

# The Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch speaks out against Violence in Syria

Youhanna X Yazigi says Christians, Muslim united against violence

By [Vatican Radio](#)

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The pain and suffering of Christians in Syria was at the heart of a meeting that Pope Francis had on Friday with Patriarch Youhanna X Yazigi, head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East. On Sunday the Patriarch will attend Mass in St Peter's Square, celebrated by the Pope to mark the Day of Catechists. He's also due to meet with Italy's foreign minister and attend the St Egidio international, interfaith conference which opens at the weekend.

In his encounter with the Holy Father, the Patriarch spoke about the difficulties facing the Christian community in Syria and the surrounding region. He also talked about the plight of his own brother who was kidnapped last April, together with the Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Aleppo. The two leaders also shared their hopes for progress on the journey towards full Christian unity.

After their encounter, the Patriarch came to Vatican Radio and talked to Philippa Hitchen about his hopes for an end to the conflict in his country...

Listen:



"First of all I'd like to express my deep, heartfelt love to my dear brother in Christ....I bear in my heart all the pain of our people in Syria, in Lebanon, in the Middle East, and we consider the attitude of His Holiness towards our people, our Church in the Middle East, in Syria and Lebanon especially to push, to find solutions, to establish a peace through dialogue, not in war ..

It [the Pope's day of prayer and fasting for peace] was very important I think, and in fact all our people participated that day, all together, in praying for Syria, for the Middle East, for peace in all the world, and it was a very important message to all the world, and I think to all the governments - not the simple people, but to the states and to the governments, to find a solution through peace.

## **Kidnapped Brother**

Unfortunately we hope and we pray, and we try on all levels - with the governments, with different people - to find a solution to this story, and we hope, but till now we don't have unfortunately any official or sure information about our two brothers....we hope they're still

alive...

### **Which Group is Responsible?**

They haven't given us any sure answer till now - a lot of stories, a lot of promises, but not any results unfortunately.

### **Did you talk about this with the Pope?**

Yes, absolutely. We discussed a lot of topics and subjects. First of all I expressed all my brotherly love to His Holiness personally, and all my love of our Churches, the Antiochian Orthodox Church - as you know always in history we've had a good relationship and cooperation with the Catholic Church, with Vatican City. ...And we talked about our progression towards unity, Christian unity as you know, dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. We try, we want to do what we can do, all together - this is the desire of His Holiness, and our desire. And about this political situation, about the presence of Christians in the Middle East - it's a very important issue now, because a lot of our people are leaving Syria or Lebanon for other countries, and we cannot accept the Middle East without the face of Christ.

Will there be a solution to the conflict now there's been an agreement on chemical weapons?

We hope, and we ask all the governments to help us and to push all the countries to help Syria to find a solution through dialogue, and especially Russia and the United States, and Europe maybe - they have a very big and important role, and we hope to help in this way

### **Hard-line Islamic presence after conflict?**

About Islam, you know, we have very good relationships with the Muslim people, in general in all this area. We live together, we have the same history, the same future - we're like one family, this is the truth. But now we see in our countries a new spirit of extremism from some groups, Islamic groups, and we all refuse that - and the Muslim people, they refuse this extremist Islamic spirit.

### **Can religious leaders help?**

Absolutely. And we all - the Imams in Syria and Lebanon for example, and the bishops, the priests - we are all together. And we try with our people - with the Christians, with the Muslims - to do what we can do to have a calm life, and peace.

### **St. Egidio, The Courage of Hope**

We try to be with our people, and to give them some hope, to stay in their houses, in this land, in this Christian land. And I would like to thank St Egidio for their invitation, and it will be an occasion for me to say some words, maybe a message of our pain, in the Middle East, in Syria and Lebanon, especially to make this voice heard by all the world.

### **Do you fear for yourself?**

No. There is a danger, but for example I live now in the Patriarchate in Damascus, sometimes in Lebanon in our residence in Balamand, near Beirut, and our church is open,

we have our liturgies, our services as usual. Except some areas absolutely where we have difficulties, in Aleppo, in Homs, in others.

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