

The Eastern Catholic Churches between past and present

"Fear not, little flock." (Luke 12:32)

First Letter of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs

On the occasion of their First Congress

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We thank God who has granted us the grace of gathering together for the first time in our region to study together questions relating to the life of our Churches. We have held our first symposium in Lebanon thanks to the hospitality of His Beatitude Mar Nasrallah-Pierre Sfeir, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. We began by examining the "Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches," recently promulgated in Rome for implementation from 1st. October 1991.

We then examined our relations with Muslims, to whom we are bound by a particular history, the authenticity of which we would like to deepen and transform in the service of all the inhabitants of our countries.

We met together during a decisive period for our Churches, our region and the world. No-one can fail to notice that the Middle East has become a clear field for international conflicts, at a juncture when humanity is looking for a new world order whose outlines are not yet defined and whose issue no-one can foretell, whilst we are already on the threshold of the third millennium. Meanwhile everyone realises that these numerous, tangled conflicts have left and continue to leave in their wake destruction, displacement, death and all sorts of suffering.

In these circumstances, we decided to meet to take inspiration from our faith, hope and love, and to seek the will of God for our Churches in these difficult times and to try to respond to it with renewed trust, joy and resolve, despite all the difficulties that we are facing. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is always with us and our Churches, as he promised us, saying, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." (Mt 28: 20)

So we determined, at the close of our talks, to send a message to our Catholic children and to our Christian, Muslim and Jewish brethren and to every person of good will throughout our dear East and the whole world. We aim to acquaint them with our questioning and aspirations, that seek only everyone's good.

To our Catholic Children

We shall speak first to you, dear Catholic children of the East. We gathered together, bearing your cares and hopes: the cares and hopes of each and every one of you. We have experienced with you difficult situations in those places where we live together with all our compatriots and those situations have left a deep impression on

our souls. We sorely need to stop and meditate, in the light of our faith, the Gospel and our inheritance, upon the meaning of our presence, vocation and witness in this part of the world where God has willed us to live out our faith and mission.

The difficult situations with which we are faced must not make us run away, shrink into ourselves, withdraw from our world or melt away into it. They must rather bring us back to the roots of our faith so as to find there strength, constancy, self-confidence and hope, reminding us of the Lord's saying, "Fear not, little flock." (Luke 12: 32) The Church does not measure itself in figures. It is not dependent upon statistics, but upon the awareness that her children have of their vocation and mission.

Presence, Mission and Witness

We have been living from very ancient times in the East. It is part of our inmost identity and we in turn are part of its identity and essence. Hence, we do not have the right to stay here and limit our main concern to our will to endure, which would imprison us in isolation, fear and the deadly minority complex. Our presence in the East is to do with mission and witness, not with being an institution happy to dwell on the past and incapable of making its way towards the future. Our Churches are alive, attuned to the will of God manifest through events, environment, inheritance and civilisation. We have long regarded ourselves and been seen by others from a confessionalist viewpoint, which has prevented our getting to know others, entering into deep relations with them or feeling responsible for their lives and concerns. That very perspective has prevented others from really knowing us: all of which engenders suspicion, enmity and prejudice. These in turn rapidly metamorphose, on the slightest pretext, into artificial, sterile antagonism.

No Longer confessional Entities but living Churches

It is time for us to move from being confessional entities to living Churches that try, through the diversity of their rites and inheritance, to live out their faith in all its authenticity and in creative interaction with their surroundings that God has willed for us and that we have willed to be our own. It is up to us to bring an effective contribution to all areas of public life (social, economic, political, cultural and other.) It is up to us to do so completely open-heartedly, with total generosity and genuine relationship to all those with whom we live. In doing so, we are only seeking God's glory and service to humanity, according to the economy of salvation of God who created us all in his image and likeness. The difficulties to which we are exposed are only stimuli to establish and promote this authenticity in living together, taking into account the ever-changing and evolving historic circumstances in our region.

Hoping and Acting

"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and for ever." (Hebrews 13: 8) Through

the mediation of our Churches, Christ, the eternal Word of God, becomes incarnate in the circumstances of our history in all his aspects and faces. All of that requires a permanent disposition to cooperate with the work of the Spirit, which purifies and clarifies our faith, ensuring that it corresponds to our calling and election and raising it to the height of our cherished hope: that hope of which the Apostle Peter asks us to be always ready to give an account. (1 Peter 3: 15)

The period we are living in is not one of fear, sorrows, lamentations and escape, but one of hope and action with an eye to a future in which we continue both to establish ourselves in our Christ and in our societies, so as to be a leaven of welfare, charity, reconciliation, rapprochement and peace. So you see, dear children, that our countries and Churches need us in these difficult times. We have lived with our fellow-citizens through easy times. It is only fair to share with them the difficult days and work together to rebuild our countries and establish their inhabitants on secure, healthy foundations.

The Scourge of Emigration

In this respect, we cannot fail to recall, sick at heart, as each one of us has done separately in the past, the catastrophic scourge of emigration. This scourge eats away at our ecclesial body, hinders our progress and deprives our Churches and countries of the generous service that we owe them. We need our countries, which constitute the natural environment for our vocation and mission. For their part, our countries need us and the genuine wealth of our living and active presence. There is no question that our countries sincerely wish, or at least we hope so, to help us live in dignity on our ancestral land.

To our Christian Brethren

Our Eastern Churches are remarkable for their antiquity, heritage, variety of liturgical expressions, authenticity of spirituality, breadth of theological horizons and strength of their centuries-old witness that at times has amounted to heroic martyrdom. All that represents a vital, cherished asset, a powerful stimulus for our hope and a source of trust and perseverance upon which we draw as we explore future paths.

Diversity is an essential characteristic of the universal Church as it is of the Christian East. This diversity has always been a source of wealth for the whole Church, when we have lived in unity of faith and in charity. Unfortunately, this diversity has changed into deviation and separation because of human sin and estrangement from the mind of Christ. Nevertheless, what unites us is still more important and powerful than what separates us. It does not prevent our meeting and helping each other. Eastern Christianity, notwithstanding its divisions, shows an essential unity in faith that nothing can fragment. We are Christians together in good times and bad. Our calling, witness and fate are all one and the same. We are required, then, to work together

through the various means at our disposal to fortify at grassroots the faithful entrusted to us, in a spirit of fellowship and love. We have to do this in the many spheres of action to which we are impelled by the common welfare of Christians and by the hopes of all the believers of our different Churches, who pin great hopes on our rapprochement and mutual help.

To be or not to be Christian

In the East, we shall be Christians together or not be. Inter-Church relations have certainly not always been set on fair in our region. There are many reasons for that, both internal and external. But the time has come to cleanse our memory of the negative after-effects of the past, however painful they may be, and to look together to the future, in the spirit of Christ and in the light of his Gospel and of the Apostles' teaching.

We say this at a moment when the Catholic family has rejoined the Middle East Council of Churches, which represents a unique oasis for meeting and seeking common denominators favouring a collective presence and common witness in our dear East. This witness does not seek its own interest, but the glory of God and the service of man in our societies. We wish our brotherly meeting to be a vital sign of meeting and fellowship among all the children of God that people this region of the world. God made it a special place through the revelation of his love and the wonders of his salvation. God grant that we work to establish strong, tangible and practical foundations for mutual help, so as to enable our faithful and our societies to benefit from them, in the expectation of the day when we shall be able to find each other again in the single Eucharist, according to the wish of Our Lord Jesus Christ expressed in his sacerdotal prayer. (John 17 :21)

To our Muslim Brothers

We turn to our Muslim brothers with an open heart and honest intent. Our living together down the centuries constitutes despite all difficulties the solid ground on which it is our duty to establish our present and future common action, in the service of an egalitarian and harmonious society, where no-one, whoever he may be, feels alien or rejected.

We are drawing on a unique inheritance of civilisation. Each of us has contributed to form it according to his own special character. Our relationship to civilisation is our historic patrimony. We are keen to safeguard it, allow it to evolve, re-establish and reenergise it, so that it may be the foundation of our living together and our fraternal mutual help. The Christians of the East are an inseparable part of the cultural identity of Muslims. In the same way, the Muslims in the East are an inseparable part of the

cultural identity of Christians. Hence, we are responsible for each other before God and history.

An Exemplary Vocation

It is incumbent upon us to seek constantly the form, not only of coexistence, but of creative and fruitful relations which would guarantee stability and tranquillity to every believer in God in our countries, safe from the machinations of hatred, fanaticism, discrimination and rejection of the other. We are convinced that our authentic, spiritual and religious values are capable of helping us to overcome the problems that encumber the road of our living together. That obliges us to look at each other in a spirit of reciprocal openness and mutual determination to get to know each other. For that man is an enemy whom one does not know.

The world today is rent by the scourges of quarrels, fanaticism and discrimination under its various forms. We are desirous of laying down foundations for living together that would be exemplary for our world, instead of defacing God's plan for us and presenting an image contrary to the longing of people today for peace, concord and mutual help, at the level of a healthy and sincere citizenship.

God willed, in his unfathomable wisdom, for us to be together in this region of the world. We accept this will with great openness of mind in the hope that it will enlarge our hearts' capacity, until there is room for all, whatever the range of their allegiances.

To our Jewish Brothers

We are speaking to you, Jewish brothers, despite the bloody conflict between our peoples since the beginning of this century. The Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflict has made many innocent victims on both sides. There has resulted above all from that a flagrant injustice with regard to the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples.

As with the holy book that we have in common, we are united by the Arab civilisation in which you have participated as we have.

That is why, when we envisage the future of our dear East, we suppose that it is up to you, as to every soul with honest intent, to take some responsibility for the return of peace, justice and stability in our societies and on the land which is home to our institutions.

The first step along the way of justice and peace consists in establishing mutual trust on the basis of self-liberation from the fear complex. That means becoming free from the vision of enmity as a constant in the relationship between peoples of the region and in the subordination of security and peace to the logic of force and violence. Justice is the only route to security and peace. In the same way, recognizing God in the face of the other person is the way to mutual recognition of peoples and their rights.

On that basis, we invite you to open up to the East by changing the vision you have of it. That should allow you to understand it and to find your place in it on new foundations.

To Christians throughout the World

We feel the need to speak to our fellow Christians throughout the world so as to open new horizons of dialogue, mutual recognition and exchange.

It was in the East that the Church was born. Since then, Christian communities have peopled this region of the world, fully living their faith, their sacraments and their witness. It pains us to see that our fellow Christians throughout the world only know very little about these ancient Churches, the wealth of their heritage and the variety of their ecclesial expressions. Our Churches have given a great deal to the universal Church. They have the right to look to their sisters throughout the world and expect from them better knowledge and more solidarity. The universal Church is liable to find in our Churches an enriching diversity, just as our Churches discover in the universal Church an extension to their mission, according to their own vocation. This requires permanent exchanges between our Eastern Churches and the other Churches throughout the world, with a view to a mutual enrichment and better understanding of the problems of the peoples in the surroundings amid which we live.

We thank our fellow Christians worldwide for everything that they have undertaken up to the present with a view to supporting and helping us during these difficult days, the end of which is not in sight. We thank especially His Holiness Pope John Paul II for his repeated appeals and his just, high-minded stances during all the crises which have affected our different countries, above all the Gulf crisis.

We are appealing to all Christ's faithful throughout the world and particularly to our brother Heads of Churches, asking them to redouble their efforts with those in government who hold the power of decision, so as to put into action the Security Council's resolutions relating to our countries. These resolutions have been awaiting implementation for many years.

To the international Community

The world is at a crossroads. At this crossroads, humanity is seeking a new world order of justice and equal opportunities. Each people should have the right to be itself and to express itself accordingly and to contribute effectively to building the new world to which the whole of humanity aspires. Any new world order which would put any people, however tiny, aside from the human family table, would be beneath humanity's ambitions.

It should be mentioned here that our region has a geographic, strategic and economic importance that polarises global attention. Everyone knows that its stability means stability for the world and lack of stability represents a risk for all. How it pains us to see that the international Community, from selfish intentions, or through a desire for supremacy, has turned this region into a theatre of conflicts and destruction for the sake of material interests. It is time for the international Community to take a fresh look at this region. It must allow it to play a unique, positive and beneficial role in building a new world. This can only be done with immunity from selfish ambitions and in the light of the rights of peoples to development, peace and justice.

The East has the prior claim on its own resources

It is obvious that our region represents an enormous reserve of natural resources. It is easy to transform it into a conflict zone, with the aim of some being to monopolise those resources to the detriment of others, especially its own inhabitants. It is right for the East, most of which is still bent beneath the yoke of poverty, under-development and suffering, to be the primary beneficiary of its own resources, whilst being also first to receive guidance in the use of these resources for the welfare of the whole of humanity, but more particularly of the poor. The divide between rich countries and poor ones, North and South, developed world and third world, and indeed between rich and poor in the same country, must be reduced.

In this respect, we cannot fail to mention before bringing this letter to an end, questions on account of which our region continues to endure very great suffering. His Holiness Pope John Paul II devoted his closest attention to them and called for just and equitable solutions guaranteeing to all their rights and dignity.

A. The Lebanese Question

The Lebanese people have borne the brunt for many years. They have been the victims of murderous fighting planned by various parties. The Lebanese case has entered a new phase. It is to be hoped that Lebanese are given responsibility for deciding their own affairs and that they find among themselves, in constructive dialogue and sincere exchange, the shape of tomorrow's Lebanon. This shape should respect the special status of Lebanon and its authentic centuries-old mission. The misfortunes of past years have shown that violence only begets violence and that a responsible dialogue is the only way of guaranteeing Lebanon its sovereignty, stability, authenticity, role and mission and protecting its territory.

We thank His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the great concern that he has always accorded to the trials of Lebanon, reminding the world of the tragic situation created for it and the beneficial interest for everyone of the Christian presence in this country and neighbouring countries. We urge the international Community to honour the right of Lebanon to see implemented the resolutions that have been taken concerning it and so enable the country to recover its sovereignty and independence, and to extend its authority over the whole of its territory.

B. The Palestinian Question

For their part, the Palestinian people have endured intolerable conditions of dispersal, expulsion, injustice, coercion, repression and humiliation. The Palestinian question is still a thorn in the flesh of the world, which will not find rest until a real, complete and just solution has been worked out on the basis of the United Nations' Charter of the right of peoples to self-determination, and the Security Council resolutions. Such a just, complete and permanent solution, free from hide-bound compromise, is the only one capable of giving to each his due and bringing to a close a drama that the Community of Nations has up to now neglected to deal with in a serious way.

The international Community took on a heavy responsibility from the outset of the crisis. It cannot be allowed to delay any longer in finding a real solution to this question and one that is free from hypocritical or partisan measures.

The status of Jerusalem

At the heart of the Palestinian question is the status of Jerusalem, a city that Heaven has made holy and that three religions, Christian, Muslim and Jewish, consider as part of their spiritual and cultural inheritance. Hence, no political solution could afford to ignore this situation, in substance, of the city of Jerusalem. An original formula has to be found, that permits any Christian, Jewish or Muslim believer to feel on an equal footing with any other in the Holy City, without distinction or predominance of one party over another. In that way, instead of being the city of conflict, division, dispute and inter-religious strife, Jerusalem will be the city of peace, encounter and fellowship for its inhabitants and a sign of hope for the whole world.

C. The situation in Iraq and in the region

It was possible to resolve the Gulf crisis through peaceful means. The great powers preferred, contrary to what was advocated by Pope John Paul II, the way of violence and destruction. The Gulf region experienced the worst kind of treatment thanks to this choice, and Iraqi people are still exposed to an unjust policy and measures that threaten them with famine, forcing them to emigrate and depriving them of essential means of survival, because of the economic blockade that has been imposed on them.

Lifting the blockade

Working to lift this blockade is an humanitarian petition that must allow the Iraqi people to reconstitute themselves and once more contribute, with the international Community, to rebuilding the region and encouraging it to develop on healthy foundations. Besides, we must recall the results of the war on population movements. A great number of people belonging to various Arab nations have been obliged to go home in dramatic circumstances. Others have been obliged to seek asylum in neighbouring countries because of the terrible circumstances prevailing in their home

countries. All that took place before the eyes of a world that said nothing. The international Community bears a special responsibility with respect to this tragedy. It has to do this so as to bring an end to it by all means and to help the victims find humane conditions that guarantee them a worthy and stable life.

We would like to say again here what we said last March during our meeting in Rome with His Holiness Pope John Paul II and the Presidents of episcopal conferences of the countries concerned by the Gulf war: "We reject any justification or explanation of a religious kind with regard to the Gulf war. There is nothing in it that could be considered as a conflict between East and West, or between Islam and Christianity. "

Conclusion

We have listed these pressing questions, without however forgetting the human and social problems from which each of our countries is suffering. We are part of this region. We bear witness to our solidarity with it and our desire, as Churches, institutions and individuals, to contribute, as far as we are able, to resolve its problems, in a sincere spirit of service and co-operation with all those who want its good. We want to work with everyone for human edification, respect for human dignity and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, in such a way as to be a positive factor in the building up of society, free from fear, anxiety, constraint and frustration.

We have held our first symposium in Lebanon. With God's help, we shall meet periodically in future, to continue our consideration of the practical level and to undertake concrete projects in the service of our children, societies and countries. We ask God to support us and bless our intentions, so that we may be a living sign of his love and peace and of contributing to create the civilisation of life and love advocated by the universal Church.

At the end of this letter, we ask God to fill us with his heavenly blessing, so that you and we may be justice- and peace-makers, for the glory of the Most High and the good of mankind in our region and throughout the world.

Council of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs

Bkerkeh, 24 August 1991