

June 2010 Newsletter from Doug Dicks - Amman, Jordan

Dear Family and Friends,

Don't ask Father Nabil Haddad of Jordan what the Middle East would be like without Middle Eastern Christians. At least, not at first. It is true, that he is concerned about the plight of Arab Christians in the Middle East, but that is not a starting point when engaging him in a conversation about the Arab Christian presence in Jordan and the Holy Land today.



Father Nabil is Arab, by birth; Christian, by faith; Greek Catholic (Melkite) by religious tradition, and Jordanian by nationality. He moves about the city of Amman, and all of Jordan, for that matter, in what he describes as his "eastern" or "Byzantine" clerical robe, a crucifix on a long chain hanging from around his neck and visibly present on his chest. Oftentimes, he forgets his hat. "In Jordan, we don't have a 'Christian quarter', such as in Jerusalem", he says. "I can go anywhere I please." And go he does. Whether he is attending Jordan's Independence Day celebrations at the Prime Ministry, or hosting and escorting the pope during his visit to Jordan,

Father Nabil is always visible and out and about in this city of approximately 2 million plus people.

He says that the cross he wears does not form some kind of wall between him and his Muslim neighbors. "Long before we build walls and barriers on the ground, we build them in our hearts," Father Nabil says. He goes on to say that Christianity teaches him to love his neighbor. "The Bible doesn't tell me to love my 'Christian' neighbor", he says. "It says 'love thy neighbor', no matter who they are."

The founder of the Jordanian Inter-faith Co-existence Research Center on Jabal Weibdeh in Amman, Father Nabil says that he has never felt inferior, even though Christians are a minority in Jordan. He asserts that his is a Christian voice in a Muslim Society, and that Christians in the Middle East have lived with Islam for 1,400 years. And he speaks of the rich history that Arab Christians have had in the Middle East, starting with the time of the first Pentecost. He is quick to point out that, in the New Testament book of Acts, Chapter 2, it states that Arabs were present at the First Pentecost, and received the Holy Spirit, along with other peoples. As such, Father Nabil says that Arab Christians are capable and qualified to speak, and that they are part of society, and do not feel like aliens. Founded in 2003, the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center, or JICRC is concerned with the sensitive and vital issues of mutual respect and coexistence among followers of diverse religious faiths, not only in the Middle East, but throughout the world. In 2004, the center was recognized by the US State Department for "its role in shaping societal attitudes both in Jordan and worldwide, through its work in peace-making, interfaith dialogue and coexistence efforts."

Father Nabil promotes the Common Word initiative, which was penned by leading Muslim scholars in October of 2007 and highly received by Christian churches across the globe.



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The letter calls for peace and understanding among the leaders of both faith communities, written from Muslim leaders to their Christian counterparts, in the spirit of love of God and love of neighbor as common ground. The Amman Message is also critical to the work of the JICRC, a document released by King Abdullah II in 2004, which has as its major imperative to define what Islam is, and what Islam is not. This statement is critical in defining the religious climate in the Middle East and beyond. In addition to their religious value, these documents comprise the cardinal texts of the JICRC, and serve as tools for use in promoting values regarding interfaith understanding. Father Nabil also serves as the priest for the Greek Catholic or Melkite Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, a relatively small church that was built near the ruins of a rather large cathedral dating from the time when Amman was known as the city of Philadelphia, one of the ten cities of the Roman Decapolis.

He jokes with a visiting group of young people, that the city of brotherly love is not “that American city called Philadelphia”. “Amman is the city of brotherly love”, he proudly states. He says that Jordanians are proud of the brotherly love that they share between Christians and Muslims. Regarding the question of the dwindling Arab Christian presence in Jordan and the Holy Land, Father Nabil admits that he would much prefer to see the pews filled with the faithful. “How can we understand Islam as a religion of tolerance when there are no Christians?” he says.

But Father Nabil isn’t playing the numbers game. He speaks with a voice of authority and reason, as well as with an air of conviction. “There are 15 million Christians in the Middle East today”, he states. And he proposes that it is the Arab Christians who can best build bridges of understanding between peoples. “What our region needs is justice”, he says. He proclaims that this is the Holy Land, the land that God chose. “Are we making this land holy today?” he questions. “How may churches welcome Muslims? And how many mosques welcome Christians?” Father Nabil says that we can build understanding between peoples when we are reconciled with ourselves. And he says we have the obligation to spread the message of love. He reminds us, however, that love is both decisive and tough. “We need to tell people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear”, he says emphatically. He says that religious values, forgiveness, reconciliation and building peace are desperately needed, and that this is the work that we should all be about. “We need to speak our hearts”, he says. “We need to speak our faith.” “There is no reconciliation without forgiveness”, says Father Nabil. “And there is no forgiveness, without love.”

“We have a message to convey”, says Father Nabil. “We have to remind people of both forgiveness and love.” “We need to re-think how to carry this message to the world.” “We can make the change, he says. “God needs us 24/7!”

Blessings,

Doug

