

Updated: Pope, Lebanon's Christian leaders meet for day of prayer, reflection

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – After a day of prayer and reflection with Lebanon's Christian leaders, Pope Francis urged political leaders in the country to set aside partisan interests that have devastated the country.

At a prayer service concluding the summit July 1, the pope called for "an end to the few profiting from the sufferings of many," a practice that has sacrificed peace and the common good.

"Stop using Lebanon and the Middle East for outside interests and profits," he said. "The Lebanese people must be given the opportunity to be the architects of a better future in their land without undue interference."

The pope and the nine Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant leaders began the day with a brief prayer in St. Peter's Basilica and a day of reflections on and discussions about Lebanon and its religious, political, social and economic challenges.

"Abana alathie," Pope Francis intoned in Arabic as he led the Lebanese leaders in praying the Lord's Prayer at the brief early morning service. After reciting the prayer and standing in silence for 10 minutes, the pope and leaders walked down the stairs under the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica to light candles.

The pope and his guests spent most of the day seated at a round table in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace with Archbishop Joseph Spiteri, the nuncio to Lebanon, moderating the closed-door discussions.

Joining Pope Francis were: Cardinal Bechara Rai, the Maronite patriarch; Syriac Catholic Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan; Melkite Catholic Patriarch Joseph Absi; Chaldean Catholic Bishop Michel Kassarji of Beirut; Bishop Cesar Essayan, Latin-rite apostolic vicar of Beirut; Greek Orthodox Patriarch John X of Antioch; Armenian Apostolic Catholicos Aram of Cilicia; Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II; and the Rev. Joseph Kassab, president of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon.

Lebanon was thrust into a political crisis after Saad Hariri, who was designated prime minister in October, and President Michel Aoun failed to reach an agreement on forming a government.

And the country's economic woes – because of a free falling currency and the COVID-19 pandemic – were exacerbated after a massive explosion last year at the port of Beirut killed at least 180 people, wounded 6,000 and displaced as many as 300,000 others from their homes.

After Pope Francis met Hariri at the Vatican in April, the potential prime minister had tweeted that the pope “will visit Lebanon,” but only after a government is formed.

However, Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, the Vatican foreign minister, told reporters in late June that a papal visit could happen late this year or early next year and, given the suffering of the Christian community in Lebanon, the pope even might consider making the trip before a government is formed.

Flanked by the Lebanese Christian leaders, the pope made his way into the basilica. The solemn service included the traditional Christian hymns and prayers in Armenian, Syriac and Arabic echoing in St. Peter's Basilica. Among those present were members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Vatican and the Lebanese community of Rome.

In his address before concluding the ecumenical evening prayer

service, the pope said that in seeking "God's light" to illuminate the darkness facing Lebanon, Christians also recognize their "own lack of clarity" in "failing to bear consistent witness to the Gospel" and in missing opportunities of building "fraternity, reconciliation and full unity."

"For all this, we ask forgiveness, and with contrite hearts we pray: 'Lord, have mercy,'" he said.

Calling Lebanon a "treasury of civilization and spirituality" in the Middle East, the pope said the country's vocation "is to be a land of tolerance and pluralism" and "an oasis of fraternity where different religions and confessions meet." He also encouraged the Lebanese people to "not lose heart" and to "find in the roots of your history the hope of a new flowering."

The pope called on political leaders to "find urgent and durable solutions to the current economic, social and political crisis, mindful that there can be no peace without justice." He also urged members of the international community to create conditions "so that the country will not collapse but embark upon a path of recovery."

This, he said, "will be to everyone's advantage."

Christians in Lebanon, he said, have a crucial role to play in "building a future together" and must be free from "partisan interests, privileges and advantages."

"We Christians are called to be sowers of peace and builders of fraternity, not nursing past grudges and regrets, not shirking the responsibilities of the present, but looking instead with hope to the future," the pope said. He also assured Muslims and members of other religions in the country of the church's "openness and readiness to work together in building fraternity and promoting peace."

"Together, through honest dialogue and pure intentions, we can

bring light where there is darkness,” Pope Francis said. “Let us entrust every effort and commitment to Christ, the prince of peace, so that, as we have prayed, ‘by the unclipped rays of his mercy, darkness will flee, twilight vanish, shadows be dispelled and the night recede.’”