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# ASIA/LEBANON - Archbishop Maroun Lahham: The Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI is a real help to the Christians of the Middle East

Beirut (Agenzia Fides) - The post-synodal apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in the Middle East "is a high-profile pastoral text, with Biblical inspiration, full of useful tips that will help Christians in the Middle East to live their lives in the given conditions of faith and their witness to the Gospel." This is what Archbishop Maroun Laham, Patriarchal Vicar for Jordan of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem says to Fides. He is in Beirut along with a delegation of more than fifty Jordanian Catholics of the Latin rite, Mgr. Lahham took part last night in the first meeting of the Pope with the patriarchs and bishops of the Middle East in the greek-catholic cathedral of St. Paul in Harissa, where Benedict XVI put the signature to the text of his Exhortation.
According to Mgr. Lahham, the new papal document applies to the urgencies of the moment "the guidelines which in recent decades, especially after the Second Vatican Council, have accompanied the Christian communities in the Middle East to rediscover their vocation of faithful natives. The Pope repeats firmly that Christianity in these areas is not a reality of importation. These are the lands where Jesus was born, lived, walked the streets. The perspective shown is evangelical of the testimony in fraternal dialogue with all religious bodies that live in these places. With a recognition of the noble and essential contribution that Christians in the Middle East bring to the construction of the Body of Christ. " The pastor of the Latin Catholics of Jordan emphasizes the concreteness of some practical suggestions designed to confirm and revive the union of various churches in the common reference to the faith of the Apostles: "In this perspective," says Archbishop Lahham "the Pope calls for ecumenical agreement for the mutual recognition of Baptism among the Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches, including the Coptic Orthodox Church. Benedict XVI also proposes to have a clear understanding of the Council's openness to a certain communicatio in sacris for the Sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick, that is not only possible, but even to be commended in some situations, in accordance with specific norms and
with the approval of the ecclesiastical authorities."
What is also important, according to Mgr.Laham, is the reference to the principle of religious freedom "which also includes the freedom to choose the religion that one believes true and to publicly express one's beliefs without risking one's own life and personal freedom" .
With regard to the political issues of the region, without going into details, the Apostolic Exhortation confirms the already known positions of the Holy See on the various conflicts in the region and the status of Jerusalem and the Holy Places. In this regard, Archbishop Lahham, also impressed by the security measures put in place by the Lebanese authorities, puts into perspective the media controversy mounted on the welcome speech addressed to Benedict XVI by the Patriarch of Antioch of the Greek Melkite: "Gregoire III," says Archbishop Lahham "spoke in Arabic, and at that time the Pope had no paper in his hand with no translation that would allow him to follow the Patriarch's speech. Gregoire said that the recognition of the Palestinian State will help peace. But did not address any direct request to the Pope." (GV) (Agenzia Fides 15/09/2012)

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