

## ***St. Paul's Damascus and Damascus Today***

*Interview With Archbishop Samir Nassar*

*DAMASCUS, Syria, JULY 4, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Though Christianity in Damascus traces its roots all the way back to before St. Paul, the little community today is struggling to subsist.*

*That's because the Church is such a small minority in a Muslim land that individual Christians are lost to the cultural norm, explained Archbishop Samir Nassar of Damascus.*

*The archbishop, who turns 60 on Monday, has served that local Church since 2006.*

*In this interview given to the television program "Where God Weeps" of the Catholic Radio and Television Network (CRTN) in cooperation with Aid to the Church in Need, Archbishop Nassar speaks of the difficulties the Damascus Church faces, but also reasons for hope.*

*Q: Damascus, where you are the archbishop, is a city at the heart of Christianity, where St. Paul lost his sight and recovered it again. Can you tell us a little bit about the situation of Christians today in Damascus?*

*Archbishop Nassar: Damascus and Syria is a very old Christian country. We used to have in Syria 33,000 churches. Syria used to be predominantly Christian and we still have many famous Christian places. We have many Christian churches that are still very alive. Christians in Syria are not guests. They are the roots and we lived side by side with the Muslims since the seventh century.*

*Christianity however was deeply rooted in Syria before Islam. Yes, before St. Paul because St. Paul was baptized and was made able to see again in Damascus, which means that Christianity existed [here] before St. Paul.*

*Q: How many of the 33,000 Churches you mentioned are still active today?*

*Archbishop Nassar: We have three kinds of churches. Firstly, we have the monophysite churches; they are the Syriac Orthodox and the Armenian Orthodox and they have their patriarch living in Damascus. And then we have the Greek Orthodox, the biggest church in Syria, and then we have many Catholic churches and of course some Protestant churches. All these churches are very old except the Protestant, which came in the last century; all the other churches are of the apostles. I belong to the Maronite Church, which was founded in the fifth century by St. Maron, a monk who used to live somewhere between Aleppo and Antioch. The first 1,000 years we were in Syria and after that we moved to the Lebanese mountains and from there we are now everywhere, in Australia and America. More than half of our population is outside of the Middle East.*

*Q: Let us go back to Syria. What percentage of the total population of Syria is Christian?*

*Archbishop Nassar: Officially we are 8% to 10 %. Some people say between 4% or 5 %. We are a minority. This would roughly be about 1 million people in a population of 21 million.*

*Q: What other religious traditions, aside from Christianity, are in Syria?*

*Archbishop Nassar: We have the Sunni Islam or the orthodox Islam if you will; they are nearly 80% and the other kind of Islam called Alawites [1], which is 10% and the rest are Christians.*

*Q: How do you describe the Christian-Muslim relationship today in Syria?*

*Archbishop Nassar: We have lived together for 1,400 years. Sometimes we have had problems but we've lived together. We share and live together and in my bishopric in Damascus, I have a mosque next to my room so I hear their prayer and they can listen to our prayer. We co-exist on a daily basis.*

*Q: Do you have a personal contact with the imams and the other representatives?*

*Archbishop Nassar: Yes of course, on many occasions. They come to us for Christmas and Easter and we visit them during Ashura or Ramadan or Eid-ul-Fitr. We are really one family.*

*Q: How is it that the tolerance of Christians in Syria has been preserved while all around, like in Iraq and other countries, the Muslim-Christian relationship has broken down?*

*Archbishop Nassar: It has been preserved because of the government who looks after the minorities. They [the government] don't let problems arise between Muslims and Christians. The government plays a very big role in this and they have succeeded.*

*Q: The Church in Syria faces challenges. What are some of the challenges that you are facing, being a minority in a predominantly Muslim environment?*

*Archbishop Nassar: We are a very small minority between 5% to 8% and this is the main challenge; there are very few of us in a predominantly Muslim society. The Muslims are not forcing us to convert but if one Christian family, for example, lives in a building of 12 Muslim families, the children play with their children, go to school with their children and little by little they learn the Muslim more than their Christian faith. We are losing our presence because we are few in number and we don't have enough local support to be together, to strengthen our faith, to teach our children and keep our children in our local churches.*

*Q: A Christian child goes to the local school, which is majority Muslim, the majority are Muslims and the Christian children learn the Koran and then Islam. Do they come out Muslim?*

*Archbishop Nassar: Little by little they get to know more about the Koran and Mohamed, more than Jesus Christ, and we give them one hour of catechism and we have to send a bus or a car to bring them and to take them back. Sometimes they come, sometimes they do not, and one hour of catechism is not enough. So we are trying to find out how we can keep our Church alive in this land of the Bible.*

*Q: The other problem is that in the Islamic faith, if a young lady wants to marry a young Muslim fellow, she must convert?*

*Archbishop Nassar: Yes, this is a problem and if a Christian man wants to marry a Muslim girl he too has to convert. This is a very old law and we cannot change it. Nobody obliges this man to marry a Muslim girl, but when 95% of the girls are Muslim and 5% are Christians, there are more choices on the 95% side, so when he marries we too lose our people this way.*

*Q: What about the question of conversion? Do you have Muslims coming to the Maronite Catholic Churches interested in converting? How would you respond to this issue of conversion, because in Islam conversion is punishable by death?*

*Archbishop Nassar: That is fanaticism, but many Muslims come to our Church; they learn the catechism, they follow our meetings but they can't be baptized. They can be Christian if they want in their hearts but they cannot show it.*

*Q: So they are secret ... hidden Christians?*

*Archbishop Nassar: They cannot show it, but we do receive them with open hearts and some of them come to daily Mass, to the Bible studies and catechism. They come but they have to stay, outwardly, Muslim.*

*Q: You then have to be very careful as a Church; when a young person comes to you and wishes to convert, how would you handle this situation?*

*Archbishop Nassar: I can receive him but I can not baptize him otherwise I will have a problem with the government. [...] But it's a happy Church. We are not many but we are a very active and very dynamic little Church and we have a very beautiful ecumenical life. We work together; in Damascus we are nine bishops, five Orthodox and four Catholics, and we meet once a month to share our pastoral work, pray together and organize our pastoral work. This is very good. In the Church when people come to my Mass, they are not only Catholics, some are Orthodox and other Christians, and my people too go Mass at the Orthodox church, which makes us nearly a family.*

*Q: What would the Middle East be without Syria? In a sense that the Catholic Church in Iraq is rapidly disappearing and so is the case in all of the Middle East except Lebanon, but even in Lebanon the young people are leaving ...?*

*Archbishop Nassar: If you look at the Middle East now you have war between Turkey and Kurdistan; you have the war in Iraq; the war between the Palestinians and Israel and you have the war in Lebanon, and Syria is the only peaceful country in the area. That is why everybody is coming to Syria because it's the only peaceful place to live, to work, to pray and learn; it's a university town. So without Syria the majority of the people will leave the Middle East. They will leave and emigrate.*

*Q: Are you hopeful for the Church?*

*Archbishop Nassar: I have to be. We are the Church of hope. We cannot be pessimistic. This is our faith and to become a martyr; I can see some Iraqi Christians who are happy despite the persecution. Jesus Christ after all was a refugee, a martyr and he gives me the strength in my faith in this world and this is very beautiful to show how important it is that we have to stay.*

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*[1] The Alawis or Alawites are a prominent minority religious group in Syria who describe themselves as a sect of Shī'ah Islam. Alawis are distinct from the Turkish-based Alevi religious sect, although the terms share similar etymologies, and the sects may share a common origin.*

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*This interview was conducted by Mark Riedemann for "Where God Weeps," a weekly television and radio show produced by the Catholic Radio and Television Network in conjunction with the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need.*

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*On the Net:*

More information: [www.WhereGodWeeps.org](http://www.WhereGodWeeps.org)