

September 11, 2011

Sunday Before Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Of the various jurisdictions of Orthodox Christians in this country, the Antiochian Archdiocese is very likely the least monochrome. Only one of every three believers in this Archdiocese has immediate, living ties with the Middle East, and only one out of every five clergy. The rest do not.

This distinction, moreover---on the whole and with definite exceptions---determines the cultural preferences of individual congregations. That is to say, those faithful with immediate, living ties with the Middle East tend to be found together in specific parishes with such ties. Those faithful without such ties tend, on the whole, to be found in parishes without such ties.

When I first joined the Archdiocese, roughly two decades ago, I thought our Antiochian parishes were distinguished mainly by language. In congregations with immediate, living ties with the Middle East, the preferred language in worship was Arabic, whereas in other parishes everything was in English.

The events of the past five years, however, have shown how shallow was my understanding of the situation. The difference is far deeper than liturgical language. It is obvious to me now that the deeper distinction between these two types of Antiochian parishes is based on their immediate relationships with the Middle East. I started to suspect this during the Iraqi War.

At that time, I wrote, "a not inconsiderable number of Orthodox Christians in the United States are from the Middle East, either directly or through their very proximate ancestry. Their forebears and current brethren have lived for more than a thousand years as a minority population within predominately Muslim cultures and under Muslim political institutions. Their entire experience as Christians is colored and contoured by that Muslim context. In various ways, as history provided, those Christians discovered the means of survival in that setting and even made their own distinct and rich contributions to its culture.

"Many of them have close relatives who live in the countries of the Middle East, including Iraq itself. The idea of going to battle against Muslims, with whom they have lived peacefully for centuries, sharing a common language and much of the dominant culture, represents for these Christians an affront to their entire historical experience" ("Not So Quiet on the Eastern Front," *Touchstone*, November 2003).

Even at that time, however, I failed to understand that the "ethnic Arab Christians" in our Archdiocese had a much better grasp on the real "political possibilities" of the Middle East. They understood what would---and would not---work. When they predicted, for example, that the American invasion of Iraq

would be disastrous for the Christians of that country, I should have taken their fears more seriously, because the ensuring history of the region proved them to be entirely justified. There are relatively few Christians left in Iraq now.

I am recalling those days at present, as I reflect on the current situation in Syria. Although there is not the slightest chance that America will invade Syria, our State Department has called for the removal of President Assad and the establishment of a government better representative of the majority of people in Syria.

This is the kind of talk that strikes apprehension into the hearts of Middle Eastern Christians, including those in this country. Christians in Syria have survived very much the way Christians in Iraq survived; that is, under the protection of a coalition of minorities, under a dominant leader. This is the reason Syrian Christians, including those in our Archdiocese, are very concerned about the possible overthrow of the Assad government. Unlike the Christians in Egypt earlier this year, they are not sympathetic to a movement for political change. They are convinced that their lot will be far worse if the Assad government falls to a Sunni majority. (Americans should understand, after all, that a despotism of the majority is the worst sort.)

Are Syrian Christians correct in this conviction? I have no idea. Indeed, I have not yet figured out---to full satisfaction---what will finally result from the political changes in northern Africa this year, much less what would ensue in the event that Assad is overthrown.

This much seems clear to me, nonetheless: Arab Christians understand the Middle East much better than I do, and probably better than our State Department does. For this reason, I am slow to second-guess them.

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