

WORLD & NATION

Pope calls for Lebanese to seek interfaith harmony

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

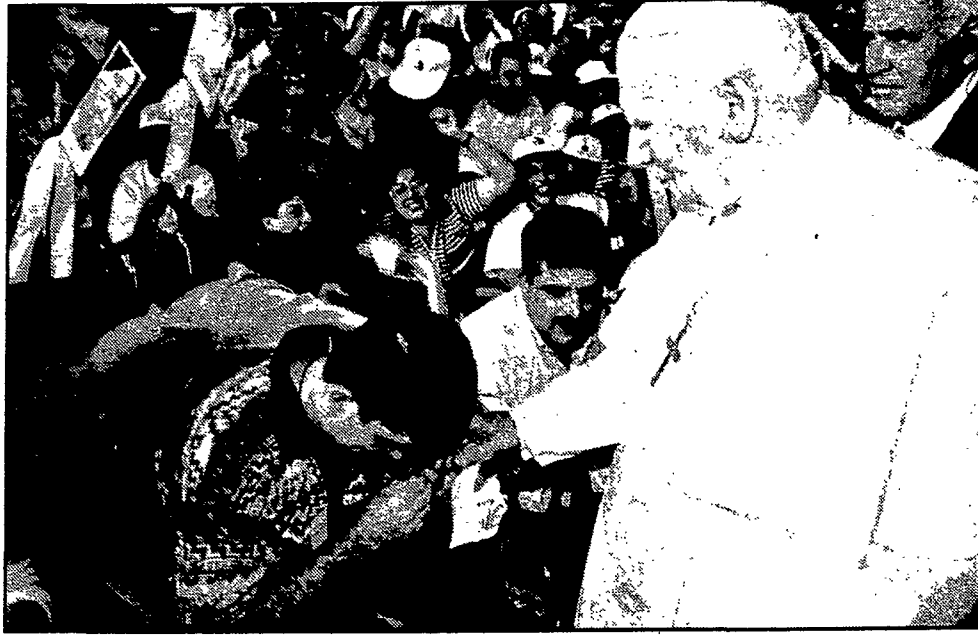
BEIRUT, Lebanon (CNS) — From an altar built upon the rubble of war, Pope John Paul II urged Lebanese to put aside their differences and remake their country into a model of Christian-Muslim harmony.

The papal appeal capped a 31-hour visit that prompted an outpouring of good will by hundreds of thousands of Lebanese Christians and Muslims.

"Spirit of God, pour your light and your love into human hearts to achieve reconciliation between individuals, within families, between neighbors, in cities and villages, and within the institutions of civil society!" the pope said at a seaside Mass May 11 in downtown Beirut.

An estimated 500,000 people poured into the Mass site, a landfill created with the debris of buildings destroyed in the 1975-90 conflict, and authorities said it was the largest crowd ever assembled in Lebanese history.

Unprecedented security was deployed, with some 20,000 soldiers and police placed along the pope's route and at events. Despite apprehensions, the entire



CNS/Reuters

Pope John Paul II blesses a war victim at a Catholic shrine in Harissa, Lebanon, May 10 during a 31-hour visit to the Middle East nation.

visit occurred without incident.

To a country that still bears the inner and outer scars of factional fighting, the pope brought a healing message and carefully avoided reopening old wounds be-

tween religious and political communities.

He met with government officials, Muslim leaders, bishops and Catholic youths, emphasizing to all groups a dominant

theme: Lebanon's future depends on establishing forgiveness and dialogue as the guiding values in personal life and public policy.

At a brief ceremony following the Mass, the pope presented his 194-page apostolic exhortation on Lebanon, a final synod document that sketched out pastoral reforms for the church and pledged cooperation with Muslims.

But more than the document and speeches, the pope's presence was the big story for the massive crowds — Christians and Muslims — who lined the streets of Beirut to cheer him as he rode through their neighborhoods in his glass-walled popemobile. Christians waved papal flags, veiled Muslim girls held greeting signs with the cross and the crescent moon, and on every block well-wishers pooled the pope's vehicle with fistfuls of flower petals.

From the moment his plane touched down May 10 at Beirut's airport, the pope appeared satisfied to have finally arrived in Lebanon and the Middle East. He told the country's leaders that he came as "a friend who wishes to visit a people and support them in their daily journey."

"Allah iuberekum!" ("God bless you!") the pontiff said in Arabic. Lebanese President Elias Hrawi, a Christian, welcomed the pope as "the image of hope for all Lebanese people." The crowds greeted him as "el Baba" — Arabic for "the pope."

The pope later held private talks with Hrawi and other government officials. The politicians, in remarks to reporters, focused on the political aspects of the pope's visit, in particular expressing satisfaction at earlier Vatican statements favoring Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

In a similar vein, some Christians used the papal visit as an occasion to urge withdrawal of Syria's 35,000 troops from Lebanon and an end to what they see as Syrian interference in political life.

The pope, however, steered clear of a detailed discussion of internal and international political issues, instead issuing a general call for Lebanese sovereignty and independence.

He said Lebanon should become "ever more democratic, in the full independence of its institutions and in recognition of its borders, which are indispensable conditions to guarantee its integrity" as a nation. He was a little more specific in his post-synodal document, referring to the "threatening" occupation in the South and the continued presence of other non-Lebanese soldiers.

The pope said interreligious dialogue was essential for Lebanon, in order to demonstrate that "religious convictions are a source of fraternity and to show that harmonious coexistence is possible."

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