

Destroying all Churches? Bishops Protest.

A recent declaration coming from Saudi Arabia was meant to shock Christians in the Gulf region and far beyond. Sure enough, a sharp reaction came – from Europe. Read about the declaration and the reaction in an article written by Benjamin Weinthal, correspondent of the "Jerusalem Post", Reuters contributing to the report. It was published on 24th March, 2012, in the online edition – see <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=263235> – under the heading,

“Europe’s bishops blast Saudi grand mufti”

BERLIN – Abdulaziz ibn Abdullah Al al-Sheikh, the grand mufti of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, issued a religious fatwa in March, saying it is “necessary to destroy all the churches in the Arabian Peninsula.”



Saudi Grand Mufti Abdel Aziz Al Sheikh (Photo by Reuters)

His declaration unleashed sharp criticism from Christian bishops in Germany, Austria and Russia on Friday.

The Roman Catholic bishops in Germany and Austria slammed the sheikh’s ruling as an unacceptable denial of human rights to millions of foreign workers in the Gulf region.

Of the roughly 3.5 million Christians that live in the Gulf Arab region, many are Catholic workers from India and the Philippines.

Archbishop Mark of Yegoryevsk, head of the Russian Orthodox department for churches abroad, called the fatwa “alarming” in a statement on Tuesday. Such blunt criticism from mainstream Christian leaders of their Muslim counterparts is very rare.

The March fatwa came in response to a Kuwaiti lawmaker who asked if Kuwait could ban church construction in the Arab state. According to Arab-language media reports, the sheikh ruled that further church building should be banned and existing Christian houses of worship should be destroyed.

“It’s astonishing, horrible and amazing that the most important Muslim cleric in the land that gave birth to Islam can call for the destruction of churches without this genocidal fatwa attracting any international condemnation or protest,” wrote Giulio Meotti, an Italian journalist with *Il Foglio* and expert on Christians in the Middle East, in an email to The

Jerusalem Post. “Where is the White House? Where is Lady Ashton? Where is the Vatican? Where are the UN’s agencies?” he asked.

Meotti, who is working on a book about the Vatican and Israel, said the fatwa will have consequences for Christians in the region, and the West should respond with a counter “antigenocidal campaign” based on the UN’s Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ratified on January 12, 1951.

“This fatwa is like Iran’s Ahmadinejad calling for the destruction of the State of Israel. Both, the Jews and Christians, today are targeted for a new impending genocide.”

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, chairman of the German Bishops Conference, said the mufti “shows no respect for the religious freedom and free coexistence of religions,” especially all the foreign laborers who made its economy work. “It would be a slap in the face to these people if the few churches available to them were to be taken away,” he said.

Saudi Arabia bans all non- Muslim houses of prayer, forcing Christians there to risk arrest by praying in private homes.

There are churches for Christian minorities in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Yemen.

The bishops conference in Austria, where Saudi King Abdullah plans to open a controversial center for interfaith dialogue, demanded an official explanation from Riyadh.

“How could the grand mufti issue a fatwa of such importance behind the back of his king?” they asked. “We see a contradiction between the dialogue being practiced, the efforts of the king and those of his top mufti.”

Bishop Paul Hinder, who oversees Catholic churches in the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen, told Catholic news agency KNA that the fatwa had not been widely publicized in Saudi Arabia.

“What is worrying is that such statements have influence in part of the population,” he said.