

Mideast Christians in uneasy position

By NADIA ABOU EL-MAGD, Associated Press Writer *Sun Sep 17, 6:01 PM ET*

CAIRO, Egypt - Christians in the Middle East are growing uneasy over the widespread Muslim anger at Pope Benedict XVI, saying they increasingly worry about growing divisions between the two faiths. The region's minority Christian communities generally live in peace with their Muslim neighbors, but their relations are often strained and the uproar over the pope has brought some violence — attacks on at least seven churches in the Palestinian territories over the weekend. "I wish the Catholic pope had considered the reaction to his remarks," the head of the Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, told journalists Sunday.

"Being enthusiastic about one's religion shouldn't lead to judging other peoples' religions. "Criticizing others' faith breeds enmity and divisions."

The Greek Orthodox bishop of Homs in central Syria said that he was pleased that Benedict expressed regret Sunday for offending Muslims with comments last week about Islam and violence and that he hoped Muslim anger would recede.

"We hope that hearts will remain open between Muslims and Christians, and they will go on with the process of coexistence," Bishop Isidore Battikha said.

Two churches were set on fire in the West Bank on Sunday, a day after Muslims hurled firebombs and fired guns at four other West Bank churches and one in the Gaza Strip. Authorities in Lebanon, where Christians account for about 36 percent of the Arab country's population, tightened security outside churches as a precaution Sunday. They said there was no specific threat against Christians.

Police said security also was tight around churches and universities in Egypt, where Christians make up about 10 percent of the country's 73 million people.

Rafik Habib, an Egyptian sociologist and Coptic Christian, said the situation between the two faiths remains dangerous.

"This comes during an intense stage to harm the Muslim-Christian dialogue and emphasizes that there is some kind of Crusade (against Muslims) and animosity and complicates the relations between Muslims and Christians in our region," he said.

Christian leaders hoped the pope's expression of regret Sunday would calm tempers and were heartened that some Muslim leaders reacted positively to Benedict's statement.

The leader of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood said the Islamic political movement's relations with Christians should remain "good, civilized and cooperative."

"While anger over the pope's remarks was necessary, it shouldn't last for long because while he is the head of the Catholic church in the world, many Europeans are not following it. So what he said won't influence them," Mohammed Mahdi Akef said.

Mohammed Habash, a legislator and head of the Islamic Studies Center in Damascus, Syria, cautioned against sectarian animosities and urged both Muslims and Christians to find ways to avoid conflicts.

"We understand the reasons for the (Muslim) anger, but we do not call for that and instead we call for calm and dialogue," Habash said.

Associated Press writers Albert Aji in Damascus, Syria, Nasser Karimi in Qom, Iran.