

# Religions for Peace

24 March 2010

## **Islamic-Christian celebration to honor the Virgin Mary, symbol of national unity**

On the occasion of the Feast of the Annunciation, Lebanon's government launches a joint Christian-Muslim celebration in honor of Mary who is venerated in both communities. In the square in front of Lebanon's National Museum a statue of Our Lady will be erected surrounded by a crescent. The initiative might be extended to other countries.

Beirut (AsiaNews) – Tomorrow 25 March will be the first “Islamic-Christian Day” in honour of the Virgin Mary, *L'Orient-Le Jour* reports today in an article signed by Fady Noun, who notes that the new festivity will fall on the Feast of the Annunciation of Mary according to the Christian liturgical calendar.

“Together around Mary, Our Lady,” is the title chosen for the celebration, which will be more of a national event than a religious one. At present it is not a statutory holiday but it could become one in “the near future, in addition to traditional celebrations of the Annunciation.”

“It will make the Virgin Mary, who is revered by Muslims and Christians alike, a factor of unity among Lebanese of every faith,” the French-language daily wrote.

The final decision, which was three years in the making, came on 13 March in a meeting of the Lebanese cabinet.

The idea of making the Virgin Mary a symbol of a joint Christian-Muslim celebration came to Sheikh Mohammad Nokkari, general secretary of Dar el-Fatwa, or ‘House of Decree’, during Annunciation celebrations at Jamhour College.

**Emir Harès Chehab and Mohammad Sammak**, who co-chair the Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee, welcomed the initiative as did Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora.

Beirut Mayor Abdel-Monhem Ariss responded positively to a demand by the initiative's promoters to erect a statue of Mary in front of Lebanon's National Museum. The square where the statue will be located is actually a major intersection and might be renamed in honor of the Virgin Mary. The statue itself would “reproduce a stylised Virgin Mary surrounded by a crescent moon,” Islam's symbol par excellence.

A religious ceremony is scheduled for tomorrow in the chapel of Our Lady College in Jamhour, during which “Christians and Muslims will be able to pray together to the Virgin Mary.”

In addition to prayers, there will be songs, psalms, sacred music, testimonials, readings, as well as audio and video tapes.

Sheikh Amr Khaled, one of the Arab world's most important preachers, will attend the ceremony. Mgr Salim Ghazal, chairman of the Commission for Islamic-Christian dialogue of the Assembly of Maronite Patriarchs and Bishops, will also be there.

Organisers, according to the Lebanese paper, hope that their "initiative will lead to more.

Contacts have already been made so that next year "similar ceremonies could be held in six other countries, namely Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Poland, Italy and France."

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