

October 2, 2011
Cyprian of Carthage

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When Metropolitan Philip sent our little delegation to visit Syria not long ago, he asked us to make an honest and polite inquiry about the current political situation in that country, especially with regard to its Christian minority. Our interview with President Assad of Syria was probably the centerpiece of that inquiry.

We met with the President for about 90 minutes in the early evening. As the appointed spokesman for our delegation, I endeavored to set the tone in my introductory statement:

"Mr. President, Bashar al-Assad, we are a delegation of American Christians, sent by Metropolitan Philip, our archbishop in the United States and Canada, as a renewed expression of his loyal friendship with you and his concern for the people of Syria.

"Metropolitan Philip has charged us with the responsibility of learning---first-hand---your assessment of the political conditions in Syria.

"Our mission here is likewise an expression of the concern of American Christians for the well-being of this beloved country of Syria, to which our debt is incalculable with respect to religion, history, and culture. To most of the members of this delegation, and certainly to myself, our visit to Damascus represents the dream of a lifetime.

"To us, Syria is not just any country in the world. It is, rather, the hearth of our culture as Christians. To the extent that anyone in this room can be described as a cultured person, he is indebted to Syria.

"Our journey to Damascus, therefore, expresses a return to the roots of our identity. Please, believe this declaration of our deep respect for Syria and our love for its people.

"In the inquiries we humbly make of you today, we beg you to see both this respect and this love.

"We bring you the warmest greeting of Metropolitan Philip, who holds your name and person in the highest honor, and we sincerely thank you for meeting with us."

I confess that our experience of the previous few days disposed us to think favorably of President Assad right from the start.

For example, the abbess at the Shrine of St. Thecla in Maalula, described his visit there this past Pascha. According to her, Dr. Assad drove his car, accompanied only by his wife--with no one else in attendance, neither security personnel nor press. They dined with the orphans who live near the shrine and are cared for by the nuns. The couple spent the rest of the day with the orphans, who---the abbess said---look upon the President as a father.

I think I speak for our whole delegation in remarking that the testimony of the abbess seemed very sincere and was powerfully convincing. An identical impression was also

conveyed to us, when we met with two Antiochian bishops at the Patriarchate the next day.

Such impressions were difficult to reconcile with the image of President Assad on American TV, where he is referred to as a "butcher," who "slaughters his people."

In the next Ponderings, I will relate the substance of our discussion with the President.

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