



Vatican shifts the prism on Mideast Christians

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The French newspaper La Croix is a solid and cautious daily that looks at the world from a self-described position of "Christian conviction." Part of a large Roman Catholic-oriented publishing house, its journalistic professionalism and strong financial backing make for a confident voice.

Because it has been reporting something of real magnitude lately on the church's vision of the Middle East, you could ask if La Croix might get a development involving the Vatican horribly wrong? Considering the significance of the issue, and how it has startled policy makers here, the safe answer is: not very likely.

Usually most comfortable in defending old truths, La Croix has been

saying something very new over the past month.

The newspaper has focused attention on the idea that the Christian presence in the Middle East - an estimated 10 million believers - is now critically threatened by Islamic hard-liners. In a series of articles, it has drawn attention to Christian communities' loss of their thousand-year legitimacy in the region, and to members of the Catholic hierarchy who are saying for the first time that radical Islam is at the heart of the Christians' problem.

"There's an upheaval in the church's attitude," Dominique Quinio, La Croix's editor, said by telephone. "Traditionally, the church minimized Christians' difficulties in the Middle East. Some of that had to do

with solidarity with the Palestinians, and partly with old notions that keeping quiet left the Christian presence intact.

"Now, with Islam's assertiveness and the rise of Hamas, there's a much harder tone from the Vatican," she said. "We may be seeing the Vatican beginning to press Western countries on the diplomatic front" for visas and refugee status for Christians seeking to leave Iraq and other areas.

While this is not a forecast of a Clash of Civilizations a year into the pontificate of Benedict XVI, it involves an altered realization by the church about Middle East reality. To the extent that this can substantially affect American Middle East policy, the Bush administration and the American Catholic hierarchy may be called on soon to measure how much weight and determination is behind the Vatican's new diction on Islam.

An example of that language: In a statement last month on Christians' place in the Middle East, Archbishop Giovanni Lajola, who heads the Vatican office of relations with states, or foreign ministry, said the church must "take clear and courageous positions to affirm Christian identity."

A bold approach was necessary, he said, because "we know very well that radical Islam exploits anything that it interprets as a sign of weakness."

Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, Lajola's predecessor and now the Vatican's archivist, described Christians in the Middle East to *La Croix* as feeling they have become "second-class citizens" as a result of a "harder Islam," and said that many were being forced to "seek well-being elsewhere."

An even more direct evaluation came from Monsignor Philippe Brizard, who heads *Oeuvre d'Orient*, a French charitable organization supporting Christian communities throughout the Middle East. It brought seven Christian patriarchs from the region to Paris in late May to talk to French political officials, including President Jacques Chirac.

"Islam's radicalization is the principal cause of the Christian exodus," Brizard told a French reporter. "The Muslims' identity crisis has resulted in one for the Christians."

La Croix's reporting, alongside the Vatican's changing emphasis, has been a break with the traditional French approach to the Middle East that lays the basic cause of Christians' problems at the feet of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. Rather, in an article from Nablus, the newspaper, which has a daily circulation of 102,000, quoted Christians saying they were told "we're foreigners," and feeling they could not be sure the new Hamas leadership, as a vector of Islamic radicalism, will continue to need a Christian presence "to soften up the West."

At the same time, another article told of Monsignor Luis Sako, archbishop of Kirkuk in Iraq, saying that the Americans, in their failure to control Protestant evangelists entering after the country with U.S. troops, "instead of helping us in the middle of a religious conflict, worsened it."

Compacted, the sense I took from the newspaper's series was that if the Christian presence in the Middle East was a gauge of its potential for openness and tolerance, Islamic fundamentalism was now confronting it in circumstances where the United States was offering inadequate assistance.

Would the papal nuncio in Washington talk to me about all this? Short answer: no. Zero points for trying. But I did speak to a senior administration official, and people from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the American Arab Institute and the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House, a right-of-center nongovernmental organization.

Basically, there was fascination with what appeared to be a significant development, but also discomfort and uncertainty. For the American bishops, it looked as though the Vatican was saying that its notion that Israel's part in the Palestinian

conflict is the central problem for Christianity in the Middle East now stood as a side issue compared with radical Islam.

For the Bush administration, which is not granting temporary refugee status here to Christians from Iraq, the appearance of being called to task as a problem creator by an Iraqi bishop was an embarrassment involving an exceptionally religious president.

The senior administration official insisted that Washington had been active and effective diplomatically on behalf of Copts in Egypt, Maronites and Iraqi Christians, but said, illustrating the United States' real dilemma, "we want to avoid the charge we privilege the situation of Christians and play into the propaganda themes of the Islamists."

On the issue of the survival of the Middle East's Christians in the face of radical Islam, Pope Benedict has given solid indications of toughening the Vatican's line.

Stalin was once quoted as asking, contemptuously, How many divisions does the pope have? In the case of Benedict, his strongest weapon in entering a traditional zone of maximum caution may be in having laid out a strategy based both on truth and surprise.