeopardy the rationale for Christians holding the presidency. In Jordan, Palestinians, already a de facto majority, would clearly outnumber the native population. Israel has ruled out even a symbolic return of Palestinians to the Jewish state for fear of compromising the Jewish majority and with it the country’s national identity.

It is therefore easy to see why the synod’s working document avoids the refugee question. It is as nettlesome as any issue could be. Why should the churches, which are a minority presence in the region, take on a problem with such little hope of success and such great risk of unhappy outcomes? We believe there are both pastoral and prophetic reasons for the synod not only to make recommendations for social-pastoral action, but also to speak out on behalf of “the refugee church” and the wider refugee population.

The Pastoral Needs of Displaced People

First, the officially recognized and especially the unrecognized refugees in the Middle East represent a human rights challenge that is not being addressed by the sending countries or the host countries or the international community. Having repeatedly committed itself to the service of human rights beginning with Pope John XXIII’s encyclical “Peace on Earth” and the Second Vatican Council’s “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” may the church in synod avoid addressing the Middle East’s refugees because it is politically inconvenient? Must those across the region who have been forcibly displaced from their homes with no reasonable hope of return remain stateless persons denied their human rights for the foreseeable future?

The church’s teaching on migration is rooted in its affirmation of the dignity of the human person further supported by the unity of the human family in creation, covenantal duties to the stranger and Christian love of neighbor. Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See’s permanent observer to the United Nations in Geneva and one of the church’s leading experts on migration, points out that Catholic teaching on human rights supports several propositions relevant to the refugee question:
Moving away from the dangers of violence, hunger and oppression is a natural right of every person;

The exercise of this right needs to be regulated by states;

The right of hospitality and integration into a host society should balance the common good with the rights of the individual;

Forcibly displaced persons have a just claim on the international community to be assisted in order to return to a normal existence;

Displaced people searching for a more dignified life but present in an irregular situation in a host country are not without rights.

An international regime should be established to better manage all forced human displacement, a social phenomenon that is transitional by nature.


Second, service of the refugees is an immediate social-pastoral problem for the church. Local pastors, bishops and Catholic Charities agencies, as well as nongovernmental organizations like Catholic Near East Welfare Association/Pontifical Mission and the Jesuit Refugee Service, scramble to assist the invisible refugees in receiving communities. But in a hard-pressed region, every choice is one between serving struggling established communities already in place or those just getting on their feet and the waves of needy new arrivals who flood in upon them. The church’s service agencies can meet only a fraction of the need. Aid and support are being extended heroically, but because of the vagaries of international funding and the technicalities of international refugee policy, the humanitarian outreach is limited.

Third, there are direct needs for spiritual ministry to Christian refugees, especially in celebration of the liturgy and administration of the sacraments, which strain local clergy and their communities. Coping with refugee populations may also demand new skills or augmentation of existing ones to supply aid, provide employment or offer pastoral and family counseling.

At the same time, structural questions about the Eastern Catholic churches and their interrelationships emerge. How can the historic religious identity of refugee populations be preserved in a new land by a sister church? Will service of an emigré population interfere with attempts to persuade the exiles to return home and/or remain faithful to the rite of their ancestors? Will new eparchies and exarchates (Eastern dioceses) be established or strengthened to accommodate demographic shifts? Will receiving churches that provide support to the refugees resist the temptation to recruit new members from those they are aiding?

Answers to these questions may emerge in part from the synod’s central deliberation on communion among the particular churches—that is, how Melkites and Maronites, Chaldeans and Latins, to name four, live together in unity and with greater charity. Fostering the sense of mystical union in which all the churches are rooted is fundamental. It provides a spiritual starting point for greater mutual understanding and closer cooperation. For the church this is, to be sure, an end in itself. But in this time of crisis, one must also ask, for what purpose? How will we experience the fruit of this unity in Christ? This meeting is called a special assembly because the regional situation presents all the churches with exceptional challenges at the level of pastoral care and social engagement. Addressing the needs of refugees, particularly the Christians among them, presents a major test of the church’s pastoral capacities.

**Prophetic Responsibilities**

The church as a whole must also weigh its prophetic responsibility for refugees. The practical imperatives of church governance and international diplomacy ought not inhibit the church’s prophetic witness for the stateless. After visiting the Daheisheh Refugee Camp outside of Bethlehem in 2000, Pope John Paul publicly
affirmed the Palestinians’ “natural right to a homeland of [their] own,” committing the church “to be at [the] side” of the refugees “and to plead [their] cause to the world.” Today’s refugees need to hear from the synod similar expressions of solidarity.

At the same time, with peace in the Middle East on the diplomatic agenda once more, a prophetic challenge to the international community is needed on the refugee question. For both Israelis and Palestinians, the refugee issue is a deal-breaker. Only a regional accord in which the international community is fully involved has a chance of finding a solution. The church, which has been a servant and advocate for refugees so often in modern history, ought now, gathered in synod, to speak out for a comprehensive, long-term solution to the refugee problems in the Middle East. It ought to hold up for the world to hear its own teaching on the human rights to be integrated into society and to establish a home for one’s family, and it should challenge the world community to uphold its commitments to the Convention on the Status of Refugees and other international instruments.

Education and Advocacy

Last, during a time of xenophobia in much of the world, the synod should remind bishops, priests and preachers everywhere to educate parishioners about the church’s teaching on migration and the rights of refugees. In the United States, the bishops’ conference will observe National Migration Week from Jan. 2 to Jan. 9, 2011, beginning with the feast of the Epiphany and the remembrance of the flight into Egypt, an archetypal Christian memory of forced displacement and a search for refuge. Epiphany and Migration Week offer an opportunity to educate parishioners about the church’s teaching on migrants and their rights and for local groups to become involved in advocacy on U.S. refugee policy.

As the social ethicist David Hollenbach, S.J., has written in his new collection *Driven From Home:* “Though the mass displacement of Iraqis today has not been caused solely by U.S. military action in that country, the initiation of the Iraq conflict by U.S. intervention gives rise to special obligations toward displaced Iraqis.” The annual quota for admission of Iraqi refugees to the United States, especially for Christians fleeing religious persecution, however, has been disgracefully inadequate, and the actual admission rate has been even lower than the total allowed. American Catholics could respond to the backlogged needs of Middle East refugees by pressing the State Department to admit the full complement of positions allotted for Iraqis each year. For its part, the synod should affirm the responsibilities of the Eastern churches that are on the spot to offer hospitality, protection and advocacy on behalf of those in their midst who have been forcibly driven from home.

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