

Il Cardinale Leonardo Sandri
Prefetto della Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali

Message of H.E. Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches, for the Conference “*Christians in the contemporary Middle East: Besieged Religious Minorities and the Struggle for Secular Nationalism and Citizenship*” – Villanova University, Pennsylvania, December 5-6, 2016

Rev. Peter M. Donohue, OSA, PhD
Villanova University President

Reverend Father Rector,

Your invitation to take part in the Conference that begins today was most welcome, but it was not possible for me to be away from Rome in these days. Nonetheless, through this message I wish to express my deep appreciation for this important initiative, together with the hope that the listening and interaction of the participants might offer a genuine and practical contribution for the present and the future good of our Christian brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

The sad events of recent years, particularly in Syria and Iraq, have brought the dramatic situation, in which the Christians of the Middle East are forced to live, to the attention of the whole world, particularly in the West. These tragic circumstances have led many of them to seek shelter and safety away from their origins in Europe, Australia, Canada and also among you, in the United States of America.

Many commentators have analyzed the situation, and not infrequently, with a typically Western eye, they tend to characterize these communities as "minorities". While applying a criterion of a numeric type is understandable enough, it risks obscuring the history and the origins of the cultures in question.

It is important, therefore, also at the level of method and terminology, to abandon the term "minorities" and train ourselves to think in terms of "presence": this expresses awareness

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of the fact - of which the Patriarchs, Bishops, and even the simple faithful often remind us – that, namely, Christians are original inhabitants of this region. They have not settled there over the centuries as a result of migratory processes, but are rather the heirs to apostolic origins and the guardians of ancient traditions that find expression in a singular theological, liturgical, spiritual and disciplinary patrimony.

Moreover, faith generates culture. Therefore, it should be stressed that the Christian presence in the Middle East has contributed decisively to the history of these peoples and nations, both in the past as in the present, through literary figures, philosophers, artists and thinkers, also in the social and political fields.


The due recognition of the Christian presence in the Middle East calls us to a conversion of mentality and approach, which embraces multiple fields. I think, for example, in the context of the gradual and painful recovery of the territories controlled by DAESH, how important it is to avoid thinking about the future of those lands in terms of "reservations", as it were, where Christians might return to live, isolated from the rest of society but protected, at least initially, by some kind of force. This would be to distort the centuries-long history of coexistence, and it would deny the Christian communities their role of germ and yeast in a peaceful society. For example, as they have no part in the conflict between the different components of Islam, they can serve as builders of bridges and forgers of unity, bearing witness to the possibility of harmony in diversity.

In order for this to happen - and now I turn to the second point evoked in the title of this conference - the international community must work towards the recognition of full citizenship status for Christians in all countries of the Middle East. For their part, academic institutions, including, of course, Villanova University, could initiate exchange programs for students, offering their contribution towards the implementation of educational programs, for example, in the area of the Social Doctrine of the Church. This crucial area, which is so close to the heart of our Holy Father Francis, is not infrequently threatened with being altogether forgotten in the West. This field of study holds much promise of success, because it avoids the risk of seeking to "export" models of democracy into different geographical contexts in a

sometimes foolhardy manner. Rather, Christian Social Teaching, by insisting on key principles, promotes the growth of criteria for discernment in those who will become political and social actors. Thus, a foundation is laid for hope in an eventual reconstruction of countries, which have suffered the destruction not only of homes but especially of human hearts. The post-war psychological trauma in our Christian people must also be addressed and, where possible, healed.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that one of the tragic consequences of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, is that there are thousands of children and young people who have been deprived of the possibility of even a basic education. Therefore, if we want these countries to have a future, the dimension of education and training must be made a top priority.

Once again wishing all present a fruitful Conference, I beg you, Reverend Father Rector, to transmit to the speakers and participants, as well as to the entire Academic Community of Villanova University, my deep appreciation, together with my cordial greeting.



Leonardo Card. Sandri



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KAIL C. ELLIS O.S.A., PHD
ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT

September 8, 2016

His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri
Prefect, Congregation for the Oriental Churches

Dear Cardinal Sandri,

Because of your key role in supporting Christians in the Middle East, I am writing to invite you to address a conference at Villanova University on December 5-6, 2016 on *Christians in the Contemporary Middle East: Besieged Religious Minorities and the Struggle for Secular Nationalism and Citizenship*. The conference is sponsored by Villanova University, a Catholic university founded by the Augustinian Order in 1842 that is located near Philadelphia. It is cosponsored by the American University of Science and Technology in Beirut and by Bethlehem University. I had the pleasure of meeting you at the Bethlehem University Board of Trustees in Rome last June, of which I am also a member. Brother Peter Bray, Vice Chancellor, recommended that I contact you.

It would be an honor to have you address the conference. You have been an important voice for Christians in the Middle East, as your statement of last Good Friday that urged the churches of the world to solidarity with Christians in the Holy Land, demonstrates: “*We do not want a Middle East of dead stones, like a museum, but of living stones where our Christian faith was born, to continue bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ, Lord of the world, who has brought peace to men.*” The conference participants will be International scholars, government officials, NGO representatives, and the academic community. The topics are: (1) The reasons for the decline in pluralistic spaces in the Middle East, and the consequences for Christians and other minorities; (2) The historic role of Christian intellectuals and their contributions to Arab politics and religious freedom; (3) Securing the equality of citizens, (4) Combating the persecution of minority communities; and (5) Regional tensions, especially the Shia-Sunni conflict that have threatened the presence of Christians and other communities in the Middle East.

If you are able to attend the conference your travel expenses, accommodations and a stipend of \$1,000 will be provided. I understand that you may have many commitments that may not allow you to attend. In that case, we would be grateful if you could give a greeting that would acquaint the participants of the Holy See’s concern for Christians in the Middle East that we could publish in the program. Thank you again for your consideration.

With kind regards,

Rev. Kail C. Ellis, O.S.A.