

## **Fourth Pastoral Letter**

### **“The Mystery of the Church”**

**«Je suis la Vigne, vous, les Sarments» (Jn 15,5)**

**Christmas 1996**

### **INTRODUCTION**

To our brothers in the episcopate, to priests, deacons, monks, nuns and all our faithful, who are the Church of God, in all our eparchies in the East and in the diaspora, “*Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” (1 Corinthians 1: 3)

#### **1. Pastoral concerns and questions**

We have begun this joint Pastoral Letter with the greeting that the apostle Paul addressed to the Corinthian Church in order to allow you to share, right from the start, the concern that haunted the apostle’s heart, expressed in the following verses: “*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment;*” (1 Corinthians 1: 10) then he says: “*For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*” (1 Corinthians 2: 2) That is the concern that haunts us and challenges us today to become aware of our reality as a Church. Are we conscious of being a Church, and that the Church’s foundation is Jesus Christ crucified? Or are we confessional communities in search of human achievements? Are we conscious of being the Church? Do we really live the Church that we are and that we are called to be, ever more faithfully? We could also adopt this other question of the apostle: “*How [ought we] to behave [ourselves] in the house of God, which is the church of the living God?*” (1 Timothy 3: 15) How can we be living branches on the vine and bear much fruit for the glory of God the Father? (cf. John 15: 1-5)

#### **2. The reality of our Churches today**

The concern of the Apostle of the Nations fills our hearts in the face of the plurality and diversity of our traditions, for we all wish to have but one heart and manner of speech in order to be witnesses of our Lord Jesus Christ, as he tells us, “*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*” (Acts 1: 8) We are currently seven Catholic Patriarchates in the Arab East: the Patriarchate of Alexandria of the Coptic Catholics, the three Patriarchates of Antioch, of the Syrians, Maronites and Melkite Greek Catholics, the Patriarchates of Cilicia of the Armenians, of Babylon of the Chaldeans and of Jerusalem of the Latins. Our faithful can often be found in the same country, working all together in the one field of the Lord. We wish to have a united action and a common witness, despite the plurality and diversity of our traditions, for the glory of God who has sent us all into the

same vineyard, and for the strengthening of faith of our faithful in all our Patriarchates.

We held our fourth annual meeting in Rabweh, (Lebanon) from 19 to 24 September 1994, thanks to the hospitality of our brother, Patriarch Maximos V Hakim. We focused our thinking on this fundamental issue, the mystery of the Church and what makes it different from the Confessional Community. We reflected on what comes to us from God and what comes from men, on fixed traditions and those which should be a source of renewal and life, enabling us to deal with the many challenges of our daily private and public life.

### **3. Reference to previous Pastoral Letters**

In our three previous letters,<sup>1</sup> we reflected with you on the roots, significance and mission of our Churches in the land of the East. We looked together for new ways to renew our vocation and witness in our changing societies. We saw that our essential vocation in our countries, *that* of our Churches, is the common witness to our Lord Jesus Christ. But we must admit that experience has shown that this essential vocation of our Churches is hampered by obstacles that come from us, pastors and faithful, in our behaviour as communities. In the Creed, we profess that the Church is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic;” but in fact, we behave like confessional communities, each seeking its own interests. That is why we have deemed it necessary and important to reflect with you on the mystery of the Church, to grow the spirit of communion among our Churches, in all areas of the apostolate, and to attain the realisation of the “ecclesial model” which would make the witness and mission of our Churches more transparent and effectual.

### **4. Purpose and divisions of the Letter**

In this Pastoral Letter we wish to go into the meaning of the Church, as Jesus Christ willed it, as the apostles after him understood and lived it and consequently as we too have to understand and live it today.

When we speak of the meaning of the Church, we must also speak of the meaning of the Confessional Community (Ta'ifah). That is indeed the historical, political and human setting in which we have been living our Church life and in which our particular ecclesial traditions have developed. Those traditions are spiritual treasures and vital and life-giving energies, born of the faith of our ancestors and still capable of rekindling our faith today. That is why our life as a Church, upheld by our particular traditions, ought to nourish our daily life in all fields.

This is the aim of this letter: to affirm the necessity of maintaining a permanent link between our ancient traditions, in the context of each community, and everything new in our daily life. We would like there to be an interaction between our traditions, the demands of our life today and our hope in the future.

The “confessional community” has had a positive role in the course of our history as Churches; it has in fact preserved ecclesial tradition, basic human and ethnic culture in each of our Churches. But many weaknesses have found their way into it, and that because of a faith which was becoming sometimes superficial, or because of social factors which stifled the true meaning of the Church. That has allowed confessionalism to appear, causing distortion in our ecclesial life. The main

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<sup>1</sup>. 24 August 1991, Pascha 1992 and Christmas 1994

distortion has been self-absorption and, hence, the weakness that has characterised our relations with those who belong to another confession or religion.

The question that we wish then to put in this letter is the following: how are we to free ourselves from this negative confessionalism and strengthen our traditions, making them into a wellspring of life? The answer will lie in the exact meaning of the Church, in the setting up of a permanent link between tradition and life today, and in the ability of that tradition to contribute to building contemporary life, understanding its needs and giving it the requisite answers.

So we wish in this letter to try to reach a clear vision of what Jesus Christ willed when he founded the Church, and of what we ourselves wanted when we came to believe in that Church. We want to see what needs to be renewed in our attitude and behaviour. We also want to clarify the relations between the Church willed by Jesus Christ in every time and place, and the human setting, known in the East as the “confessional community,” in which this Church is incarnate. We shall say that we are the Church first of all and that the Church is incarnate in human reality in order to purify it, raise it and make it into a source of action and liberation. This reflection on the mystery of the Church will be in the end our guide for coping with current challenges and for sharing in the life of our time and that of all our brothers and sisters.

This Pastoral Letter will have four chapters. In the first we shall try to distinguish between Church and Ta’ifah or confessional community. We shall underline the wealth of traditions belonging to each of our Churches. We shall also show how some confessional attitudes, claiming to preserve traditions and heritage, in fact distance us from the real meaning of the Church.

In the second, we shall talk about what the mystery of the Church is and how the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the source, model and end of the Church, a sacrament of lived communion and, at the same time, a sign and instrument of salvation for everyone.

In the third chapter, we shall talk about plurality and unity in the life of the Church, on the basis of the concept of Communion, to demonstrate that plurality and unity do not contradict each other, and that communion can be lived with the plurality and diversity of the Church’s traditions.

In the fourth chapter, we offer pastoral perspectives and guidelines rooted in the mystery of Communion, and showing how the faithful can be living members in a living Church. So they will be able to preserve their traditions, living by them, remaining faithful to them and, at the same time, freeing themselves from confessionalism and every negative and destructive element for Church and faith.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Church, confessional Community and Traditions**

#### **I. How were our Eastern Churches formed?**

##### **5. In Jerusalem the Church was born**

In our East, God the Father sent his only Son to become man, and to bring about, through his death and resurrection, the salvation of humanity. Here he instituted the Church to be leaven and an instrument of salvation. In Jerusalem, through the Holy Spirit, the first Church was formed, on the day of Pentecost, when the crowd, gathered

round the apostles, heard Peter proclaim Jesus as Saviour and believed in him, “*Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. .. and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.*”<sup>2</sup>

## **6. In Antioch and all the East**

Following the example of the Church of Jerusalem, all Churches were formed, after the apostles spread out into the world and proclaimed the Gospel of salvation brought by Jesus Christ. In Antioch, the first Church after Jerusalem was formed. (cf. Acts 11: 19-26) There the disciples “*were called Christians first.*” (Acts 11: 26) There, the Church became “*daughter of the nations,*” and there, freed from the ancient Jewish law, it spread into all the countries of the world, spoke to all peoples and drew them to Christ.

So the Church spread in our East, in Egypt, Asia Minor, Cilicia, Armenia and Mesopotamia. The Church was founded in most regions and cities in the course of the first three centuries, despite the persecutions that it had to face. It had to adapt and express itself through the variety of its many cultures. They were local Churches in the full sense of the term. Political circumstances did not always favour frequent exchanges between Churches. Some however, confronting the danger of doctrinal deviations, managed to communicate among themselves and with the Churches of the world through Synods, in which they set out their internal problems and difficulties. Both Churches of Antioch and Alexandria, major cities of the East at that time, were reference points for most Churches, when the danger of deviations became apparent at the time of the controversies between Churches. When the problems became insoluble, Rome remained the last resort, as was, for example, the case at Chalcedon and in other councils. That is how the Churches lived in our East. They lived as local and ecumenical Churches at the same time.

## **II. How the confessional framework was formed**

### **7. Eastern Churches and cultural diversity**

The East was, in days of old, a field of war and conflicts between the peoples of the region and powers from abroad. What is strange is that the various conquests did not succeed in obliterating the ancient cultures. The latter were preserved, although under the guise of conquered and oppressed minorities and became in the course of time ethnic minorities, within successive great empires. The concern of those minorities was the preservation of identity in the face of the aggression and violence to which they were subject. The struggle for survival thus became the primary motive in determining their behaviour and conduct at every level.

The last conquests before the Arab period, which left traces up to the present on the country and on the Churches, were the Greco-Roman conquests. Some of the peoples of the region adopted the culture of the new conquerors and acquired citizenship from them. But the majority attached themselves to their own language and culture, Coptic in Egypt, Aramean in Syria, ancient eastern Aramean in Mesopotamia and Iran, and Armenian in Armenia, then in Cilicia.

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<sup>2</sup>. Acts 2: 37-38, 41-42; cf. also 2: 14-47

To that East, with its diversified cultures, the Church brought the message of salvation. It did not arrive with armies or the force of a new culture, but simply with the message of universal salvation for all. Its only concern was to be able to proclaim salvation through existing languages and cultures. It became adapted, with astonishing swiftness, perfectly aware of its mission. Soon it became an essential element in its various cultures.

### **8. The first centuries**

In the course of the first three centuries, the Church was born as a local Church incarnate in the various cultures existing in our countries. This first Church, sprinkled with martyrs' blood, could cope with the various divisions and particularities. Through the blessing of its martyrs, and despite persecution, it continued to live the mystery of Christ, either in the eremitic life in the deserts, or in the very society which persecuted it and thus strengthened its faith and ecclesial unity.

In the fourth century, after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the religion of the empire. The latter started supporting the Church. But on the other hand, the civil power began to infiltrate it with its concepts and behaviour, and to subject it to its political demands. In the living Church, animated by the Holy Spirit, administrative and human concepts made inroads. A new social aspect of the Church appeared. The traditions of the Churches were also gradually transformed into human institutions that stifled faith, instead of remaining as fruits given life by the renewing Spirit of Jesus.

At that period began also the divisions and great doctrinal controversies on the topic of the person of Jesus Christ, eternal Word of God. These divisions had consequences that have lasted until today. The political power made itself the arbiter of religious affairs and started to support one Confession against another. Besides, having its own cultural and national identity, it quite naturally provoked opposition from other cultures. Thus began the first manifestation of "confessionalism," that narrowed the concept of the Church by subjecting it gradually to a confessional vision, whose concern was the preservation of its tradition, its own dogmatic expression and opposition to the dominant political power.

### **9. With the Arab and Muslim conquest**

Islam would not interfere in Christian religious affairs. It gave to Christian communities a particular status, that of "dhimmis" or "protected people," under the protection of their religious leaders. Islam, by thus ensuring the survival of the Churches in its midst and by recognizing their autonomy, threw them back upon a confessionalism that would mark for ever their internal religious and civil structures. That autonomy developed two main characteristics within Christian communities: first, concern for survival and defence of self-interests over against Islam, as with respect to other Churches; second, the religious leader became the community leader in every domain, and the community confided to him, besides his religious responsibilities, the civil responsibilities requisite for survival. This confessional context thus became the normal state for all growth or promotion. That is why the concept of the confession, a community anxious to defend its rights, gradually took the place of the Church, body of Christ and community of believers united among themselves and with the other Churches by the link of the same Spirit.

## 10. The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire, (1516-1918) definitively institutionalised this state of affairs and rounded it off with the status known as “millah” or religious community. It granted to religious leaders greater civil capabilities with regard to their faithful and made them into official representatives for any dealings with the civil power. This new status was another decisive step in the formation of the ethnic community and the transformation of the Church into a social and political entity. We still live with this mindset. Foreign meddling should also be mentioned here as contributing its part to the consolidation and exploitation of confessionalism.

**Comment [VC1]:** The Ottoman Empire is usually reckoned as 1299-1922 (1)- or at the least, 1301-1922, when the Sultanate was abolished. The caliphate was declared in 1517 and abolished in 1924.

Most modern Arab states recognize today in their constitutions the equality of all citizens. Civil power has taken back all its responsibilities with respect to all its Muslim and Christian citizens and thus liberated Christian religious leaders from the overload of power imposed by the status of “dhimmis” or “millah.” Yet the confessional mentality continues to predominate in our Eastern Churches. In fact, no modern Arab regime, despite the wording of the constitutions, has yet managed to resolve the problem of pluralism in its country. All Arab regimes remain in a state of puzzlement and powerlessness when it comes to applying the principle of equality of all citizens.<sup>3</sup> That is why there is still among the faithful the feeling that the Church, Confessional Community, is the framework that must support the faithful, not only in their religious life, but also in their civil and social life.

## 11. Confessional community and confessionalism

So there in brief are the historic and cultural circumstances that led to the birth and growth of our Churches in their diversity and specificity in the East. Those same difficult and negative circumstances, together with our sins, have led every one of our Churches to fragment and become introverted. That is how they became confessional communities (Tawa’if), consumed by divisions and by overloads that erased from their faces the image of Christ. They put out in themselves the flame of the Spirit and this led them to forget that they did not exist for themselves but for God, and to bring the message of salvation into their surroundings from which they had been drawn and to which they had been sent.

All that gave birth to confessionalism, which is a dangerous distortion of religion and in flagrant contradiction with the meaning of the Church. Confessionalism’s first care is for its own survival, self-defence and defence of its acquired rights and privileges, rather than for the growth of the faith itself. It worries about human achievements

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<sup>3</sup>. As for the confessional regime which prevails in some of our countries, this can only be ended after undertaking a new education based on principles that see in all people brothers and sisters, despite any difference of religion and background. It will have as its aim the uprooting of the confessional mentality from minds before abrogating confessionalism in legislation. That requires the State to pay equal attention to all its citizens, so that the allocation of jobs should be according to capabilities and not confessional membership. In the temporal sphere, citizens will be directly linked to the State without the support of the confessional community. In the spiritual domain, Christians will refer to the Church and Muslims to the mosque, without mixing up the temporal with the spiritual, because the interference can be detrimental to both. If, on the other hand, separation between both proves impossible in some societies, the question remains: how can we free ourselves from confessionalism? It may be a risk that this question will remain unanswered.

In this case, does not the confessional regime constitute a barrier preventing the oppression of one religious group by another, in a society where several religions meet and where one is in the majority and the other the minority?

more than faith achievements and external religious appearance more than spirit. It makes traditions into a prison chaining the faithful to a distant past alien to contemporary life, without evolution making it into a powerful presence and continual renewal. Thus, our Churches became groups concentrating most of their concern on survival and on purely human outlooks. From that resulted also the violation of another ecclesial characteristic: openness and charity. Confessionalism indeed causes us to shrink into ourselves when we are faced with other citizens or even our co-religionists. The others become unknown, rivals or competitors, despite the fact that they may share the same faith, land, citizenship and human brotherhood.

The confessional mentality is ignorant of the Church to which it claims to belong and the meaning of its traditions. It is ignorant of the Church because it sees in it only one ethnic and religious group amongst others, and because it withdraws into itself as we said, while the Church of Christ is open to all, to every people and nation. It does not know ecclesial traditions, as often it quite simply is ignorant of them, or reduces them to socio-cultural realities, as do most of the civil or sometimes even religious media in their reports. The latter highlight the confessional mindset and neglect the essential mission of the Church.

### III. Our ecclesial traditions

#### 12. A new inheritance

Through our first birth, we have first inherited a group of structures that contributed to shaping both our individual and social nature: the motherland, though many have long ago left it, the mother-tongue too, the history, the homeland, family, educational, professional and civil institutions and customs. Simultaneously and correspondingly, we have inherited a culture and collection of values which, being shared by the social groups with whom we have been living, have unconsciously become normative for our vision of things, our personal behaviour, our relations with others and even with God.

Through our second birth, i.e. baptism, we have put on Christ and been anointed with the Holy Spirit. (cf. [John 3: 5](#)) And it is in the mother Church and through it that we inherit that new life, as joint heirs with the only Son. (cf. Romans 8: 17)

**Comment [VC2]:** Not John 5: 3, as per French

Two aspects of this new inheritance may hold our attention here. On the one hand, baptism does not confer on us a human nature or culture different from those of non-baptised people. Our local Church is of the same stuff as the humans to whom it is sent: it is not a Christian society alongside a non-Christian society. Its novelty is to be the leaven of the Kingdom of God in the social and cultural lump of the place where it lives. Because the Beloved Son assumed the whole of human nature in order to save it, only what he assumed is saved. That applies to each person and each culture. Christ, our God and Saviour, does not destroy what he has created, but frees us from sin and death, purifies us and renews his image in us, if we consent to it, even as far as our innermost mind where the museum of our cultural heritage is hiding, everything good and everything to be purified or modified.

On the other hand, the local Church where we are born and grow into Christ has known throughout its history, the fate of the leaven in the lump. Its novelty is having made the fruit of the Spirit grow in the socio-cultural field where it was sown. From that we have inherited today: firstly, the Holy Scriptures translated into our languages, the sacramental celebration of the Liturgy, the transmission of the apostolic faith in our culture, the canonical organisation of the ecclesial community, as well as the

deepening of faith required by apologetics or controversies over heresies. Through these different expressions the plurality of ecclesial traditions has developed in our East, a plurality not only legitimate but necessary.

### **13. Our traditions are theanthropic**

Our traditions are then theanthropic. They are at once the fruit of grace and the efforts of our ancestors in faith. Since they are human, we must begin by saying that several temptations await us. The most serious of these dangers is “worldliness.” Our fathers and mothers in faith, in particular our martyrs and spiritual authors, who were the servants of our holy apostolic Tradition, are the living witnesses of that faithfulness of the Church to its Lord, in the face of temptations from worldliness. Worldliness? That is confessionalism and it is also observing to the letter the rites of our liturgies or boasting of their beauty, while our hearts are far from the One we are honouring (cf. Mark 7: 7); it is “*laying aside the commandment of God [to] hold the tradition of men*” (Mark 7: 8), such as certain customs to do with baptisms, weddings and funerals, which are perhaps respectable, but which obscure the authentic meaning of the sacrament celebrated.

### **14. Our traditions are the incarnation of the Gospel in culture**

Christ has called us to be members of his Body in our local Church, and in it we are sent to the inhabitants of that same place. Our ecclesial traditions incarnate, in the flesh and history of each of our Churches, the one mystery of the Tradition of faith received from the Apostles; they are the particular forms, adapted to each culture, in which that same mystery of human salvation is shown, made real and communicated. Now the wonder of the Holy Spirit in human history and culture is to embody the Word of Life, to show him in the flesh of every culture, to make real his work of salvation and to put everything into Communion with the Father in the Body of Christ. He brings about that wonder in each of our Churches, whilst fully respecting its human identity.

### **15. The Church relies on the power of the Spirit**

For each of us, our Church is really a Mother. Through our first birth, we are the children of our parents. Our new birth to the life of the Father has been given to us by our Church. At the Annunciation, Mary conceived the Son of God in her flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the same way, at Pentecost, and ever since, it is entirely through the power of the Holy Spirit that the Church constitutes the Body of Christ. For Mary as for the Church, it is the same mystery of virginal maternity that does not rely on human power, but on that of the Spirit. Now that is what the confessional mentality ignores, as it is reliant on the powers of this world. Our Church behaves like a Church when, like the All-holy Virgin Mary, it “*know[s] not a man,*” (Luke 1: 34) and expects to be fertile through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the Artisan of God’s works and he is the source of the holy and living Tradition.

In our Church the Holy Spirit has enabled us to be reborn to the Father’s life in the beloved Son. In the Church he feeds us with the Word of God through the gift of faith; in it he enables us to participate, through the Eucharist in Christ’s Passover, i.e. his death and Resurrection; in it he forgives us and reconciles us with the Father and our brethren; in it he teaches us to pray in truth; in it he teaches us to love and serve our fellow-citizens, as Christ loves and serves them; in it he sends us into the world, as signs and servants of the Communion of God with man and of all people in God.



## **16. Our tradition our way towards knowing Jesus Christ**

Let us be sure: through the lived experience of our ecclesial traditions we have access to “*knowledge in the mystery of Christ...by the Church.*” (Ephesians 3: 4-10) Our Fathers in faith, especially in the East, did not reduce the proclamation of the Gospel to a school teaching of religious truths. Their catechesis never separated listening to the word of God from the celebration of the Holy Mysteries, i.e. from the Tradition which was a daily source of life for them. Tradition thus became the experience of evangelical life in society and an atmosphere steeped in prayer of the heart. Thus was formed “*the new man*” in the Church incarnate in a given time and space.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **The mystery of the Church**

#### **I. The Mystery of Communion**

##### **17. The Church is a mystery**

After having reflected on the birth of our Churches, our traditions and the spirit of confessionality that permeates them, we would like now to invite you to reflect, beloved brothers and sisters and children, on the mystery of the Church. What does the expression mean: ‘we are the living members in a living Church,’ in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council?

Thirty years after the Second Vatican Council, whose aim was the renewal of the Catholic Church in faithfulness to God’s economy for the world, it is possible that the younger generations are still unaware of its meaning and that their elders have not yet accepted all its inspiration in the life of our Churches. Now, it is remarkable that the first chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) opens with the title: “The mystery of the Church.” Practical and legal aspects will not be forgotten in the following chapters, nor in later documents: they are necessary, but relative to the mystery that they must reflect. What is divine is primary and is manifest in what is visible. The Church is called to serve as the sacrament it is: a mystery in the life of mankind.

That is why we begin by saying that the Church is a mystery, i.e. an amazing plan of God, “*which was kept secret since the world began,*” (Romans 16: 25) which the Father made known to us “*when the fullness of time was come,*” (Galatians 4: 4) in “*the Beloved,*” (Ephesians 1: 6) in whom he wanted to “*gather together in one all things in Christ.*” (Ephesians 1: 10) All that means that the Church comes from God; it is a human community constituted by the grace of God, and not only by human ties; it is born “*not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*” (John 1: 13) The grace of God however extends to everything human to raise it, to give life to it and to be incarnate there. The grace of God does not invite us to confine ourselves to ourselves; it does not feed sectarian fanaticism. On the contrary, it fills us with love for everyone, those who are in our Church, those who are in other Churches and those who are of different religions and beliefs.

##### **18. Mystery of the communion of God with people**

Now this mystery is inseparably divine and human. It begins and ends in God and extends to people. This is the mystery of the Church which brings about the communion of God with people. Communion - *koinonia*, one of the most beautiful names of the

New Testament to enable us to sense the inexpressible mystery of God Love – is at the heart of the rediscovery of the meaning of the Church in the present ecumenical movement.

Pope John Paul II recently reminded us of this: “*Communion: that is certainly a key concept in the ecclesiology of Vatican II, and, today, twenty-five years after its conclusion, it seems more than ever necessary to focus our attention on this concept. Koinonia is a dimension that imposes its mark on the very constitution of the Church and covers all its expressions: from the Creed to the witness of practice, from the transmission of doctrine to the articulation of structures... This is the theological and Trinitarian communion of every believer with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, spreading with effusion into the communion of believers among themselves, gathering them into a single people...with an essential visible and social dimension.*”<sup>4</sup>

## **II. The Holy Trinity, source, model and end of the Church**

### **19. Communion gathers the believers into a single people**

The believers form “a single people.” How are we to understand this expression? Some understand it in the ethnic or political meaning sense, but, in our holy Books its meaning is quite new: it has to do with the “people of God”, an “assembly” called by God, whose reason for being is God; it can only exist through him and its goal is to be holy as he is holy, because it is God’s “*purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.*” (Ephesians 1: 14) The whole of the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* enables us to discover the Church as “People of God:”

*“That messianic people has Christ for its head, Who was delivered up for our sins, and rose again for our justification, □ (Romans 4: 25), and now, having won a name which is above all names, reigns in glory in heaven. The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. (cf. John 13: 34) Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time, when Christ, our life, (cf. Colossians 3: 4) shall appear and creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God . (Rom 8: 21)”<sup>5</sup>*

### **20. After the pattern of the One Trinity**

Of this new people, the living and true God is the free source. He it is who, since the time of Abraham, has been calling his people, awakening faith in them and revealing himself to them. He entrusted to them his plan of salvation for all people. He gathered this new offspring of faith “from every race, country, town, village, and house.”<sup>6</sup> That such a multitude should make a single people surpasses human understanding and power: it is the work of the one and only God, who, justly, thus reveals both his transcendent unity and a mystery of personal plenitude, the mystery of the communion (*koinonia*) of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Church is not formed through the

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<sup>4</sup>. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 9; John Paul II, “Address to the Roman Curia,” December 20, 1990, no.

9: AAS 83 (1991), 745-747

<sup>5</sup>. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 9

<sup>6</sup>. Anaphora of St Serapion, bishop of Thmuis in Egypt, in the fourth century, to whom St. Athanasius wrote his “Letters on the Holy Spirit”

addition or the co-option of persons: it is the great gift of the fellowship of the one and indivisible Holy Trinity, given to people that they might have life through it. *“For the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness and shew unto you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested unto us... that ye also may have fellowship with us. And truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”* (1 John 1: 2-3) Such a mystery of communion does not arise from the human heart, but comes down from God like *“the Bride of the Lamb.”* (Revelation 21: 10) The Church is not the fruit of our decision. It is not we who have chosen to be disciples of Christ, but he who has chosen us, (cf. John 15: 16) because the Father first loved us. (cf. 1 John 4: 19)

**Comment [VC3]:** Note that in English, fellowship=communion in the sense of koinonia, and I have used both terms in this translation where it appeared most appropriate to do so. See also the following comment on “communion” in the French text of this letter.

## **21. A people one and many in the image of the Holy Trinity one and indivisible**

From the beginning of this Pastoral Letter, we have been asking ourselves the question: how is unity compatible with the diversity of our Churches and traditions? In seeking the answer, we found that the “confessional community” and the mentality which inspires it, does not give us the pattern that corresponds to the reality of the Church. Worldliness, indeed, can neither conceive nor achieve unity respecting diversity. The only model which reveals this to us and can enable us to live out this paradoxical mystery is the unity of the Trinitarian fellowship, *a model that we find in the icon of the Trinity, renowned in Eastern iconography.*

By revealing himself in the Economy of our salvation, the only God made himself known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one and only God. Each Divine Person is “towards” the Other; no-one belongs to himself but gives himself in pure transparency. Now, human persons are *“in the image of God”* (Galatians 1: 26) and essentially long to be loved and to love. But we know, alas, that we are not in his likeness, insofar as each individual or group is self-seeking and does not live for others. That is why personal or communal unity is, humanly speaking, an inaccessible mirage. Our world is sick from excluding and rejecting “others.” Worldliness engenders sin, division and death.

## **22. The Church, communion of life**

The Church is called to be the clear sign of this communion, because its divine model remains faithfully in it. That is why it is also the servant; the Holy Trinity is the end of the Church. Already anticipating *“a very closely knit union with God and ...unity of the whole human race,”*<sup>7</sup> the Church is not yet the fellowship of all human beings with their Father and among themselves. It is sent so that the Kingdom of Love may come into all creation when God will be all in all. That is to say, that the Church does not exist for itself, but for its Lord and for all human beings whose servant and Saviour he became. It is the communion of life, symbolised in Trinitarian iconography by the tree of life, which is rooted in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity.

We no longer belong to ourselves but to him who died and rose for us. This applies to every baptized person and every Church. The Church of God is really God’s, for the Father, and therefore for all his scattered children. This awareness is critical for our ecclesial conversion, because being converted means just redirecting our heart towards the Father through the beloved Son who restores us to fellowship with him and with all his children.

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<sup>7</sup>. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

### III. The Church as Sacrament of Union

#### 23. Visible sign of the divine mystery

Through the Church, the mystery of the fellowship of the Holy Trinity is revealed and given to people in the incarnate Word and by the Holy Spirit, for them to live this life of communion. Thus, the Church is the sacrament of union,<sup>8</sup> it is essentially sacramental. That means that the mystery of the divine fellowship, invisible and transcendent in itself, is visibly communicated in the Church. It is, at the same time, and inseparably, “*the visible assembly and the spiritual community*,”... “*one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element*.”<sup>9</sup> this is the mystery of the incarnate Word.

It is important, today especially, for our experience of the Church to be inspired by this vision of faith, for otherwise we deviate towards two extreme temptations: either, the Church becomes but a socio-religious organisation, and so we fall again into confessionalism, or, in reaction against the confessional institution, the believers in Jesus Christ join together into a vague sentimental brotherhood not incarnate in real human life. In both cases, Christ becomes divided and the mystery of communion expunged from human history.

#### 24. The mystery begins with the advent of the Son

Now “*when the fullness of the time was come*,” (Galatians 4: 4) God sent his Son. Then Life, the divine communion, became embodied in history. In the person of the Word incarnate, in all that he said and did and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father accomplished his loving plan: freeing man from sin and death, that is, from what is the opposite of communion, through the death and resurrection of his Son. Now, *that* liberating Passover is the only historical event that is not over: having come “once and for all,” he is, and remains active in history, especially through his Word and by the sacraments.

How is the risen Christ still present and active among humanity, since he is no longer limited by time and space, as he was during his earthly life? The new “way of being and acting” of his risen humanity in our world is “sacramental,” that is, that fully alive with the Father, Christ remains among us, accessible to our mortal human nature. Since his ascension to the Father and until his return in glory, Christ has been present and remains active in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the intermediary of the Church and sacraments. That is what the faith of the Church confesses through the expression “the mystical Body” of Christ.

#### 25. The Eucharist, sacrament of fellowship

It is precisely at “the mystical Supper” that Jesus grants his disciples the whole mystery of communion: in his body given up and in his blood poured out for many, is fulfilled the complete gift of divine fellowship with mankind, the gift of love unto death, “*love...unto the end*.” (John 13: 1) At the paschal event in which the mystery of communion is accomplished for mankind, Jesus gives it, by giving himself, “sacramentally.” From then on, and “*till he come*,” (I Corinthians 11: 26) the great sacrament of the Eucharist manifests, makes present and spreads the paschal event in those who have put on Christ through baptism and chrismation. This divine Passover of

**Comment [VC4]:** Lumen Gentium 1 (and 9) speaks of the Church as “sacrament of union with God and of unity of the whole human race” and “visible sacrament of saving unity,” but nowhere as “sacrament of communion” as per the French. Therefore I have altered the English word here to fit the official text of the authority cited. In chapter III, I revert to “mystery of communion.”

<sup>8</sup>. *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup>. *Ibid*. 8.

the Lord is not repeated, but made present sacramentally, so that the Head's Pascha becomes that of his members. In truth, "when the Church celebrates the Eucharist, it realises what it is, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10: 17) ...By the Eucharist, the paschal event opens itself out into Church."<sup>10</sup> The Church is a eucharistic reality in the sense of communion and thanksgiving that the Eucharistic community gives to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## 26. The Holy Spirit living in the Church

But in our rediscovery of the mystery of the Church, it is essential to renew our loving acquaintance with the Holy Spirit. In the loving plan of God the Father, the Spirit is always sent with the Son, and it is when the risen Christ gives him to his disciples that the Church is also "sent" in the Holy Spirit. (cf. John 20, 21-22) He awakens in us faith in Christ, enables us to be reborn to the Father's life by grafting us onto Christ and permeating our whole being with his indelible anointing. He it is who, in the liturgy of the Word, reminds us of Christ and gives life to his word in our hearts. It is he who, in the sacramental epiclesis, transforms into Christ, what we offer. He is the Spirit of unity, (cf. 2 Corinthians 13: 13) invoked at the start of our Eucharistic anaphora, <sup>[1]</sup> who "puts into communion with the body of Christ those who share the same bread and the same cup."<sup>12</sup> From that, the Church shows what it is: the sacrament of the Trinitarian koinonia, "the tabernacle of God ... with men." (Revelation 21: 3)

**Comment [VC5]:** The closing quotation marks here (after "Christ") in the French are incorrect, as the quotation from the document continues up to the end of the next sentence. On the other hand, the French has omitted the quotation marks in the original document around the phrase "what it is" so I have reinserted them in the citation.

**Comment [VC6]:** The reference to the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Eucharistic prayer of the Roman rite appears to belong to the clause referring to "the start of our Eucharistic anaphora," and should, I suggest be moved accordingly from the end of the sentence to the middle, as I have done.

**Comment [VC7]:** Not Revelation 21:4, as per French. The reference 12 to the Joint Commission's document should, in my view, be placed here after the quotation from the document and not as per the French after the following scriptural quotation – which is not cited by the Joint Commission.

## CHAPTER III

### Plurality and Unity in the life of the Church

#### I. The Church, Mystery of Communion

##### 27. The one Church

At the end of these reflections on the mystery of the Church, it is possible for us to grasp better, with the understanding of faith, that unity and plurality, far from being mutually exclusive, are inseparably bound up with one another in our experience of the Church.

To understand why the Church is one, although many Churches have been founded the world over since the first community of Jerusalem, two erroneous concepts should first be discarded. According to the first, the one Church would be the sum of Churches, a sort of world Christian federation: this variation on confessionalism does not reflect the mystery of the Church, since *a federation is a socio-political realisation: it cannot show the divine mystery of Communion and the Churches would remain just different and divided bodies*. As for the second, conversely, the Churches would be the local branches of a headquarters which would be the one Church: that legalistic caricature also remains inferior to the mystery of communion.

These two conceptions consider the matter of "Church and Churches" as an

<sup>10</sup>. "The mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the light of the mystery of the Holy Trinity," Second Plenary Meeting of the Joint Commission for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, Munich, 6 July 1982 [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/ch\\_orthodox\\_docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_19820706\\_munich\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820706_munich_en.html)

<sup>11</sup>. Cf. "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ." (3<sup>rd</sup>. Eucharistic prayer, Roman rite)

<sup>12</sup>. "The mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the light of the Holy Trinity" 1, 5 (d)

arithmetical problem, although it is a question of a mystery, the Mystery of the Wholly Other. In God, there is no number. His unity, inaccessible to reason, cannot be thought of according to the logic that says that “one” is half of two or one-third of three. The mystery of the intimate unity of the living God is revealed by Christ as consubstantial and indivisible plenitude: the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### **28. The mystery of communion and the particular Churches**

The Church is the sacrament of this communion. “*For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.*” (1 Corinthians 12: 12-13) When we receive communion in the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, we are many; yet each person, by receiving a piece of the Eucharistic bread, does not receive a part of the Body of Christ, but the whole Christ, and that is why, “... *we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.*” (1 Corinthians 10: 17) In the same way, each of our Churches is not a part of the Church spread throughout the universe, but makes present, here and now, the mystery of the Church of which it is the sacrament. That is why the whole Church is present in each particular Church.

### **29. The catholic and apostolic Church**

It remains to specify the conditions essential for a Church to be truly the sacrament of communion with God and humans, despite the plurality and diversity of Churches.

Our faith professes these two essential conditions, during the celebration of the Holy Mysteries in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed: the one holy Church is “catholic and apostolic.” If we succeed in better understanding and living effectively these two essential aspects of the mystery of the Church, we shall also learn how to live out ever better its unity and diversity.

### **30. The apostolic Church**

Firstly the Church is “apostolic:” so it appears in the world from the day of Pentecost. What does “apostolic” mean? This word makes some think of the Apostles who founded the first Churches, especially in the East. That is true, but we must go further. That is the Church as such, made present in each of our Churches, which “*has as its foundation the apostles and prophets, and as cornerstone Jesus Christ himself.*”<sup>13</sup> “*As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.*” (John 20: 21) That means that each of our Churches makes present sacramentally, today and here, the Church of the Apostles founded by the same Spirit at the first Pentecost. It is the same Body and the same Spirit, uninterruptedly; the same Paschal mystery that happened “once for all” is made present through every Eucharist; the Church is not divided into parts; it is the same vine of the Father growing and bearing much fruit.

### **31. Criterion for unity: communion in the apostolic tradition**

Concretely, that means that our Churches can only live in unity if they are faithful to their common “*apostolic tradition,*” which is a living tradition received from the Apostles. The contents of this tradition are the sacraments of faith, especially the sacrament of “apostolic succession,” and the fellowship in charity, particularly that of the college of bishops which today represents sacramentally the college of the Twelve Apostles. The plurality and diversity of our “ecclesial traditions” vary according to the

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<sup>13</sup>. Cf. Ephesians 2: 20; 1 Corinthians 3: 10-11

human fabric of our Churches, but the criterion of their truth and unity remains communion in the apostolic tradition.

How dynamic and life-giving would be our Churches' mission, in the East and in the diaspora, if we had the desire to quench our thirst at that holy, living Tradition that the Holy Spirit gives us through our authentic traditions, always renewed by him in ever-changing circumstances! The contents of these traditions are: the Word of God, which our Church Fathers have received the charism of interpreting according to our cultures; the Holy Mysteries, which enable us to participate in the newness of Christ in our language and in our life; the spiritual witness of so many men and women, that "cloud of witnesses," thanks to whom we may "*look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith;*" (Hebrews 12: 1-2) and lastly, authentically Eastern pastoral attitudes, about which Vatican II "solemnly declares" that our Churches "*have a full right and are in duty bound to rule themselves, each in accordance with its own established disciplines.*"<sup>14</sup>

### 32. Catholic Church

It is by rooting ourselves in the apostolic Church that we can live it more and more as "catholic." The word is to be understood best, according to the original Greek "katholiké" from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This adjective, Christianised by St. Ignatius of Antioch,<sup>15</sup> means literally, "according to the whole," that is, that the whole can be found in each part, rather as the soul animates a living body.

In what sense then is the Church catholic? The answer is often: through its universality, "spread throughout the world:" but the community of Jerusalem, and then that of Antioch, though not spread throughout the world, were already catholic. So it is not extension throughout the world which makes the Church catholic. The growing plurality of the Churches does not split the Church. The "whole" mystery of the Church is present in each authentically apostolic Church, as mentioned above.<sup>16</sup> The Church which calls itself catholic must show effectively that it is in communion with other Churches faithful to the apostolic Tradition.

### 33. The service of Communion ensured by the charism of Oversight or "Episkopé"

Concretely, how should we respond in the life of our Churches to this divine gift of catholicity? The experience of Communion between Churches during the first centuries shows us how the apostolic Tradition is not a catalogue of dead leaves but a creative juice, and that in two ways.

On the one hand, it is a matter of the Churches, each of which has its particular tradition, recognizing each other reciprocally as Churches, by acknowledging in one another the same mystery of the Church through their legitimate particularities, on the basis of the same apostolic Tradition as we described above. Such mutual recognition can only be lived through the eyes of faith, and not through the spectacles of the confessional mindset. Living catholicity requires holiness, but is given only to the "pure

**Comment [VC8]:** The reference here is not to St. Ignatius (so not Ibid., as per the French), but to *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* again. Paragraph 28, however, is not especially relevant to the point at issue. Paragraph 19 seems more relevant, perhaps, but I have not ventured to change the reference further.

**Comment [VC9]:** I have inserted the term in English, as it is not explained in section 33, and a reader without Greek might incorrectly assume that *episcopé* meant *episcopate*.

<sup>14</sup>. Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 5

<sup>15</sup>. In his Letter to the Church of God which is at Smyrna, VIII, 9, he says: "Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."

<sup>16</sup>. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 28

in heart.” (Matthew 5: 8)

On the other hand, the Apostles already witness to the fact that the service of fellowship, in a Church and among Churches, is provided by the charism of “Episkopé.” That means that effective catholicity comes mainly from canonical communion between bishops, which requires co-responsibility. The councils were, from the beginning, the route followed by the Church to express that co-responsibility. After Vatican II, synodal life gained a new impetus. The Synod of Bishops became an ecclesial institution gathering Bishops regularly.

The mystery of the Church that we are called to live is then essentially new compared to the “confessional community.” We shall now see how to live out this Communion, first within each of our seven Churches, then between Churches, our seven catholic Churches with the Church of Rome, servant of communion and unity founded on charity, with all the catholic Churches of the world and also with the other Churches and ecclesial Communities with which we are not yet in full communion.

## II. Plurality and Unity in each of our Churches

### 34. The particular Church

The particular Church<sup>17</sup> is the diocese as described by Vatican II: “A *diocese* [eparchy] is a portion of the people of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the co-operation of the presbytery. Thus by adhering to its pastor and gathered together by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative.”<sup>18</sup> The particular Church, as defined here, is then a reality of faith. It is the gift of the Holy Trinity. It feeds on the Gospel and the Eucharist, and is manifest in a portion of the people of God, entrusted to a bishop who keeps it in communion with the whole presbytery. In it, the mystery of the Church is present in its totality.

The most sublime manifestation of the particular Church is evident in the Eucharistic celebration around the bishop. Vatican II says on this topic: “The bishop is to be considered as the high priest of his flock, from whom the life in Christ of his faithful is in some way derived and dependent. Therefore all should hold in great esteem the liturgical life of the diocese centred around the bishop, especially in his cathedral church; they must be convinced that the pre-eminent manifestation of the Church consists in the full active participation of all God's holy people in these liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in a single prayer, at one altar, at which there presides the bishop surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>. We cannot settle in this Letter the debate that took place among theologians about the two expressions “particular Church and local Church” and their different meanings. In this Letter we have adopted the expression “particular Church” to mean the eparchy or the diocese, in the theological sense. As the eparchy, in the East, is linked to the Patriarchate, each Patriarchate is therefore a particular Church, as Vatican II seems to indicate in the Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite. (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 2) The local Church, we define by the geographical territory in which it lies, with all its human, socio-cultural particularities. Since our Patriarchates and eparchies co-exist on the same geographical territory, they are all together a local Church.

<sup>18</sup>. Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, 11; See also CCEC, canon 177 / 1

<sup>19</sup>. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium on the Liturgy*, 41. That is the model of which St. Ignatius of Antioch speaks in his various letters (end 2<sup>nd</sup>. century.) In a letter to the Church at Philadelphia he says: “Take heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and



### 35. Many and one in God's communion

“Many?” We are thinking primarily of the plurality of persons, groups, ministries, vocations, parishes, etc. The question that arises is the following: how, being many in each particular Church, can we be practically one in the diversity of ministries and vocations? How can we live in each particular Church the charism of unity and the wealth of plurality, for both are rooted in the mystery of the Trinitarian communion?

We reaffirm here that plurality does not contradict unity and that unity does not nullify plurality: “*We who are many, are one body.*” (1 Corinthians 10: 17) Plurality means plurality of ministries, gifts and activities. (cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6) Unity means oneness of mind, common property, common “edification.” (cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 13, 14) The many persons are a “*new creature in Christ.*” (2 Corinthians 5: 16-17) Since they are baptized into Christ and anointed with the Holy Spirit, each of them is endowed with new gifts for an essential function in the parish and eparchy. That is why, if we want the Communion within each particular Church to be effective, we must revive these gifts and make them fruitful, instead of allowing them to be ignored or “hidden in the earth.” (cf. Matthew 25: 14-30) And if we want that fellowship to be a factor for unity, we must make these gifts bear fruit in unity with the whole body.

**Comment [VC10]:** The topic of this quotation is the unity of the *body*, but the matter of *edification* comes in 1 Corinthians 14, especially v.27. This reference is also rather odd. Why not 1 Cor. 12:13-14? - if that is the quotation really intended here.

### 36. The charisms are many, but the Spirit is the same

What the Apostle wrote to the Church of Corinth must be taken seriously: “*Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.*” (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7) That is the “ecclesial model” that this Pastoral Letter principally wishes to restore to view. St. Paul addresses the exhortation to each of our Churches, “*Quench not the Spirit.*” (1 Thessalonians 5: 19) Each ordained minister, bishop, priest and deacon is invited to “*stir up the gift of God which is in [him] by the putting on of...hands.*” (2 Timothy 1: 6) Each baptized person must become aware of his new vocation: “*Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular.*” (1 Corinthians 12: 27) “Members in particular” means participating effectively: “*grow[ing] up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined together and compacted.*” (Ephesians 4: 15-16)

### 37. The first community is the model for every particular Church

The concrete expressions of communion, in which the gifts, ministries and energies of all co-operate, are described for us in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The first community of Jerusalem remains for us the ever-present “ecclesial model:” the disciples “*continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*”<sup>20</sup> So this is how, though many, we can live “oneness” in each of our Churches:

**1) *Transmitting the faith of the Apostles*** is an act of Tradition and we are all responsible for it, each for his part, according to his position, role and vocation in the Church. In the family (which is “the domestic Church”) and in the parish

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*one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood; one altar; as there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants.*” (Letter to the Philadelphians, 4), cf. also note 11.

<sup>20</sup>. Acts 2:42; cf. 4:32-35 and 5:12-16

community (for adults and not just for children and young people), the Word of God, heard, meditated upon and shared, nourishes our basic fellowship in living faith.

- 2) ***“Continuing steadfastly in fellowship,”*** means concretely that the parish should be, rather than an administrative body, a living community in which faithful and pastors know each other, ensure the agreement of minds and hearts, help each other in their material and spiritual needs, and work together in the service of their fellow-citizens, since their being a “new creature” involves being the sacrament of Christ’s love for all humans.
- 3) ***“Breaking of bread,”*** the Eucharist is the most intense moment of Communion, since the saving event, Christ’s sacrifice of love, is offered and shared by his members. But the celebration of the Eucharist, and the whole liturgical life of the parish, implies that everyone participates in them in truth, not as spectators or listeners, but taking part in them actively and communally.
- 4) ***“Continuing steadfastly in prayers,”*** which gather the members of the family or various parish communities, means that each must be convinced by Jesus’ call, *“that men ought always to pray and not to faint.”* (Luke 18: 1) But, who shall teach the children of God how to pray, with real prayer of the heart? Our spiritual traditions are treasuries on this topic. The pastors and faithful who have received this gift from the Holy Spirit, the “master of prayer,” are called to live and share it with the community.
- 5) ***Diaconia or sharing possessions:*** The diaconate was first instituted in order to put into practice the commandment of love in terms of material life. (cf. Acts chapter 6) Then it extended to the various spiritual, cultural and material spheres in the community’s life. Each Church, up to the present, has different services, through which it tries to respond to the various needs of the faithful. The future of our Churches requires a better organisation of those services. It demands co-ordination, or rather unification, of those services among the different Churches. For we have all to face the same problems and the same destiny. The field of development needs to be organised among the faithful, so that each person can be his brother’s servant, sharing his concerns, collaborating with him in his own growth. But we must know also that material growth, according to the Church’s vision and the commandment of love, demands an equivalent spiritual growth. That also presupposes a mature awareness of Church membership, so that all persons feels they are members of the same Body of Christ, where they meet all their brothers and sisters in the same divine life.
- 6) ***Common witness:*** The Church is a communion for life. The Christian community welcomes life in order to give it again. When it is *“of one heart and of one soul,”* it can witness to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. (cf. Acts 4: 32-35) That common witness meant that the first Christians had *“favour with all the people.”* (Acts 2: 47) That means that despite their small number, they found welcome and esteem in their society, which however rejected their message.

### **38. Difficult circumstances**

This ecclesial model given us by the first community of Jerusalem is to be taken seriously. Let us meditate on it in prayer and compare it with what we experience in our parishes and eparchies. It will awaken in us salutary nostalgia; will for conversion and

communal spiritual and ecclesial dynamism for proclaiming the Gospel. Instead of discouraging us, it will make us humble and realistic in hope.

We do not have to imagine the first apostolic Church as belonging to the “golden age” of Church history. The book of the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of St. Paul transmit to us the concrete experience of the first local Churches in which we can recognize difficult situations which resemble the current situation of each of our Churches. In this experience of the first Churches, two realities are to be especially underlined, because, if we forget them, we cannot live the “ecclesial model” of the apostolic Church.

The first reality comes from the wretchedness of men: their limitations and weaknesses, their inclination to evil and their sins. All that appears with the first Jerusalem community,<sup>21</sup> at Antioch between Peter and Paul<sup>22</sup> and in Corinth,<sup>23</sup> etc. We have neither to idealise the situation of the first Churches, nor to be surprised at the miseries of our own: we are of the same human clay as our ancestors in faith. Far from being resigned and discouraged, we should accept this reality as real proof that the newness of the Church is “not of men, but of God,<sup>24</sup>” as Gamaliel sensed. (cf. Acts 5: 38-39) The internal divisions that hamper Communion in a parish and an eparchy are all incentives that call us to turn our hearts once more towards our Father in humility and faithfulness. Through this continual conversion we shall be cleansed of the triumphalism of the confessional mindset. Every Church is a community of sinners ceaselessly called to be reconciled with God through Christ. (cf. 2 Corinthians 5: 18-20) Only divine grace makes the Church “one and holy,” and that is why God has, from the start, granted it to be apostolic.

**Comment [VC11]:** I have inserted the source of the quotation, which is from Romans rather than Acts, and refers to circumcision of the heart.

The second reality to be emphasised, because the unparalleled wonder of communion is borne in the “earthen vessels” of our human wretchedness, (2 Corinthians 4: 7) is that the Lord continues to be the Servant of communion in every Church. This invites us not to be afraid and discouraged because of our weaknesses.

### **39. The sacrament of Holy Orders helps realise the ecclesial model**

That is what Jesus intended to indicate during the Mystical Supper, by washing his disciples’ feet. This function of “servant,” he entrusts to those who are “*sent*,” (John 13: 16) so that the apostles and their successors really fulfil, but sacramentally in the heart of the Eucharistic community, the function of him “*who is among you as he that serveth*.”<sup>25</sup>

The sacrament of Ordination is that of the apostolic succession. Through it, each of our Churches is really “apostolic,” so making the Church of the Apostles present and active. Thanks to the bishop, his priests and deacons, the local Church can realise, through all its human weaknesses, the “ecclesial model” of communion of the first

<sup>21</sup>. The fraud of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5: 1-11) and the murmurings of the Grecians against the Hebrews in serving tables (Acts 6: 1)

<sup>22</sup>. Peter’s dissimulation mentioned in the letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2: 11-14)

<sup>23</sup>. The divisions among the faithful (1 Corinthians 1-3); incest (1 Corinthians 5: 1); recourse to pagan law-courts (1 Corinthians 6: 1-8)

<sup>24</sup>. Romans 2: 29

<sup>25</sup>. Cf. Luke 22: 27 The Gospel according to St. Luke links the apostles’ disagreement over who was the greatest among them to the Mystical Supper (22: 24-30) without mentioning the washing of the feet. It should be noted, in the same context, that the announcement of Peter’s denial is preceded by that of his “return” to “strengthen his brethren” in faith. (22: 31-34)

community of Jerusalem. Without the bishop and his collaborators, there is no ecclesial communion in the apostolic faith, sacraments and charity. The sacrament of Holy Orders is the sign, guarantor and servant of each Church's unity in the plurality of its members.

#### **40. Responsibilities of the bishop**

The bishop received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands of other bishops, firstly for faithfully proclaiming the Gospel of salvation, then for presiding at the Eucharist and giving life to his Church through the sacraments of faith, and lastly for ensuring the communion of charisms of the faithful in unity, for his Church's mission. However, many other loads are imposed on him, which have no direct relation with his episcopal responsibilities, and their fulfilment does not require episcopal ordination. The faithful know that. Some are complicit, others complain, or keep quiet and move away. But what do they do to help their bishop carry his responsibilities which the sacrament of Ordination imposes on him? and what do they themselves do to carry their own responsibilities instead of throwing them onto the shoulders of their bishop? For communion is not a one-way relationship. All share the same faith and so must contribute together to the edification of God's Church.

Through his ordination, the bishop has not received intuitive knowledge to make him acquainted with all the pastoral situations of his eparchy, nor to be competent in the various ways of resolving them. Vatican II requests therefore the creation of a consultative **pastoral Council** around the bishop, composed of priests, deacons, monks, nuns and lay faithful.<sup>26</sup> Do the pastors and faithful worry about the existence and effective service of this pastoral Council in order to build the Church on the dual ecclesial and human levels? Or are they rather interested by the prominent people who represent their confessional community in the civil, political and social spheres?

#### **41. Priests and deacons**

The priest is servant of the Word, sacraments and communion of charity in the parish that the bishop has entrusted to him. The Church invites him to fulfil this ministry with zeal and love. But also, priests have to be guaranteed a suitable standard of living, so that they are not obliged in order to earn their living, to resort to other professions that might limit their primary priestly activity. The faithful, lay-people or religious, are also responsible with their priest. What do they do to help him fulfil the service for which he was ordained and disburden him from what does not have to do with his ministry? To this end, the new Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches envisages the opportunity for **parish Councils**, to deal with pastoral and economic issues<sup>27</sup> for the benefit of the faithful.

In the same line of sharing responsibilities, each one according to his charism, it would be important, in each eparchy, to upgrade the diaconate. Currently, but for rare exceptions, it is considered as a mere "stepping-stone" to priesthood and, practically, this ordained ministerial charism does not fulfil its function. Yet the Second Vatican Council recommended the restoration of the permanent diaconate.<sup>28</sup> Should we not

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<sup>26</sup>. Vatican II, Decree on the pastoral charge of Bishops "Christus Dominus" no.27; cf. also CCEC, canons 272-273.

<sup>27</sup>. CCEC, canon 295

<sup>28</sup>. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 29

respond to that invitation in conformity with authentic Eastern traditions? For the diaconal tasks are many today in the eparchial curia or in the parishes: catechesis, the diaconia of the Word of God, liturgical animation and missionary, social, humanitarian and media services. It is not sufficient to ordain mature men as deacons.<sup>29</sup> They should first be prepared for their ministry by training distinct from, though just as demanding, as that of future priests.<sup>30</sup>

#### 42. Lay faithful

Lay faithful are, through their baptism, confirmation and Eucharistic sharing, an integral part of the one Body of Christ. They have their dignity in this Body, and their mission in the Church and in the world at all levels, through their position and vocation in God's Church. The particular Church in which lay-people do not participate in its life and mission in an effective way remains cut off, not realising the full meaning of the mystery of the Church. That is the participation to which the Second Vatican Council and the documents which followed it invite us. Today this is a striking characteristic of the Church.

The Council says: *“Therefore, the chosen People of God is one: one Lord, one faith, one baptism; (Cf. Ephesians 4: 5) sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. ” (Galatians 3: 28; cf. Colossians 3: 11)”<sup>31</sup>.*

At the end of these reflections on the plurality and unity in each of our Churches, the important thing, it can be appreciated, is to have an ever vigilant concern *“for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4: 12-13) We are indeed “lively stones” (1Peter 2: 5) of our Church and “unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” (Ephesians 4: 7)*

**Comment [VC12]:** The French quotes St. Paul incorrectly, so I have corrected the citation here.

### III. Plurality and Unity in Relations between our Catholic Churches

#### 43. Unity of our Churches

In the East today, in the countries where our seven Catholic Churches are present, the boundaries of our eparchies and parishes are interwoven one in another, especially in cities. In the Diaspora it is sometimes just the same. Our Churches are in full canonical communion in the same faith, same sacraments and the same pastoral action, among themselves and with the bishop of the Church of Rome. They participate in the Catholic communion throughout the world. But actually, nationally and locally, how are they united together? They are “several:” how do they express their unity and how do we make our many traditions into a source of collaboration and charity, instead of making them into a principle of divisions?

The ecclesial model of relations between Churches is based on what was said

<sup>29</sup>. cf. Acts 6:1-6 et 1Timothy 3: 8-13

<sup>30</sup>. CCEC, canons 354, 760

<sup>31</sup>. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 32

above about communion as “catholic” and “apostolic.”<sup>32</sup> The expressions of communion among our Churches are basically the same as those in which the unity in plurality within each of our Churches is expressed.<sup>33</sup> They include two new elements: on the one hand, each is really a Church like the others, and on the other hand, the service of unity between our Churches is primarily the responsibility of the bishops through their collegiality in the apostolic succession. Thus, each bishop is the pastor responsible for his eparchy, but all are responsible together for effective communion between their eparchies.<sup>34</sup>

#### 44. The Church is one to the extent that it is “catholic”

It is evident that unity, in the plurality of our Catholic Churches of the East cannot be realised by the absorption of one Church into another: this authoritarian totalitarianism has nothing to do with the mystery of the one Church. It is evident too that respect for plurality does not build unity, if each Church is juxtaposed to the others, on the same territory, and claims to remain in isolation. Each Church is one insofar as it is actually Catholic. The only ecclesial model which the apostolic Tradition offers is that of communion. Now the structures which allow us to respond to the needs of unity in plurality are also available to us through the apostolic Tradition. The main one is episcopal collegiality.

#### 45. Episcopal Collegiality

Episcopal collegiality, around the bishop of Rome, actualises sacramentally the collegiality of the twelve apostles around Peter. This hierarchical and canonical communion is indispensable for plurality to be at the service of unity. The collegiality of bishops is not only affective, from afar and in feelings: it must be effective, on the ground and in action. It therefore implies the co-responsibility of bishops in the situations which they all share, beginning at local and national levels.

Now, since apostolic times, the traditional expression of that co-responsibility is the synod. Well before the councils called “ecumenical,” meaning “of the inhabited earth” by the Churches, the bishops of a particular territory would meet to consult and take decisions about their common problems. The composition of those synods varied according to the extent of the territory and the problems. But the co-responsible collegiality that the synodal structure seeks to reflect was not amorphous: there was always a bishop, a “first among equals,” to be the sign and servant of the communion of all.<sup>35</sup> Without synodal life, there is no effective communion between the Churches in the same spot, whatever the extent of that place. The history of our Churches in the East teaches us that it is deficiency of synodality which has been the cause of most divisions, or at least has prevented their healing. It is then urgent to revive the Synod of bishops of

**Comment [VC13]:** The canon in question is no. 35 and not 34, as here stated. (The IJC gave the same mistaken reference in its 2009 statement, *Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church*.) The translation of the canon here used is by James Donaldson. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.)

<sup>32</sup>. Cf. supra, paragraph 29 and following

<sup>33</sup>. Cf. supra, paragraph 42

<sup>34</sup>. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 23 and *Christus Dominus*, 6

<sup>35</sup>. From the second century on, this practice is attested by the collection of “Apostolic Constitutions (Book VIII),” “The bishops of every country ought to know who is the chief (*protos*) among them, and to esteem him as their head (*kephale*), and not to do any great thing without his consent; but everyone to manage only the affairs that belong to his own parish, and the places subject to it. But let him not do anything without the consent of all; for it is by this means there will be unanimity (*homônia*), and God will be glorified by Christ, in the Holy Spirit.” (The Ecclesiastical Canons of the Same Holy Apostles XLVII, 35) It is noticeable that the model of unity in plurality is here again the Communion of the Holy Trinity.

the patriarchal Church and the Assembly of patriarchs and bishops.<sup>36</sup>

#### **46. Synods of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church and Assemblies of Patriarchs and Bishops**

Synodality, in the strict sense, is exercised today in our Catholic Churches of the East at the level of each Patriarchate. The Holy Synod meets at least once a year and devotes its work to issues that are common to the Patriarchate's eparchies in the East and in the diaspora. Its overall objective is to promote, in faithfulness to the tradition proper to its Church and in response to current needs, the communion of the Churches of that tradition according to the various links of ecclesial communion: the evangelisation of the faithful, the renewal of liturgical life, spiritual and theological tradition, monastic and apostolic life, mission and initial and ongoing formation of the clergy.

Relations with the other Churches also enter into this overall objective, but by itself, the patriarchal synod does not deal with relations between one of its eparchies and an eparchy of another patriarchal Church. This last question confronts in fact all the eparchies of our patriarchal Churches wherever they are adjacent to each other, especially, within the borders of the same country. That is why, following Vatican II, Catholic bishops regrouped in each country into an Assembly of Catholic hierarchy. This new structure does not amount to a Holy Synod (proper to the patriarchal Churches), nor an Episcopal Conference (proper to Churches of the Latin traditions), but is a flexible and pragmatic formula allowing member Churches to respond together to problems common to them at the national level. We hope to be able to develop these Councils in future so that they can be more effective in taking decisions and defining common ecclesial attitudes.

However the synod of bishops of the patriarchal Church or the assembly of patriarchs and bishops of a country must be able to affect the life of the eparchies and parishes through their decisions and recommendations. In fact it is here that the People of God lives its prophetic, sacerdotal and royal mission with the bishops, priests and deacons. They should also deal with common problems resulting from the overlap of families, parishes and eparchies, and then, problems of relations between different Catholic Churches. In fact it is necessary to respond to current mission needs in the same life context.

#### **47. Ecclesial Communion in the Eparchies and Parishes**

It goes without saying that issues common to our Churches at local level require being resolved at the same level, together, by the Churches concerned, where relations are rarely impersonal. Therefore we invite deeper ecclesial communion, in order to respond to all demands at all levels and in all circumstances. That applies not only to provincial towns but also to districts in more sizeable cities. From this human fabric the local Church is woven as communion of God and human beings.

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<sup>36</sup>. Vatican II clearly says, "This sacred ecumenical synod earnestly desires that the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigour. In such a way faith will be deepened and discipline preserved more fittingly and efficaciously in the various churches, as the needs of the times require." (Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, 36)

To that end it may be useful to reactivate the provincial synods of the first millennium, but in new conditions. It would suffice for the bishops concerned to meet periodically in the same surroundings. The priests and faithful, deacons, monks and nuns concerned by the issues on the agenda could then take part in these consultations. So each person would find out that he or she is at any rate responsible for the mission of the local Church and would get involved in it with conviction.

In furthering ecclesial communion between all our Churches, others would be no longer rivals but recognized as brothers, through esteem for their particular tradition and faithfulness to our own tradition. Communion is inventive: it is that newness of love with which the Father loves us in Christ: it is “the communion of the Holy Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 13: 13)

#### **48. With the other Apostolic Churches**

As our rediscovery of the mystery of the Church as communion calls us to radical renewal of our relations both within our local Church and among our Catholic Churches, so we are called to revise our relations with the other apostolic Churches which are not in full communion with us. These are the Churches of the Middle East which are genuinely apostolic, meaning that they share with us the sacraments and basic faith in the mystery of the Church as sacrament of communion with the Holy Trinity, as the Apostolic Tradition has transmitted it to us.

We have to make such a radical revision in faithfulness to the Tradition which we share and which, today, expresses itself as “inspiring grace of the Holy Spirit,” of astonishing power: “the ecumenical movement.”<sup>37</sup> Now, again, we must recognize that the main obstacle that Christians oppose to this movement towards the unity of the Churches in their plurality, comes from our confessional outlook. We are called to a radical conversion of our mindset: passing from the confessionalism that inspires our behaviour to the novelty of the communion of the Holy Spirit. Yes, “*he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*”<sup>38</sup> The golden rule of the ecumenical movement is to act according to “*the truth in love.*” (Ephesians 4: 15) It is thus that the Body of Christ is built up and the Spirit heals its divisions. We shall deal with this topic, in our next letter, in a more comprehensive and profound way.

### **CHAPTER IV**

#### **Pastoral perspectives and guidance**

##### **49. The mystery of faith source of pastoral action**

We have been reflecting together, beloved brothers and sisters and children, on the various facets of the mystery of the Church. The mystery is a precious repository. As we meditate on it, we discover its beauty and wealth. In our reflection, we have emphasised especially one essential aspect of that mystery: communion. Its effects on our pastoral activity are significant and numerous, giving it a new face. For every activity is an extension and translation of how we understand that faith in the Church.

We wish, in this last part of our letter, to draw your attention, beloved brothers and sisters and children, pastors and faithful, to some sectors of the pastoral life which require renewal today in the light of the mystery of communion. This pastoral

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<sup>37</sup>. Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*” 4

<sup>38</sup>. Revelation 2: 29, 3: 6 and 13: 22



revision is an urgent necessity. It will allow us to collaborate together in order to build the “ecclesial model” capable of transforming the gift of communion that God has granted us into a lived reality and principle of action. That divine gift remains a permanent reference and guiding light, inspiring us, making all areas of our pastoral life fruitful and helping us to evaluate them. We have mentioned in the preceding pages, here and there, some pastoral guidance. We want to gather the most important under three headings here: the formation of ecclesial awareness, the means of strengthening communion and the spirituality with which we welcome our many, diverse traditions.

## **I. From Confessional Community to Church – Formation of Ecclesial Awareness**

### **50. The confessional mentality**

The first conversion to which this reflection invites us, is the conversion of the confessional mentality into an awareness of the authentic Church. We have seen that the Church is a wonder that God grants us and in which we are “a new creature.” (cf. 2 Corinthians 5: 17) At almost every step, the light of the mystery of the Church has enabled us to discover that we bear this marvel in earthen vessels. (2 Corinthians 4: 7) Among the sad characteristics with which we are imbued, there is one which has revealed itself to be a major obstacle to the understanding of the mystery of the Church, and to our behaviour in Church: our confessional mentality.

Some might believe that going beyond the concept of community and the confessional mindset means the annulment of everything there is in our Churches, such as history, heritage and specific characteristics, or a misunderstanding of it all, or abandonment of the rights and duties of the Churches in civil society, or even resignation from our role in the various spheres of public, social, economic, cultural and political life, etc. That cannot be the goal, since the Church is a reality rooted in time and place. It is incarnate in the human dough, acting as its leaven and light. That is why the goal to be reached is the overcoming of every negative element superimposed on our incarnate reality, caused by the confessional mindset which is foreign to the mystery of the Church, as God has revealed it in our Holy Books, and in our ancient traditions.

### **51. Overcoming the confessional mentality is possible**

Throughout this letter we have tried to show the effects of this outlook at all levels, in order to draw your attention to it, and overcome it. It can be further transformed. Changing our outlook is dependent on the action of the Spirit in us, but also on us and our collaboration with the action of the Spirit in us. We should take the narrow way of holiness which leads to life. (cf. Matthew 7: 13-14) Entrusting ourselves to the truth of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 11: 10) will free us from the spirit of this world: “*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.*” (1 John 4: 1) If we ask, humbly and decisively, the Spirit of truth will make us understand that our first identity as disciples of Christ consists in existing through him and in him: in a word, “being a Church.” Each of us is called to begin conversion in heart and mind, so as to free ourselves from every limitation imposed by the community or confessional mentality. Each is called to self-renewal by the power of the Spirit acting in us and our Churches. God’s grace can unite us and our mutual love will make us strong on the same road of conversion: “*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the Churches.*” (Revelation 3: 6)

## 52. An ecclesial soul

Being of the Church demands of each of us to live with an “an ecclesial soul,” guiding us in all our behaviour. Through this beautiful expression, our Fathers in faith meant the habitual disposition of the Christian soul thanks to which “... *the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.*” (Acts 4: 32) Such is the “ecclesial model” that we find in the first community of the Acts of the Apostles and that the Spirit of the Lord Jesus wishes to give us.

Comment [VC14]: Not Acts 5:32, as per French

It is above all in our liturgical life, and mainly in the Eucharist, that our Schoolmaster forms in us “the ecclesial soul.” When we profess our faith, we declare: “We believe...” When we pray the prayer received from the Lord, we say, “Our Father...” From beginning to end of the liturgical celebration, it is the ecclesial “we” that is expressed in the unity of the fellowship of the Holy Trinity. What we celebrate in Christ, we have then to live out and allow it to imbue our mentality. In this fellowship, the ‘I’ of each person is not submerged in an anonymous crowd. Rather on the contrary, being “in the image of God” our personal mystery can only be fulfilled in fellowship, “in his likeness.” And that same communion unites us with our Father and all his children, in his only, beloved Son.

The ecclesial soul is simple: it is animated by the Spirit of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1-12) and receives its strength from him. Vigilant in prayer of the heart, it unmask and avoids the lying temptations of individualism, whether they be those of personal egocentricity or confessional selfishness. It is humble and patient; it knows its own wretchedness and the compassion of our Saviour, and thus finds itself in harmony with the compassion of our Father for all humans. The ecclesial soul is free, it is as broad as the Love of Christ (cf. Ephesians 3: 18), like the Church. There is a pressing exhortation of St. Paul which can enable us to understand this love: “*Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 2: 2-5)

## 53. Formation in the authentic meaning of the Church

The Church is the sacrament of Love in every place to which is it sent. It is called to be the living witness of it. It is also its servant, both communally and through each of its members personally. All the faithful, whether in the charism of marriage or in the consecrated life, in the solitude of the single or widowed state, as well as those who are ordained to the ministry of the episcopate, priesthood or diaconate, all, whatever their age, health and abilities, are all given to drink of the one Spirit and can co-operate in the growth of the Body of Christ.

The formation of all in the authentic awareness of the Church, in the way the preceding pages have underlined it, is essential. This formation is at first initial, but should become ongoing, in the diversity of charisms and situations experienced by all the members of our Churches. It concerns men, women and children, young folk and the elderly, because the catechism of faith and love knows no limits of age. It concerns especially those men and women who have a particular ministry in the service of the ecclesial communion: the bishop with his priests and deacons, monks and nuns, faithful

persons in charge of apostolic and socio-cultural or charitable movements.

#### **54. Formation through teaching**

The ecclesial spirit demands from pastors and faithful a renewal in all spheres of education, in seminaries, religious training institutes, academic institutions, catechism manuals, homilies and in all available means of communication. The renewal of ecclesial discourse, at all levels, is an inescapable necessity, if we really want to reach conversion in our ecclesial life and in our reciprocal relations. For that we must go back to the first sources of our faith, Jesus Christ, the apostles and our ancestors in faith. We must also return to the conciliar documents of Vatican II and all the documents that followed it, because they are a sure source of renewal. Let us be certain of this: our training in the service of unity is one of the preconditions for the renewal of communion in our Churches and with other Churches. It is useless to complain about the ills of our local Church or of the slowness of the ecumenical movement if we omit to renew ourselves in the mystery of the Church.

#### **55. Formation through practice**

This formation cannot remain theoretical. It must be acquired through practice and action. It is not enough to renew our way of speaking; it is not enough either to trace the outline of an ideal Church. The members of the Church must be able to live out this discourse and model in practice. We have to obtain for all our faithful, all groups and all ages, the opportunity to live an ecclesial experience in little communities, of whatever shape, which would prepare them for joining the big ecclesial community. Practical involvement in the life of the Church and its mission is a training school in ecclesial awareness. When we put our hand to the plough and collaborate with our brothers and sisters, we gradually discover the mystery of the Church and the joy of being part of it and contributing to its edification.

For this experience to bear fruit, it must be lived in the presence of God and continually evaluated in the light of his life-giving Word, so that it becomes ever more pure, and able to grow and overcome every obstacle. We shall have the awareness of Church when we are a “Church together,” in everything that we say and do. It is certain that these experiences may go through crises and difficulties. If we live them with the spirit of conversion, penitence and spiritual growth, they will contribute to awakening ecclesial awareness that takes root, grows and flourishes as we go on our way and work together.

## **II. From Communion to Participation – Means of strengthening Communion**

#### **56. Communion and participation**

Communion is a gift of God to his Church. If we welcome this gift it will lead to active and concrete participation. Otherwise it remains an abstract concept and pious wish without any practical application. Participation in the life of the Church is, on the one hand, the expression of communion, and, on the other, a means of making it grow. We note nowadays a strong desire for encounter among people. It is a sign of the times. For years we have come across the same desire among our Churches. We must encourage and develop this focus and translate it into concrete actions, in order to make it into a constant and firm reality in the life of our Churches.

This participation can take various forms, according to the vocation of each person in the Church and according to the charisms given by God to each. It is not required that

the hand be the foot and the eye the ear. Yet, “*the foot cannot say: because I am not the hand, I am not of the body...*,” nor “*the ear ... say, because I am not the eye, I am not of the body.*” In the same way, “*the eye cannot say unto the hand: I have no need of thee, nor again the head to the feet: I have no need of you. ...And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, but one body.*” In fact none can say, I am little or weak or superfluous in the body, because every member has his or her dignity, contribution and role in building up the body. (cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 12-29) With this spirit, all participate in unity in the life of the Church, so that the building can be beautiful and solid.

### 57. Forms of communion

For this communion to be able to affect the life of all the faithful, in the diversity of their vocations and ministries, participatory bodies must be created in the Church. The Second Vatican Council indicated several of these forms (Council of Bishops, Presbyteral Council, Pastoral Councils, etc...). We have also mentioned already in this letter some forms according to the spirit of our Eastern traditions.

We need these forms of participation at all levels: of persons (bishops, priests, monks, nuns and lay-faithful), places (parish, eparchy and region) and the various Churches (local and regional). These forms will promote the encounter of individuals in one particular group, among different groups, and among all the Churches of the region. Encounter will lead to mutual acquaintance: acquaintance to brotherhood and co-ordination and collaboration. So we shall have lived an experience of true communion and we shall have transformed the mystery into concrete reality.

“*Finally, worthy of attention are the diocesan Synods [or the Eparchial Assemblies], during which the bishop, by implementing a special form of communion with the priests, religious and lay faithful, turns to the particular Church to address, with reflection, prayer and pastoral concern, the problems posed by the proclamation of faith and witness of charity, in the concrete situations in today’s world.*”<sup>39</sup>

**Comment [VC15]:** Not mentioned in the original Italian. (There is no official English or French version of His Holiness’ address, so I have made this translation from the Italian.)

The rapid changes of our era certainly demand that we periodically update this traditional expression of ecclesial communion.

### 58. Conditions for participation

It is certain that all forms of participation will remain weak as long as they do not rely on spiritual positions consistent with the end for which they were created. If the behaviours of “the flesh,” such as “*hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envying... and such like,*” (Galatians 5: 20-21a) prevail, those forms will deviate from their goal. If, on the contrary, they are given life by the actions of the Spirit, such as “*love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance,*” (Galatians 5: 22) those forms will be fecund; they will bear much fruit. It is mainly the private interests of individuals or groups, party spirit, pride and personal enmities which corrupt all tendencies to common action. It is however strengthened and warranted by the esprit de corps, the sense of the common good, the common building, through selflessness, listening to others, dialogue, humility, benevolence and love. On the basis of this vision and spirituality communion can be lived.

<sup>39</sup>. John Paul II, *Address to the cardinals and the Roman Curia*, 20.12.1990, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1990/december/documents/hf-jp-ii\\_spe\\_19901220\\_curia\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1990/december/documents/hf-jp-ii_spe_19901220_curia_it.html)

### **59. The role of the lay faithful in our Churches**

We wish here to draw attention to the growing importance of the role of lay-people in the Church. Vatican II gave it particular importance as we have already said. The document “Apostolicam Actuositatem” and the following documents remain a luminous sign on the way of ecclesial renewal in our time. This spirit has had echoes in the East. We have seen indeed, during recent decades, a lay-people’s awakening. It needs to be followed up and its features and content strengthened in all areas of Church life.

It should be said that participation of lay-people in the life of the Church calls the clergy and laity equally to a conversion of ways of thinking, if we wish that aspect of communion to take the right road and become a constant and effective method of living in our Churches. On the one hand, the clergy has been used to be alone in the pastoral action and administration of the Church’s business, in dioceses and parishes. They have a pyramidal vision which considers lay-persons as inferior rather than as participants. This mentality needs to be changed, on the level of theological reflection and in pastoral care and the spiritual life, so that the laity can be considered as full members of the Church. Lay-people, on their side, also need a similar conversion. Their vision of the Church, like their behaviour, is often of a confessional or tribal type. They are sometimes moved by material interests foreign to the mystery of the Church: all these are obstacles in the way of their lively, efficient and genuine participation in the life of the Church. These conversions will enable clergy and laity mutually to accept each other and build their relations, not on the “you-us” antithesis, as if the two were opposing or rival categories, but on the “us together” basis i.e. all of us members of the same Body of Christ, each according to his or her own vocation in the Church. On this point, we can only praise those lay-people, whose number is continually growing, who have discovered the mystery of the Church and started to carry out their mission with the spirit of faith and of real membership in the Body of Christ. This participation of lay-people is expressed especially in the Pastoral Councils, which Vatican II invites to be formed in every eparchy.

## **III. From Communion to Communication and Collaboration – Spirituality of Communion**

### **60. Authenticity and openness**

We have talked, in the preceding chapters, about the wealth of our ecclesial traditions. Today they are the topic of research and study, with the aim of enlivening them and putting them within the reach of all the faithful. Here, we wish to speak of the spirituality through which we ought to deal with the particular heritage of each Church. We can sum it up in two words: authenticity and openness. On the one hand it is natural that every Church should consider its tradition as a reference for thought and spiritual life. It is natural too that it should seek to preserve it, enliven, develop and spread it. That is a sign of authenticity and a help for its life and evolution. It is equally the right of each Church to be proud of its inheritance; it is also a subject of pride for the universal Church.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>. Vatican II recalled the esteem of the universal Church for the Eastern heritage in general when it said: “History, tradition and abundant ecclesiastical institutions bear outstanding witness to the great merit owing to the Eastern Churches by the universal Church. The Sacred Council, therefore, not only accords to this ecclesiastical and spiritual heritage the high regard which is its due and rightful praise, but also unhesitatingly looks on it as the heritage of the universal Church.” (Vatican II, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 5)

But, as we have already said, into all that, the confessional mentality can infiltrate, creating isolation and estrangement from others. An authentic ecclesial spirit does not instigate isolation; it does not erect barriers; it does not deepen divisions; it does not feed a spirit of fanaticism, pride, competition and rivalry. Authenticity is lived in openness to others and to all the wealth of their heritage. Our many traditions are not a principle of division but a source of communion, and therefore a source of collaboration and love.

#### **61. The heritage of the whole Church is our common heritage**

The heritage of our Churches, with its diversity and singular wealth, is the heritage of the universal Church. It is a fortiori our common heritage in the East. Through all its expressions, thought, spirituality and liturgy, it feeds us, gives us life and makes us grow. Every Church, besides its rootedness in its own heritage, is called upon to enrich the respective patrimonies of other Churches. That is why our whole multi-faceted and varied Eastern heritage must figure in the programmes of study of our seminaries. That will allow the clergy to get to know and assimilate a common heritage and help in reconciliation and mutual esteem.

We can only praise and encourage all the efforts expended in this domain, research, congresses, publications etc... We also recall to everyone's attention the Arab Christian heritage, created, perfected and developed by all the Churches at once: it is then common to us all. It can also enlighten and guide us in the present and the future. We ask our academic institutes to make it the object of a particular study and to collaborate to give life to it again and to put it onto educational programmes.

#### **62. Incarnation of the Gospel in the present life**

Giving life again to our patrimony today has a meaning, if we make it into spiritual food for our present, and a help for building the world in which we witness and carry out our mission. The heritage is not a museum piece on which we pride ourselves. It is a living repository of thought and spirituality which keeps its relevance when we talk with our contemporary society. It is the leaven in the lump. It must respond to the needs, concerns, difficulties and hopes of our world.

The vitality of our patrimony is evaluated by its ability to speak to the people of today, in this region of the earth in which God has willed us to be and in the moment of history in which God has called us to live.

The cultural patrimony of every nation and people is not fixed and its evolution never stops. On the contrary, it is formed and constantly enriched by everything that successive generations bring to it. That is true also as far as our ecclesial traditions are concerned, because the Gospel becomes incarnate in every setting, in every time and culture. In the same way as it became incarnate in the past and formed our first traditions, so today it continues to become incarnate in our culture. If this interaction does not continue in the present, the vitality of the Church will cease and tradition will become a dead letter, a slavery stifling life, and it will no longer respond to its demands. It would also be one of the reasons for the estrangement of the faithful from our Churches.

Are our Eastern Churches aware of this danger that threatens them, if they prevent their Traditions evolving to enable them to respond to the requirements of present culture and if they prevent the incarnation of these traditions in the reality of our ever-

changing societies and cultures? Are our Churches aware that they must always proclaim the Gospel in a contemporary language and way of thinking? – this is a serious question that we ask ourselves, all our collaborators and our faithful. Our reply is as follows: the Gospel of our Lord and God Jesus Christ is for all times and places. That is why we have to incarnate it in our present culture, in the light of the Word of God, our traditions of the past and the teaching of the Church, so that there is neither opposition nor tension between the past and the present, but a salutary perfecting and evolution of our traditions.

### 63. Mutual acquaintance

The plurality of traditions brings us back to the plurality of Churches, each with its particular organisation, its independent administration, and its own pastoral activity. This reality cannot hold us each closed in on himself, in the isolation of his own worries and in ignorance of others: each one thinking only of his own work, his own initiative, and “others” being forgotten because they are “other.” The real question, at bottom, is not so much plurality as otherness. This is a temptation for our Catholic schools, for apostolic movements, and even the religious Congregations called “inter-ritual:” the plurality of Church allegiances is managed by ignoring them and resolving the issue of their unity by uniformity, i.e. different Church affiliations are merged into one single Church affiliation. Mutual ignorance has in the past been the cause of too many divisions and bitter fruits. That is why, today, becoming informed is the first service required by communion.

Means of communication play an important role here. They should show ecclesial awareness in all our institutions and spheres of witness. Through the media we should try to make manifest the mystery of Jesus as Saviour and to proclaim the glad tidings that he brings to the world, instead of showing the human face of our Churches in the various institutions and activities that figure in our news: “*For I determined not to know anything among you, save Christ Jesus, and him crucified.*” (1Corinthians 2: 2) We have only one choice to make: *to prefer nothing to the knowledge and love of Christ, Lord and Head of the Church.*<sup>41</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch, who was one of the first witnesses of the formation of our ecclesial traditions, reminds us: “*But to me, Jesus Christ is in the place of all that is ancient; his cross and death and resurrection and the faith which is by him are undefiled monuments of antiquity.*”<sup>42</sup>

**Comment [VC16]:** The meaning of this sentence is not clear, as the French stands. I have therefore tried to clarify in English what I guess may be meant!

### 64. Communication and collaboration

Communion invites us to communication, co-ordination and collaboration in all fields. When we take a look at the pastoral reality in our Churches, we notice the multiplicity of particular initiatives, created without care for co-ordination and duplicating each other; whence, a dispersal of material strength and human resources which leads, consciously or unconsciously, to sterile competition or even rivalry or enmity. We find that unfortunately in all areas of pastoral life: schools, catechetics, information, movements, institutes and all sorts of activities. Besides, several services are paralysed through lack of persons or means, although in every particular Church there is enough generosity, sacrifice and energies to respond to the various needs.

<sup>41</sup>. “Anthony told everyone to prefer nothing of what is in the world to the love of Christ” (Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Anthony*, 14, 7)

<sup>42</sup>. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, 8, 2 Translated by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1. Eds. Robert, Donaldson and Coxe (Buffalo, NY. Christian Literature Publishing Co. 1885)

We invite our Churches, at eparchial and parish level, to co-ordination and exchange of experiences and persons, with a view to saving energy, personnel and resources, and with a view to guaranteeing the best results in all services. It is normal that all co-ordination and collaboration must be made with respect for the particularities of each Church. For resorting to standardisation, without heeding the identity and tradition proper to the Churches and faithful, leads to confusion and to the loss of identity and uprooting of the faithful.

Together, and in mutual respect and charity, we have to deal with all the issues facing our Churches today, and the new challenges to which they must respond. In that way Communion among us will be strengthened.

## CONCLUSION

65. The Church is open to the infinite and to the whole world: it welcomes to its bosom all those who come to it, without distinction of race, gender or language, although the ‘*confessional mindset*’ is closed in on itself and only takes to heart those who profess its principles, traditions and customs, and contribute to the realisation of its particular aims, without worrying about affairs of the Spirit.

Comment [VC17]: Punctuation incorrect in the French! Corrected here.

In the Church is the wellspring of living water from which all Christians drink through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord, (cf. John 4: 14) through the sacraments that they receive in it, and the spiritual help that they find there, and through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and all the saints. The ‘*confessional mindset*,’ on the other hand, makes the Church into a spiritually rigid reality; it tends to survive and keep its privileges and rights, with a view to the worldly prestige of the community.

The Church causes people to be reborn by water and the Spirit and guides them to God who is their ultimate end. The ‘*confessional mindset*,’ if it be not enlivened by the Spirit of the Church, runs the risk of changing into a party that tends towards temporal goals, which are the interests of its individual members and groups. The Church is the Body of Christ. He is its head. The ‘*confessional community*,’ without the Spirit of the Church, can become quite simply a group of persons united by ties of tribalism and by interests foreign to the Spirit and the Church.

With you, beloved brothers, sisters and children, we ask God, to give us the grace of genuine membership of the one, catholic, holy and apostolic Church. We invite you to remain faithful to your traditions and Church, and at the same time to be open to the traditions of every Church other than your own and to the love of your brothers and sisters, with all their particular traditions. This is the motto and conduct of every disciple of Christ: faithfulness to oneself and love of brothers and sisters different in tradition, or even in faith and religion.

We invite you to do everything possible to overcome all the obstacles that confessionalism sets before the unity of the Body of Christ and to take wise and prudent initiatives to draw the ties of brotherhood closer and strengthen them. Take all avenues of collaboration between all our Churches, so that we can grow together in faith, in “ecclesial awareness” and in all spheres of social life, which is the same for us all. Our faith and Churches will thus be a source of openness and love for all those with whom God has called us to build our society.



We wish to conclude with a word of hope. Our hope is not founded on the human but on God. In the past he was always present amongst us. That presence in the past is the warranty of his presence amongst us today and in future. Our Churches are Churches of hope. The Spirit acts and awakens in them a new awareness of their identity, of their existence, vocation and mission. We cannot but hear what the Spirit is saying today to our Churches in the East, that they may be renewed and continue their earthly pilgrimage, responding to the calls of the world addressed to them.

We ask the Holy Virgin, our Mother and Mother of the Church “sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth<sup>43</sup>” to support us on the way of faithfulness to our traditions, on the road of mutual love and love of all our brethren different from us. Through her intercession, we ask God to protect you and to grant you his Divine Benediction, “*him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, unto him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages world without end. Amen.*” (Ephesians 3: 20-21)

- † **Stefanos II Ghattas**, *Patriarch of Alexandria for Coptic Catholics*
- † **Maximos V Hakim**, *Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem, for Melkite Greek Catholics*
- † **Ignace Antoine II Hayek**, *Patriarch of Antioch for Syriac Catholics*
- † **Nasrallah Pierre Cardinal Sfeir**, *Patriarch of Antioch for the Maronites*
- † **Rafael Bidawid**, *Patriarch of Babylon for the Chaldeans*
- † **Jean-Pierre XVIII Kasparian**, *Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics*
- † **Michel Sabbah**, *Patriarch of Jerusalem for the Latins*

### **Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs**

Christmas 1996

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<sup>43</sup>. Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 68-69.