

## Archbishop Fitzgerald reflects on the Arab Spring



*Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald*

*The former papal nuncio to Egypt, Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald, looks at the origins of the Arab Spring and how the Christian leaders responded to it in Egypt and elsewhere*

GERARD O'CONNELL, THE VATICAN INSIDER, 30 MAY 2013

“The true results of the Arab Spring are still awaited” and right now “it is difficult to offer any definite conclusion”, Archbishop Michael Louis Fitzgerald, one of the Church’s leading experts on Islam, said in Rome recently.

The English-born archbishop is one of the Catholic Church’s main experts on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. A member of the Society of Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers), he headed the Vatican’s office for dialogue with other religions from 2002 to 2006, when Benedict XVI assigned him as papal nuncio to Egypt and Delegate to the Arab League. He retired from the Holy See’s diplomatic service in October 2012, and now works in Jerusalem, at the White Fathers’ institution in Jerusalem, and is much in demand as a speaker worldwide. He was recently in India and the USA.

Earlier this month, he delivered this year’s Bradley Lecture at Rome’s Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), at the invitation of its new head, Don Valentino Cottini. Addressing an audience that included professors, students, diplomats and journalists, he spoke on the Arab Spring, focusing mainly on Egypt but also referring to other countries. He highlighted in particular the root causes of the revolutionary movement, the developments that took place and the ongoing realities, as well as the role of different religious bodies in all this. The full text of his talk will appear in the 2013 volume of the Institute’s publication *Islamochristiana*.

Fitzgerald spoke from the perspective of one who had lived not far from the epicentre of the 25 January 2011 revolution, Tahrir Square, and monitored the situation unfolding “from the outside in”, as it were.

“The roots of the revolution”, he said, can be found in “three main grievances” which brought young people to demonstrate against the leaders of their countries: the oppression of dictatorial regimes; tight control of information; the increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

In response to these grievances he noted a corresponding desire of young people, in particular, for a greater possibility of political involvement, for greater freedom of expression and a better distribution of wealth.

“Those who initiated the protest movements were in general young people”, he said: many had university degrees but found themselves unemployed in societies where contacts and recommendations counted often more than qualifications. These movements were “not strictly ideological; they did not attack Western countries or Israel”; “nor were they religiously motivated”, he added. They aimed at gaining greater freedom, justice and dignity.

Fitzgerald devoted the centre part of his lecture to the start of the revolution in Tunisia and its spread to Egypt and other countries.

While acknowledging that the movements that triggered the Arab Spring in Egypt and elsewhere were not religiously motivated, Fitzgerald in the final part of his talk looked at how the religious authorities – in particular the Christian ones - acted during the Arab Spring in their lands.

In Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, he said, the presence of Christians is minimal and certainly “politically insignificant”.

In Syria, on the other hand, where Christians form a substantial minority of the population, he said, they have suffered from the civil war, and are suffering from it today, as much as other citizens. Within the opposition movement, he said, there are Christians who have been trying to persuade their fellow Christians, both within and outside Syria, that in the new State, which would be brought into being by the Revolution, their situation would be fully satisfactory, but Fitzgerald observed that they do not seem to have been successful in gaining credence for this view. In general, he said, the Syrian Church authorities have confined themselves to appealing for an end to the violence.

In Egypt, Fitzgerald recalled, “the revolution at its beginning did not have any religious reference, though it later took on a more Islamic coloration.” The crowds in Tahrir Square performed the Friday prayer, and sometimes Christian prayers too were celebrated there, usually under Protestant leadership.

As is well known, he said, the Christian presence in Egypt is massively Coptic Orthodox, so much so that the Government and the press speak not about Christians and Muslims, but Copts and Muslims. Compared to the more than 8 million Copts, the followers of the other Christian Churches - whether Greek Orthodox, Syrian and Armenian Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant or Catholic -, are small in numbers.

At the beginning of the revolution, he said, Pope Shenouda III advised Copts not to take part in the demonstrations but the young Copts did not follow his advice; they wished to show their love for their country by joining their fellow citizens in demanding greater freedom and dignity. Some Coptic priests also showed their solidarity with the demonstrators.

After Pope Shenouda’s death on 17 March 2012, a new Pope, Tawadros II, was elected. He immediately stated that the Church should not be engaged in politics, and he exhorted the Coptic faithful to follow their own consciences in political matters. In actual fact, however, recent attacks against Christians, even within the precincts of the Cathedral of St Mark in

Cairo, have forced Pope Tawadros II to speak out, voicing his complaint that Christians are not sufficiently protected. He's also shown a greater openness to cooperation with the other Christian Churches and that is a very good sign for the future, Fitzgerald said.

Protestants were evident during the early phases of the revolution, Fitzgerald said, particularly since one of their churches, situated near Tahrir Square, acted as a "camp hospital" or medical centre. Some Catholics also took part in the demonstrations, but with a low profile, in particular members of the Justice and Peace commission.

He recalled how Egypt's some 200,000 Catholics are divided in seven different rites and said that while it's true that the Catholic Church through its network of schools, medical and social services - which are open to all, has a much wider influence in society than its numbers would suggest, in actual fact it wields little political clout.

Aware that Catholics tended generally to stay out of politics in Egypt, he said the Catholic bishops decided to respond to the new situation created by the revolution by providing adult education lectures and conference, aimed particularly at young adults. and invited Christian and Muslim speakers to these events, with the aim of enhancing political awareness and highlighting the importance of fulfilling one's electoral duties. Candidates for both parliamentary and presidential elections were invited to speak about their vision for the future of Egypt. Constitutional matters were explained too. The Bishops' main goal was to focus attention on the rights of citizens in general, rather than engage in advocacy for the rights of Christians alone.

The former nuncio recalled how the Catholic Bishops in Egypt and throughout the region were greatly encouraged by the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East that was held in Rome, October 2010, in the presence of Pope Benedict. The synod took place before the Arab Spring started and, in some way, prepared the region's Church leaders for that. Its deliberations were incorporated into a final document - "The Church in the Middle East", which Pope Benedict promulgated in Beirut, September 2011. Fitzgerald said this document "provides valid guidelines" and "encouragement for Christians living in a region which is still searching for its way." It calls on Christians in the Middle East to be engaged in society and not act as a minority that is suffering, withdrawn and closed in on itself, but to work together with others.

The former nuncio also recalled that soon after being elected President of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi invited religious leaders, both Muslim and Christian, to meet with him. This was taken as a welcome sign that the President was concerned with the well-being of all Egyptians, whatever their religion. These meetings, however, proved to be unsatisfactory, Fitzgerald stated. The Christian leaders felt that they did not have sufficient opportunity to voice their own concerns and, moreover, they did not see any measures taken to guarantee equal treatment for Christian citizens. They therefore declined to accept further invitations to meetings.

In his lecture, Fitzgerald highlighted the fact that Egypt boasts the prestigious institution of al-Azhar, which has become a symbol of Sunni Islam in the world. Its head, Sheikh al-Azhar, is appointed by the President and holds a rank equivalent to that of Prime Minister. In 2010, following the death of M. Sayyid Tantawi, who had welcomed Pope John Paul II to al-Azhar on 24 February 2000, Dr Ahmed al-Tayyeb, the rector of al-Azhar University, was appointed Imam.

Dr al-Tayyeb, known then as an opponent of the Muslim Brothers, has tried to position al-Azhar in a moderate role. Under his inspiration al-Azhar has produced several important documents, Fitzgerald noted. The first, in 2011, gave support to the development of a modern, democratic state that would guarantee the equal rights of citizens, where there would be a separation of powers, and freedom of opinion. It condemned religious discrimination, sectarianism and racism. Another document in 2012 developed those ideas further and affirmed freedom of belief, freedom of opinion and expression and so on. The latest one (January 2013) focused on “Renouncing Violence”, and appealed to all Egyptians “to opt for reconciliation, to renounce violence, to activate faithful dialogue, to let just judiciary resolve all legal issues, to respect people's choices, and to uphold the rule of law”

The former Vatican envoy noted that Dr al-Tayyeb has set up or facilitated periodic meetings of religious leaders, both from within Islam and from the various Christian Churches, in order to examine the causes of the frequent outbreaks of sectarian violence, and to find ways to prevent them. He sees all this as a positive development in a country that is still finding its way.