

Third Pastoral Letter
“Together before God for the welfare
Of the individual and of society”

Christmas 1994

INTRODUCTION

Christmas Good Wishes

1. To our brothers, the bishops, priests and deacons, and our children, the monks, nuns and lay-people of all our eparchies in all Arab countries and throughout the world.

The peace of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ be with all of you. In him was manifest the glory of God in the mystery of his Incarnation and through his birth. He proclaimed peace to all people: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14) The angels’ song, heard by simple shepherds, on the night of the Lord’s birth, is still resounding in our hearts and in all our Christmas liturgies.

A new pastoral letter

2. We Eastern Catholic Patriarchs are again addressing you, beloved brothers and children, on the occasion of Christmas, in a common pastoral letter, which has as its subject coexistence between Christians and Muslims in the East. This coexistence is willed by God as a place of encounter, exchange and collaboration. In our previous letter, we sketched out the main features of Christian mission and witness in the Arab world¹. We consecrate this new letter to the welfare of our faithful and of our societies, by way of a deeper reflection on the brotherly relations which ought to unite Christians and Muslims. This topic, the very object of our long discussions during the third session of our Council held in Amman in May 1993, is indeed of great importance for us, our countries and the whole world.

Promoting coexistence

3. Many reasons lead us to study this topic. The main one comes from the fact that our relations with Islam and Muslims constitute a specific and fundamental aspect of the identity of our Churches, in the framework of the universal Church. Indeed, our coexistence with Muslims is not an accident in our life. It is on the contrary at the centre of our evangelical witness in this region of the world which is dear to us. That is why it must remain the centre of our concern, reflection and commitment. We recall what we have already said in our previous letter: “Our dialogue is primarily a dialogue with our

¹. “Christian Presence in the East: Mission and Witness” 2nd. Pastoral Letter of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, Pascha 1992

Muslim brethren. Our common life down long centuries represents a fundamental experience from which there is no turning back. It is part of God's will for us and them."² We should like therefore to do all in our power to promote this coexistence, to open up new horizons and commit ourselves to the new ways demanded by the multiple changes and current challenges on regional and world levels.

In today's world

4. Furthermore, the world today continually moves towards encounter and globalisation. This implies at once both hopes, new possibilities, difficulties and tensions. Vatican II said about this phenomenon: "One of the salient features of the modern world is the growing interdependence of men one on the other, a development promoted chiefly by modern technical advances." And it adds: "Nevertheless brotherly dialogue among men does not reach its perfection on the level of technical progress, but on the deeper level of interpersonal relationships. These demand a mutual respect for the full spiritual dignity of the person."³ Religions doubtless play a particularly effective role, at this stage of history, perhaps even a decisive one, with regard to the continuing growth of such relations among various human groups. It is no exaggeration to say that coexistence between people in the third millennium of our history will depend on positive and constructive encounter between faithful of different religions in general and those of both Christian and Muslim religions in particular.

As Churches living every day in contact with Muslims, we are then invited to play a role in this field by putting our vital, relevant and age-old experience at the disposal of all people of good will who are seeking, in today's world, ways for coexistence enlivened by sincere and positive exchanges between God's creatures throughout God's whole world.

In solidarity with all people in our societies and countries

5. Our Arab world is experiencing today a situation of "a difficult birth-giving at the level of its civilisation. It is a society in search of itself, a form for its existence and a place in the world today. This should allow it to play a positive role in breeding a world civilisation and consolidating its stability and peace, through a participation driven by the authenticity of its identity and the special nature of its inheritance. That search is forging its way through profound social, geopolitical, economic and cultural changes and amid many difficulties both at home and abroad. That means that that difficult birth-giving involves highs and lows, progressions and halts."⁴

Amidst these challenges and tensions, hopes and expectations, we Christians of the Arab world do not have the right to be spectators. Nor do we wish just to talk of our fears and questionings. We want, above all, to affirm that we share sincerely in our countries' sufferings in these critical times and express our profound solidarity with every person in our region on whom "ordeals have battered ... from all sides, to the

². "Christian Presence in the East" N°48

³. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, N°23

⁴. "Christian presence" N°10

point where he is always living under the shadow of suffering and following an endless way of the cross.”⁵ We want to walk alongside everyman in search of a way worthy of humanity, in order to reach coexistence beneficial to every human person in our Arab world and throughout the whole world.

Religious reawakening, its dangers and potentialities

6. Among historic cultural exchanges, we notice on local and global levels an evident religious reawakening in various human societies. This reawakening comprises, on the one hand, potentialities capable of reviving spiritual strength in a world suffering today from a deadly spiritual vacuum that strips the human person of its most sublime humanity; and on the other, it comprises equivocation and ambiguity, or even evidence of fanaticism and aggressiveness. That is an invitation for us all to pause a while and reflect carefully, adopting an attitude of mental serenity and spiritual calmness so as to make this religious reawakening into a positive element, capable of coping with the difficulties and problems from which the world in general and the Arab world in particular are suffering in all domains.

A healthy religious attitude could be a positive element to guide our contemporary history, if religion returned to its pure sources, away from sectarian and aggressive tendencies. Neither must returning to sources become rigid fixism, nor religious practice fanaticism deforming religion and believers. The instability of social, political, economic, and cultural situations and the imbalance in the application of law and justice among the same people, or among peoples and States, invite all religious and spiritual powers to combine their efforts in order to assume their responsibilities in the contemporary world, given its many problems.

This pastoral letter is part of various attempts and multiple efforts expended today in this direction. The consolidation of coexistence will doubtless contribute, despite present or past mistakes, to avoiding setbacks and dramas in our countries and societies. It will enable us to bear witness to a true coexistence so longed for by the contemporary world.

The subject of the letter and its spirituality

7. We address our letter to our brothers, to our beloved children, to all our fellow citizens and particularly to our Muslim brethren, and to all persons of good will in the world. We join our voice to all those which, in our countries and throughout the world, are calling for encounter and constructive dialogue among the faithful of all religions.

The title chosen for this letter, “Together before God for the good of the individual and of society,” marks the spirituality which accompanies and animates this reflection. We place ourselves, first of all, before God with reverence, humility and trust. He is the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate who inspires every good action in his creatures. We call upon him in everything we do, and, strengthened by his grace, we turn to every individual and to society, in order to work together to build a

⁵. “Christian presence” N°53

better world. We are convinced that God attends to the universe of humans, there to spread life, unity and harmony. Humans will thus become capable of building the “civilisation of love” which glorifies God, and towards which every person is moving today, despite the difficulties and obstacles in the way. Human beings, as individuals or communities, when they put themselves in the presence of God, whose name is above every name, change from humiliated, powerless and fearful persons into open-minded and -hearted people of action, full of hope and enthusiasm. We entrust ourselves to God, invoking his name and acting by the power of his Spirit.

We hope that this letter will be the object of reflection in our dioceses, among religious communities and the faithful, and a matter of exchanges between them and their Muslim fellow-citizens, so as to arrive at a shared vision.

Outline of the letter

8. We have divided our letter into five parts. In the first part we have recalled our experience of coexistence, past and present. Muslims and Christians have had a shared history, with positive and negative aspects. We then dwelt on three questions particularly important for us today, and requiring studies and analyses, namely, participation in public life, the family and religious education.

In the second part, we have seen that the experience of our current coexistence must serve as a basis to build the future. We have then recalled the negative sides from which we must free ourselves, such as confessionalism and mutual ignorance, and the positive sides which can help to build, such as acceptance of pluralism and the role of different factors, religious discourse, the family, school, church, mosque, publications and means of communication.

In the third part, we have spoken of questions to do with participation in public life, namely citizenship, religion and politics, religion and violence.

In the fourth part, we have called to mind Muslim-Christian relations at global level, their impact on us and our role in that field.

In the fifth and last part, we have tried to point out certain lines of action to our faithful. Coexistence requires Christians to be conformed to the commandment of Jesus Christ who is Love in all and for all people. Every Christian position must be based on faith. And it is through giving, devotion, service and spiritual solidarity with others, that Christians can become “salt and light” in society.

FIRST PART

Coexistence, the experience of the past and the calls of the present

Christian membership

9. Beloved brothers and sisters! The children of the Church, in every time and place, are rooted in their societies and are an inseparable part of them. That is why they share, united with all their fellow-citizens in happiness and misfortune, the same history

and the same destiny. It goes without saying that this rootedness in a given human history, with all its particular circumstances, represents an aspect of the mystery of the Church which does not contradict the fullness of its catholicity. Local Churches represent the universal Church in various human societies, while the universal Church guarantees each local Church's unity of faith, love, mission and service. Without the universal Church, local Churches become "withered fig-trees" and without local Churches, the universal Church becomes an abstract mental concept, as both the dynamism of their ongoing relationship, as well as the communion between local Churches, are a source of vitality, fertility and renewal in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" Church of God. (The Creed)

The historic rootedness of our Churches in our societies is also an aspect of the mystery of the Incarnation: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) That is what we affirmed already in our first letter.⁶ Just as Christ, the eternal Word of God, assumed our human nature and became incarnate in our history, so all Christians are called to incarnate their faith in the land where God has called them to live, and in the human society where God has willed them to be. That is the solid foundation that connects Christians to their faith and homeland.

The experience of the past

10. The Christian presence, in most of our Arab countries, goes back to the birth of Christianity. History in fact witnesses to the existence of Arab Christian communities in various regions of the East. With the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, a shared history and civilisation began, uniting Christians and Muslims in the Arab East. The experience of the past led Muslims and Christians to be fused in the one crucible of Arab civilisation, although each kept the distinctive features of their heritage. This inheritance is the guarantee of an ongoing cultural exchange helping us cope with new situations to be assimilated, potentialities to be realised and challenges to be confronted: all that opens doors towards a future in which this experience will unfold in all its vitality and authenticity.

On the cultural level

11. Islamic-Christian encounter was demonstrated in the past on two levels, cultural and popular.

On the cultural level, there was collaboration between Muslim and Christian scholars. They worked side by side and laid the bases of a common civilisation, which later became, for many centuries, a beacon for humanity. That collaboration continued for centuries and was evident especially in modern times. This is a heritage of which we are proud, since it constitutes one of the sources of our rootedness, our originality and the wealth of our coexistence.

When the Arabic language was adopted by the Christian communities of our region, with its different ecclesiastical denominations, it rapidly became almost

⁶. "Christian presence," N°37

everywhere the tool for ecclesiastical theological and liturgical expression as well as of everyday life. Thus it contributed to building communication bridges between those Churches and the new world that had just been born. It also contributed to re-establishing cultural communication between the various Churches, after a period of separation and estrangement.

The Arab Christian heritage is the glorious aspect of that cultural richness among the different Christian Churches in the context of Arab civilisation. It should also be said that a large part of that thought was born and developed in relation with Islam. That gives it its peculiar and distinctive character in relation to the general Christian heritage. The tolerant attitude which prevailed in Muslim Arab civilisation, allowing the establishment of serious religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians, deserves mention, although it was sometimes marked by a spirit of sterile polemic.

On the popular level

12. On the popular level, Christians and Muslims became integrated into a single society and shared “bread and salt.” They were together in joys and sorrows. Motivated by shared values and united by similar life-styles, they developed customs and traditions which still characterise our society up to the present, giving it its special stamp, without any distinction between Muslims and Christians. The two parties also developed their own popular wisdom, marked by balance, prudence and patience, adopted from their common culture. Thanks to it, they were able to face up to cope with the vicissitudes of history and the differences that might arise between them.

Today, faced with current questions and in our hesitant progress towards the future, it is good to take inspiration from that original folk wisdom, perfected by the collaboration of whole generations and handed down to us, in order to cope with everyday problems, which are to be found naturally in any society. Our common collective memory is the guarantee of the permanence of our coexistence.

Shadows and negative aspects

13. But at the same time, we do not wish to close our eyes to the negative aspects of that experience. In fact, every historic experience has its dark sides. The above mentioned phenomenon is a living historical reality. It comprises shadows and light. Indeed, we too have known difficult moments of obduracy, cruelty and aggression.

In those difficult moments, political calculations, psychological, social and economic circumstances, tendencies towards fanaticism, uncertain tempers of fickle governors, extremist confessional tendencies, religious wars and other factors too played an important role. It is normal for all that to leave both parties with psychological and social after-effects, which must be reckoned with, in order to make a diagnosis of them and find the cure, now that we are on the threshold of a new period as far as our mutual relations are concerned. Anyone who cannot be reconciled with his whole past remains incapable of adequately facing up to the present and to the future.

Present appeals

14. The experience of the past invites us to listen to the appeals of the present. Every historical experience plays an effective role in the life of peoples to the extent that it retains its permanent dynamic. Otherwise it becomes static, mere vestiges before which folk pause to hymn past glories, but without any effect on our life. The profound changes which are happening in our region oblige us to explore the depths of our past experience, in order to make it into a shining beacon to guide us. What is true for the life of peoples in general, is also true as far as the coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the Arab world is concerned. This is an experience whose vitality must be kept, purified, deepened and consolidated in our cultural life, in order to renew it and adapt it to new and ever-changing circumstances. Coexistence is probably one of the most important questions for our countries, because it determines whether the homeland is enriched by or deprived of the energy of all its children.

Common responsibility

15. We want to mention here what we said in our previous letter on the subject of our common responsibility in that field, because we believe that it represents a starting point which places both parties before their historic responsibilities: “In the trials that beset today’s Arab world, it is a fact that one of the considerable problems it is facing is its relationship with the various national faith-based groups. That is the case mainly among Christians who have shared “*bread and salt*” with Muslims down the centuries. It constitutes a common responsibility for all.” Muslims bear great responsibility in this domain, because they are more numerous. They are called “to calm the Christians living alongside them, in the same homeland. In the Middle East, the Muslim cannot undertake any structural project whatever, without taking into consideration the Christian community, so as to inspire confidence in it. Not only must its religious rights be respected, but it must have the feeling of representing an inseparable part of the life of society, its participation in the national community bringing with it the complete set of rights and duties that belong to all citizens. For their part, Christians bear an analogous responsibility. They are called to free themselves from the social and psychological complexes bequeathed them by history. They must find in their faith the wherewithal to free themselves from everything that prevents them accepting and encountering the other. Their presence can thus become a positive, sincere and determined commitment”⁷ to the life of their societies.

Current issues

16. In reflecting on the present situation, we must insist on certain current issues, which have a great influence on deepening and consolidating coexistence. We cannot enumerate them all, for the areas that have to do with coexistence are vast, varied and multiple. We mention some by way of example: participation in public life, family, religious education and mutual ignorance or prejudices which distort the other’s image.

⁷. “Christian presence” N°49

We would like these topics to be a subject of brotherly dialogue and exchange, in order to consolidate their encounter and brotherhood. We have the firm hope that our society is capable of resolving its problems in an atmosphere of serenity and sincerity. We shall have to resort to patience, understanding, gentleness, and prudence, qualities which are not absent from our society, despite the seriousness of the challenges confronting us.

Participation in public life

17. The first of these issues is participation in public life in all areas, political, social, cultural and other. Participation in public life is a right and duty for every citizen. This imposes on society the requirement of providing the necessary favourable conditions guaranteeing the practice of this right and duty.

Each national group has the right to enjoy the freedom necessary for participating in building society in all areas of civic life (State organisations, public and private institutions, jobs, economic interests and other). No-one should be marginalised because of membership of a religion or for any other reason. The same opportunities must be given to all citizens, whatever their religious persuasion: they have the right of citizenship, without any limitation or reference to confessional sensitivities.

On the other hand, every national group, whatever its religious affiliation, must have the necessary interest in public affairs and service of society. Individuals must fulfil this duty with selflessness, sincerity and loyalty, far from isolationist tendencies likely to deprive society of the contribution of all its children.

The road to be travelled is still long, before a society can be created that offers the same opportunities to all, without any discrimination whatever. We must however continue to work in this direction.

The family

18. The second question concerns the family and everything to do with it, especially inter-marriage between Christians and Muslims causing tragedies in families and in society. It so happens that certain Christians, devoid of religious roots, exploit the protection of Islamic religious laws to escape their matrimonial and family duties. The Christian and Islamic religious laws are different, and it is difficult to harmonise them. However that does not dispense those responsible from taking care to arrange these matters, so as to prevent everything that may disturb the peace in the same society. It is worth remarking that those wanting to escape their matrimonial duties by resorting to Islamic religious laws are often little concerned with religion: they are just exploiting it for their selfish interests.

It is important then to find a means of talking with both sides, and of creating a reference point that allows each case to be discussed separately, so that neither party feels oppressed or frustrated. This measure will help to consolidate the foundations of a healthy family life, especially at present when this basic cell of society has begun to be

eroded by different factors leading to break-down, contrary to our authentic Eastern values.

Religious education

19. The third question concerns religious education. In most Arab countries where ancient Christian communities are to be found, the Church enjoys religious freedom for the Christian education of the faithful, in its Churches and schools, where it is allowed to have its own schools, and sometimes even in State schools. However, Christian students in State schools remain a subject of concern for us. For in a number of countries, they are refused Christian religious education in those schools, although Islamic religious education is guaranteed for their Muslim school-friends. And, in certain countries, such Christian education is not even allowed inside private Christian schools.

Religious education, for Christians and Muslims alike, reinforces the spiritual values foundational for every society. Every citizen moulded by his or her religious convictions is a spiritual treasure and a credit to any society. We should like sincere collaboration to be established on this topic between State institutions and Christian Churches, even at the level of academics and experts from both sides, in order to find together a proper solution to this issue. The experience of certain Arab countries could also be useful in this respect.

School books also constitute a problem. In fact, they take no account of Christian students and of religious and cultural pluralism in the Arab homeland. That causes upset in Christian students' religious conviction. In fact they begin wavering between Christian doctrine, which they believe and learn in Church and in the family, and what they must absorb, while still young, at school from their mandatory text-books. That creates in them the feeling of being foreigners in their own homeland and among their school-fellows, with whom they are called to plan together the shape of things to come.

Illusions and misconceptions

20. Illusions and misconceptions are evident in relations between different social groups and even among individuals. They constitute a major obstacle to positive and productive collaboration at the level of both individuals and societies. These illusions and prejudices are born in the human heart. They dominate it, determining its behaviour and reactions, alienating it from both rationality and objectivity, and so provoking disturbance and tearing apart the fabric of social life.

That applies to relations between Muslims and Christians in our countries. Both parties inherit from past generations illusions and images, which are processed uncritically into negative prejudices with regard to each other, feeding a baseless mutual fear. In the same way, individual disputes or other common incidents unrelated to religion or confession often receive a confessional interpretation that is entirely unjustified.

Our Eastern society, it must be said, is often lacking in rational behaviour and becomes easy prey to hearsay and quick interpretations and rapid reactions. And when these feelings touch upon religion, it is easy to understand the destruction and discord that may result at personal and community level. That is why the leaders of both parties must be attentive and vigilant in order to define, analyse and stem the phenomenon, through regular dialogue guaranteeing the stability of society and the homeland.

SECOND PART

How to build the future

Current coexistence

21. The primary reality which may serve as a starting point for consolidation of relations between Christians and Muslims is the fact of their current coexistence which still persists in the countries of the Middle East, despite the disturbance which has occurred for a multiplicity of internal and external reasons: civil wars which have taken on a confessional character, political interests on local or regional level, a fanatical religious tendency among certain groups, shown by violent declarations or acts, and a presentation lacking in objectivity in certain media of Christian-Muslim relations in the region. In addition, there are in our societies very many economic and existential problems, which furnish plenty of food for extremism of every kind.

Despite all that, the experience of coexistence that we have had in the past still withstands all difficulties. There still exist many positive points, healthy attitudes and real friendships linking Christians and Muslims, in all sectors of civil and religious life and in different classes of society. Despite fundamental differences between the two religions, all are united by faith in one single God, as by belonging to the same homeland and destiny: all that constitutes a solid starting point for founding and consolidating present and future relations between brethren.

Whatever may be said on the subject and despite certain inevitable negative aspects, no-one can deny this primordial truth: Muslims and Christians in Arab countries belong to the same homeland and share the same destiny there; their sensibilities and reactions are the same in the face of challenges on the global and local level.

We mention below certain points capable of strengthening coexistence and opening up new horizons for it.

Spiritual daring to recognize the truth

22. Dialogue which must serve as a basis in every human relationship requires above all spiritual daring to look truth in the face. Where relations between Muslims and Christians are concerned, it is often convenient to resort to fine words and declarations of theoretical principles, whilst shutting one's eyes to the true state of affairs. Some venture to say that it is preferable not to mention too sensitive topics, for

fear of causing an outburst of negative behaviour which it would then be impossible to stem.

We believe that these fears are not healthy in a society that wants to develop an authentic civilisation. Authentic societies are those capable of facing up to reality as it is, in all its manifestations, in a sincere, positive and objective way. For the goal is to correct and prevent the bad, for the good of all. To ignore or pretend to ignore negative aspects is to no-one's advantage. In the same way, trying to hide what is really happening, and being content with fine words, conceals from us our powerlessness or lack of courage in facing up to reality and perhaps also aggressive inclinations which we dare not avow.

This confrontation obliges us to distinguish between the fine principles proclaimed by Christianity and Islam and the real practice of the faithful of both religions since this practice may well be in contradiction with proclaimed principles.

This confrontation with reality must be made with good intentions, in an atmosphere of love and sincerity, and having regard to the common good. There can be no question of slandering, creating sterile polemics, attacking or being suspicious of the other. In short, there can be no question of stereotyping the other party in a subjective and unfair way. Otherwise we only widen the gulf between us, rather than bridging it. It should also be remembered that some people like to exploit these questions with bad intentions: that is why we should remain alert so as to make sure-footed progress, perfectly aware of the scale of the problem and of the very many sensitive issues. We invite all our faithful to be on their guard against those who find it in their interest to throw society into inextricable difficulties, and who will win at the expense of all of us. Truth in love is the way which guides us with security. Truth makes free and love unites hearts: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

Confessionalism

23. We deceive ourselves if we feign ignorance of the fact that confessionalism lies in the depths of every human soul. It is also in the heart of each one of us Muslims or Christians, in a conscious or unconscious, manifest or hidden way. It can surface on the most trivial pretexts: it is enough if two persons are quarrelling for some reason, and one of them is Christian and the other Muslim, for the personal quarrel to become, thanks to an inconsiderate or stupid remark, a confessional quarrel and to degenerate into general unrest. It is really regrettable that such incidents awaken negative feelings in whole communities and unleash blind religious fanaticism, which halts the working of reason and is contrary to every spiritual and religious value.

As for those who have adopted fanaticism as their method of action, and they can be found everywhere, we should like the whole of society to know how set up resistance so as to block all fanaticism or extremism. All social and religious institutions must collaborate to extirpate this phenomenon, by a general educational plan and a constant action animated by a spirit of friendship and benevolent counsel.

Freedom from ignorance and prejudice

24. The proverb says: “Man is the enemy of what he does not know.” This applies in large measure to coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Often each side ignores the others as they are, and the nature of their feelings and desires. That is why each fashions the other into an image reflecting their own fears, suspicions and need for self-defence. The image thus depicted is loaded with hostility, instead of showing a partner with whom to build together.

That is why we say to Christians: free yourselves from illusions and ignorance and strive to understand what Islam is and who Muslims are. Don't rest content with clichés being peddled or with superficial information that distorts the truth. Look for what is positive and what can help collaboration. We say the same to Muslims: free yourselves from illusions and prejudice. Strive to get to know what Christianity is and who Christians are. Don't rest content with superficial, distorting ideas; try to see the reality lived from day to day, so as to know what is happening and to be able to avert clashes and spread calm throughout society. And to Christians and Muslims together we say: You are not enemies; neither of you represents a threat to the other's existence or an obstacle to their growth. On the contrary, the others are your brothers, friends, neighbours and partners: through their wealth you are enriched and you will be able to grow as they do.

That all requires permanent dialogue and personal, direct, brotherly encounter, to enable both parties to recognize each other mutually, away from ready-made categories and preconceived ideas. Our Arab culture is a culture of the “face.” The face can only be seen in friendly encounter, real dialogue and direct conversation. It is only then that the psychological and social barriers that prevent knowledge and recognition of others will fall. Each must get to know others as they are, as they understand themselves and as they wish to be understood.

Pluralism and diversity

25. Consequently, to enable us to live together, we must get to know each other, to recognize and accept others as they are, in their difference. Many problems come from the rejection that we set up against those who are different from us, because we regard them as a danger or threat to us, or even a denial of our existence. That is what makes diversity and pluralism in religion or life-style, into a source of disputes and hostility, instead of being a source of mutual enrichment for individuals and societies.

Christians cannot expect Muslims not to be Muslim, nor can Muslims expect Christians not to be Christian. Christians must respect their Muslim brethren in their Islam, and Muslims must respect their Christian brethren in their Christianity. When we accept others in this way, we may say that the way to mutual understanding and love is open. Love in turn opens the door to collaboration and sharing. Recognition, mutual acceptance, love and collaboration do not mean sacrificing anything of personal identity or differentiating features. On the contrary that presupposes depth of faith and self-

confidence which allow discussion with others far from any inferiority or superiority complex.

So believers must be able to be fairly strong in their faith, they must be aware of their own identity, so as not to be afraid to get to know their brothers who are different from them, and not to refuse to profit from everything they possess in terms of wealth of values.

Our Arab society is characterised by diversity and broad pluralism in several fields, including that of religion. It has room for all. Pluralism does not run contrary to unity, concord and harmony in society. It is rather an asset, profitable to the homeland common to all, in terms of originality and of the contribution and creativity of all groups. So this diversity must be given the opportunity to express itself and develop without hindrance, in the context of the common good of the homeland. Every national project which does not take this into account or shows itself incapable of dealing with the fact in a positive way is doomed to failure.

Religious speech

26. Religious language has its laws and rules. In itself, it invites to faith in God and to love of all human beings who are God's creatures, whatever their religion. If on the other hand, it changes into polemics and starts to distort the truth, it can only cause harm to all parties. For polemics go down well at the Muslim or Christian popular level, and spontaneously become blind fanaticism, inimical to any coexistence. Unfortunately, some think that safeguarding their own faith consists in twisting and attacking other people's convictions. That is just a superficial attitude which results besides in turning others into hostile images. That in turn creates rejection and enmity in itself and in others. It amounts quite simply to drawing up the psychological conditions that incite moral or physical annihilation of others.

That is why both parties must revise their religious language, in order to distance it from all sterile polemic. For polemics cannot lead to convictions; they only exacerbate relations at the personal and communal levels. That is why we are calling on Christian thinkers and theologians in the Arab world to develop a new vision which does justice to Islam, but without false complaisance. We ask Christian academic institutions in collaboration with competent teachers to introduce the study of Islam into their programmes of study. We call upon Muslim scholars and Islamic academic institutes to make the same effort with regard to the study of Christianity. Such objective and sincere study will be capable of leading to a real, mutual acquaintance. The walls of separation will then fall down, and a new atmosphere will allow communication, collaboration and pursuit of the common goal.

The role of education: the family

27. All those responsible for education have a fundamental role in this field. They can contribute effectively to erasing those images mutually reflected in distorting mirrors. Every national project that is not transformed into an educational project

remains a pure wish, far from any concrete application. For the human personality is formed by its various educational references. The values that society wishes to inculcate in its members are rooted in them. We mention below some of these references. The first is the family.

The family is the primary channel of communication between society and individuals. It is the cultural intermediary between the two. As an integral part of society, the family draws its values and positive and negative concepts from it, transmitting them to its children who accept them unquestioningly and find in them the way to become integrated into society.

That is why we should wonder about possible manifestations of confessionality in our Christian and Muslim families, in words, deeds, and various reactions and behaviour. What reaches children's ears, in their families, about "the other party?" What reactions do they notice when they take part in adult meetings? There should be a joint inquiry to find answers to these questions, with a view to helping those responsible for education to find the necessary means to develop a sort of real coexistence, beginning with the Christian or Muslim family.

School

28. Christian and Muslim students sit side by side in state or private schools. This fact in itself allows exchange, acquaintance and mutual discovery. But up to what point can one say that coexistence makes an integral part of the educational project and becomes a tangible reality in programmes of study? The heritage of coexistence on which we pride ourselves belongs still to the realm of wishful thinking and speechifying if it is not incarnated in a clear vision inculcated in pupils while they are still in the classroom, both through text-books, academic and extra-curricular educational initiatives as well as by teacher training.

It goes without saying that religious education plays a decisive role in this domain. Through it religious concepts and behaviour are communicated to pupils. Questions about the "other" religion are inevitably asked during this education, by the programme itself or by the pupils themselves. It is then up to the teacher to point his or her students in the right direction and train them to respect the truth they believe in as well as to respect others in their religion and faith. What training do Christian pupils receive about Muslims and Islam in religious education classes? And what training do Muslim pupils receive about Christians and Christianity? Collaboration, introduced with prudence and wisdom by both parties, between teachers of religious education, is entirely suitable, with an eye to mutual acquaintance between them and among pupils. No-one should be obliged to abandon his identity or authenticity in favour of the other's. What is required is mutual respect.

Mosque and church

29. Religion plays an essential role in the formation of the human personality in this region of the world, whence the influence of religious spokesmen on society's

behaviour and attitudes. Mosque and church are among the most important platforms. We all know, indeed, the mosque's influence on Muslim society and that of the church on Christian society. From there religious and social directives are emitted and received attentively and passionately by people. From there calls for discord contrary to the essence of religion may go out, or voices inviting to the love, tolerance and brotherhood proclaimed by all religions. We wish and desire everyone to hear about others from mosque and church in words that awaken trust and tranquillity in people's hearts.

Publications and means of communication

30. Means of communication create, shape and direct public opinion; their role is ever-increasing. That is why those who direct our written or audio-visual media must also assume their responsibilities in order to contribute to the creation of public opinion, guided by reason and mutual tolerance, which incapacitates and neutralises fanaticism and fanatics.

We would like to point out here the harm that may be done by certain publications which present a distorted image of Christianity (with regard to Church doctrine and discipline, Christian life and history etc...) Christians are upset by these publications, and by certain programmes in various media which unfairly attack Christianity. And, in most cases, it is not possible to rectify what has been said or to give an objective and brotherly reply. That all produces a negative impact on the general atmosphere and on young Christians, creating bitterness and frustration at heart.

However, we should also mention Islamic publications which present Christianity in a positive way. These could serve as a basis for useful and productive dialogue.

We should like to highlight certain Christian publications about Islam and Muslims, which are of a subjective nature full of sterile polemics, something that we frankly condemn, as it can only awaken fanaticism and hostility. On the other hand, it should also be remembered that certain Arab Christian thinkers have published objective and admirable studies on Islam and Islamic civilisation. Joint publications, by Muslim and Christian thinkers, would be an effective means of consolidating coexistence.

THIRD PART

Together towards an egalitarian society

Deep reflection

31. Everywhere in the Arab world, and in circumstances particular to each country, deep reflection and extensive discussion are taking place today, about the best model of wished-for social system. Doubtless this reflection is happening in political, social and cultural situations which we have inherited from the past, with all their inherent negative values, such as exploitation, under-development, corruption and internal and external forms of oppression. Research and discussion are becoming more pressing and

keen from one day to the next. Sometimes they even amount to moral or physical violence. This research has not been confined to think-tanks and the intelligentsia, but has reached grass roots, where many different and even contradictory and mutually exclusive patterns of living have been proposed.

That is why internal strife and violence have taken place today in certain Arab countries. These situations cause us to suffer, for their victims, whoever they may be and wherever they are in the great Arab homeland, are brothers and sisters. Such actions can only lead to more obstinacy and extremism. Furthermore, they cause the disintegration of society, halt all progress and obstruct ways to serene reflection and inclusive collaboration, requisite for finding suitable solutions to the problems from which our countries are suffering.

With the expression of our profound solidarity with our peoples in challenges, difficulties and trials, we want, as far as we are able, to bring our humble contribution to this domain. We know very well that the problems posed are sensitive and complex. We want to listen, to converse, to avoid all haste and collaborate with everyone without any exception whatsoever, so as to reach an acceptable formula together, which would enable our societies to break out of the historic impasse in which they find themselves, in this difficult and sensitive period. Our message to all is to follow the way of reason and faith, not that of compulsion through recourse to arms or violence.

We should now like to reflect on certain basic questions to do with our coexistence and with building the future in our societies and countries.

Citizenship

32. Citizenship consists in rootedness in the land and in the people, in true loyalty towards the homeland and in commitment to serving the commonwealth. It presupposes perfect equality among citizens in rights and duties, without any distinction based on religious or political convictions, colour, race or sex. For no-one is better than anyone else, except in loyalty and service rendered to the homeland. All must be able to participate in the national plan, and members of government must be able to guarantee the same opportunities of participation to all, far from any consideration contrary to the interest of the homeland.

Faith and religious and spiritual values have an important role in raising a person to the highest level of citizenship. Indeed, the values proclaimed by all religions give glory to God the Creator and are woven into the fabric of political and social life. They also help to purify the concept of citizenship from every passion, selfishness, one-upmanship and corruption. They can give birth to a real sense of belonging that works for the commonwealth and in the real interest of the homeland. The concepts of rootedness, loyalty, equality and participation, on which authentic citizenship is founded, find a support and guarantee in the daily practice of faith. Believers faithful to religious values can be the nation's conscience. They can raise their voices very loudly to condemn any manifestation of political or social corruption, by consolidating the values which form the basis of every authentic society.

Free and responsible participation

33. Public life cannot be the preserve of any individual, group, party, tribe or class. All must have the possibility of participating one way or another in taking the decisions which have to do with national life. Every political or social system has the duty of guaranteeing this right to all citizens and allowing them to practise it in a free and responsible way, before God, their conscience and society. That depends on the quality of relations that underpin society, and that must be characterised by respect for others' opinions, by the guarantee of freedom of expression and the possibility of developing their personal and community life, without pressure of any sort, within the framework of clear and just laws. Numbers, whether large or small, should not be taken into account. Rights and duties, in fact, are not extended or restricted in proportion to numbers; they are rather founded on human nature and the God-given dignity of every human being. That is why law must ensure the equality of all and must protect all, no matter what their religion or numbers.

This method of free and responsible participation is subject to a great deal of confusion in our Arab societies, which are often dominated by the partisan spirit of tribe, family, group, or dominant party, without mentioning the multiform corruption caused by such situations. That is why a swift reform becomes obligatory, before things get worse and the situation becomes irremediable. Similarly, citizenship, understood in its proper meaning, needs clear and intensive educational action, firstly on the part of the family, then of others responsible for education. Citizens must be trained to be free, responsible and aware, capable of participating in public life in the requisite way, capable of putting public interest before their own individual or group interests. Doubtless, we are still far from the goal, and our Arab societies still have a lot to do in that sense.

Religion and politics

34. The relationship between religion and politics is a complex question, much discussed nowadays in human societies, from the theoretical point of view or on the basis of past experiences. In our societies, it is sometimes subject to a bitter struggle, in which different lay or other religious currents and types confront each other. We should like this struggle to become a serious, calm and fruitful dialogue in which all concerned parties could participate. Indeed, each party has something to say, just as it also needs to hear others' suggestions. This dialogue will be capable of contributing to finding the model of political or social system to give glory to God, serve humanity and construct society.

In our Arab world, religion plays a decisive role in the life of individuals and communities. Faith in religious and spiritual values is an integral part of the internal structure of being in our region. That is why any national project that seeks to make sense to all citizens, cannot ignore this reality. No-one can rule religion out of public life or limit it to liturgies and devotions; for religion is doctrine and life which concern the whole of human existence, private and public, individual and social.

But the history of various human societies also teaches us that sooner or later some terrible consequence for both religion and politics always comes from mixing them. Indeed, when religion changes into political ideology it deviates from its essential goal and becomes an instrument to seize power, and sometimes an instrument to subdue and dominate. When politics, on its side, changes into religious ideology, it exploits religion and uses it as a means to assert its own interests. In both cases, politics becomes corrupt and the true meaning of religion distorted. History has witnessed such corruption and distortion.

When one seeks to link religion and politics, many pressing questions present themselves: How can religion have a real influence in public life, while keeping its own independence and that of politics? How can political and religious institutions be kept distinct, without separating them, so that religion be not subject to politics, nor politics manipulate religion? How can religion remain a factor for unity and rapprochement of society's various groups, without discrimination, marginalisation or respect of persons?

The questions asked are multiple and the subject is very sensitive. Discussion and dialogue on this topic should be pursued among different currents so as to reach a formula that inspires confidence in all, and in which all political groups see, despite their differences, a formula which is not inimical to their existence, rights and duties. We do not have the possibility of answering, in this letter, these questions facing our society. Suggestions and solutions can only come from a regular dialogue among all Arab countries and in each country, according to its particularity and specificity. Politicians, religious leaders and intellectuals should assume responsibility for this dialogue. For our part, we encourage and are ready to cooperate with every initiative in this field.

Queries

35. Considering this question from the point of view of coexistence, we find ourselves facing the following challenge: how can equality between Christians and Muslims living in the same Arab country be guaranteed? We are in fact today at a crossroads and are still confronted with the same question: how can unity between the Muslim and Christian spirit be kept in educating Arab personality, in every Arab country where Muslims and Christians coexist? Whilst preserving religion as an essential element in citizenship and public life, how can we surmount the obstacle of discrimination between citizens because of their religion? How can we surmount this difficulty in real life?

Christians wish to be considered citizens in the full sense of the term and not as a minority asking for protection. We should like all of us to be filled with the light of faith in our involvement with public life. Besides, there must also be a legal framework allowing all to participate equally in civic life, including political, economic, social and other decisions.

Linking citizenship to religious values is not wrong. On the contrary, those values give citizenship life. But in that case, religion must guide the person completely

towards God, and to perfect respect for God's creation and for every religious conviction, especially if it has to do with a minority religion. The State's laws will have to guarantee minority rights with the same strictness as for majority rights or the State religion.

We hope that the ongoing discussion will succeed in finding just solutions for Muslims and Christians. We hope that it will continue as a wide-ranging, frank, national dialogue so that all may participate in the interest of the homeland and of its citizens.

Man is the criterion

36. While the discussion continues, we remember that the human person must be the criterion of every political or social system. All systems are established to serve the person. And we mean by that the whole person, mind and body, individual and community. The rights of the person draw their sacred character from the holiness of God who created it and willed it to be the recipient of rights and duties, and to give it a living consciousness, through which to seek the truth and reach it without compulsion. There is no contradiction between the rights of the person and those of God. That is why anyone lacking respect for God's creation has no respect for the Creator.

The political system cannot be self-sufficient. It must be linked to ethics. Politics are practised by human persons susceptible of being subject to every human passion. They can easily go astray, however noble their aim. Politics, supposed to be "action in the service of man," thus becomes "action against man." It is here that the role of religious and spiritual values becomes evident: they keep a watchful eye open for the political and social system to remain at the service of the human person's dignity. That is why Pope John Paul II said: "In fact I am convinced that the various religions, now and in the future, will have a preeminent role in preserving peace and in building a society worthy of man."⁸

Comment [MSOffice1]: Not Centesimus Annus, No. 41, as per French, but No. 60

On that topic, we invite our faithful to read the social teaching of the Church, as expounded in documents of Vatican II, especially the Constitution "Gaudium et Spes" on the Church in the world today, and in the social encyclicals. These documents can be their guide and a source of light. They can also offer Christians material for dialogue with their Muslim brethren, as common meeting points are numerous. The many social problems, confronted by all, constitute a vast domain of initiatives and common programmes, for the service of the human person, the respect of rights and the affirmation of dignity.

Religion and violence

37. It is regrettable that the whole of humanity, down the ages, has resorted to violence, in order to resolve its conflicts. It is regrettable too that, in all civilisations and among all peoples, religion has been used as a warfare agent. Sometimes, one resorts to violence to defend religion and affirm its principles. Worse still, the faithful of the same religion sometimes have recourse to violence among themselves, for religious or other

⁸. John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, N°60

reasons. This way of seeing and doing still exists today, somehow. Despite that, in spite of such recourse to violence which goes far back in history, and despite its relationship with religion, we affirm that violence has nothing to do with religion as such. Religion consists in believing in God, in all that he reveals of truth, justice, love and compassion for humanity, so becoming a factor of rapprochement. Neither religion nor God require fratricidal struggle between men or their mutual hatred.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." (Matthew 5: 4) The Book of Proverbs says: "The violence of the wicked will destroy them." (Proverbs 21: 7) And Saint John says: "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer." (I John 3: 14-15)

The world is looking for a new order today which cannot be found, as long as the powerful of this world are not taking the way of justice and equity as a basis of their behaviour with persons and peoples. It is only then that people will be able to look for a new way, other than that of violence, war and destruction, in order to resolve conflicts between peoples. Faith in God imposes love of all God's children: "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar." (I John 4:20)

We find today, in several regions of the world and in our Arab societies, manifestations of confessional and religious violence. For us, this is a cause of deep sorrow. We cannot remain spectators in the face of this violence exercised in the name of religion, wherever it happens and whoever its victims may be, whether or not from our own country and religion. We condemn every manifestation of moral and physical violence, especially of a confessional and religious nature. But at the same time, we can only draw attention to the causes which give rise to them: such as political, social and economic injustice, corruption, poverty, the spirit of domination and humiliation of peoples. If one wishes to free oneself from violence in a radical way, one must first remove its causes. Injustice gives rise to violence and counter violence-and leads society into an endless cycle.

We remain convinced that violence is not the humane way to follow in order to resolve social problems or conflicts between peoples. Jesus says to Saint Peter, when he wished to resort to violence to defend him: "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." (Matthew 26:52) The role of religion consists in calling constantly to a dialogue of love and compassion which enables problems to be dealt with in a positive way, despite all difficulties.

FOURTH PART

Muslims and Christians in the world

Tense relations in the past

38. So far we have been speaking of the organisation of relations between Christians and Muslims in the Arab world. As far as these relations are concerned, a distinction

should be made between Arab countries and the rest of the world. In Arab countries, a common historical basis and destiny have been formed. In the West, these relations had specific circumstances which distinguished them in the past and present. We should now like to broaden our outlook and speak of relations on the global level, for we are convinced that we have something specific to say in that area.

Both religions have a great number of faithful among the world's inhabitants. That is why positive relations between them are an important factor for peace and stability between the peoples of the whole world. We notice nowadays that these relations are often mixed with many doubts, suspicions and fears. The Christian West often looks at the Muslim East in a negative light. The Muslim East, in its turn, looks suspiciously at the Christian West and accuses it of having hidden, bad intentions with regard to it. Often too, it attributes to Christianity in general unjust policies practised in the region by certain Western governments; just as it sometimes confuses Eastern Christians with the West. Such confusions hinder a clear view of the situation.

In any case, there is a misunderstanding whose roots go back to distant and recent history. The encounter between Christian West and Muslim East included wars and tendencies to domination and exploitation. On that basis, a collective memory of an aggressive nature was formed on both sides. Since the appearance of Islam, wars succeeded each other between Christian West and Muslim East. There were the Crusades, Muslim attacks on central Europe and other wars declared by some against others, which continued to feed both memories with opposing, negative images. In modern history, there was colonialism, the division of the Arab homeland and the Israeli-Arab conflict etc...

But it should also be mentioned, through fidelity to history, that relations between both parties included moments of creative interaction on the cultural level, in the Middle Ages and subsequent periods. Such times must be revived today and emphasised in order to make them into the basis of dialogue and positive encounter. In that way both religions will have a pioneering role in the effort aimed at consolidating peace and brotherhood between peoples, and in the defence of the human person in several areas, where both religions share a similar spiritual and religious vision, such as in protecting life and moral values that raise humanity and affirm its dignity and nobility.

From conflict to dialogue and collaboration

39. The significant changes which have happened in recent decades, at global level, have engendered the religious, confessional and national phenomenon in the life of nations. Different groups have begun to become aware of their identity and to look for their position and rights. This growing awareness has led in some regions, to bloody conflicts between adherents of different religions and nationalities. What matters to us here are the relations between Islam and Christianity. Indeed they constitute today, for many, a matter of great concern, and even of great worry.

The faithful of both religions are called today to develop a new kind of relations. The first step to be taken is to heal the memories of both from the historic after-effects that prevent encounter. In that way, the road will open up to a constructive dialogue between the two, at world level, for the good of the whole of humanity. It would be a serious mistake to place these relations under the sign of strife, disputes and violence; for such a vision will only have destructive results. The faithful of both religions must move from the logic of strife and dispute to that of dialogue and collaboration. Both religions must in the end ask themselves whether they want a bridge of peace and reconciliation or a wall of separation and strife.

We remember here what Vatican II said about the relations of the Church with other religions: "Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."⁹ Many dialogue groups exist today on both sides and make a continuous, patient effort to smooth out obstacles preventing meaningful encounter of the parties. Besides the Muslim side's dialogue groups, on the Christian side the Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue should be mentioned and, among Churches in general, the particular attention given to this topic by the World Council of Churches and by the Middle East Council of Churches. These last have in fact already taken numerous initiatives in this field.

Christians in the Arab world

40. On the level of encounter between Muslims and Christians, at global level, Arab Christians define their position very clearly. They belong, with Arab Muslims, to the same Arab culture, with all its elements. They are at the same time Christian and with all Christians of the world, they believe in Jesus Christ, the Word of eternal God. On that basis, they see that they have to play a role in bringing the Christian and Muslim worlds together, by changing their opposition into positive collaboration on the basis of mutual respect.

They tell the West that Islam is not the enemy, but the partner in an indispensable dialogue for the construction of the new human civilisation. They say the same thing to the Islamic East: Christianity in the West is not the enemy, but the basic partner in the indispensable dialogue for building a new world.

Christians in the Arab world wish to be bridges for dialogue and understanding between these two worlds confronting each other. The cultural relationship which unites them to the Islamic East, and the communion of faith with Christianity everywhere, eminently qualifies them to fulfil this cultural role.

Muslims and Christians in the countries of diaspora

⁹. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, N°3

41. Necessity, poverty and oppression, but also a spirit of adventure, have driven very many Christians and Muslim to emigrate far from their homeland. There are today in Europe millions of Muslims who have come from Islamic countries. In certain Arab countries, which offer employment opportunities, there are many Christian immigrants, especially from poor countries; among them are also many Arab Christians. This phenomenon brings many problems with it, on all levels. Among other things, it puts dialogue and collaboration into the crucible: how do the two parties behave with regard to this new state of affairs?

Here, we can only appeal to the Christian Churches in the West, for them to take the appropriate initiatives for establishing positive relations with immigrants, among whom Muslims are numerous. These last have countless problems of a religious, cultural, social and economic kind. It is desirable for Western Church institutes to develop brotherly, disinterested means of communication with them, in complete respect for human rights. These initiatives will be a special place of positive encounter between Islam and Christianity in today's world.

We address the same appeal to Islamic countries where very many Christians can be found who have immigrated for work-related reasons. They too must give their immigrants the possibility of living in security according to their faith, of practising their religious worship and enjoying all their human rights.

Dialogue of religions in the East

42. God has made the Middle East a special region. He made it the place of his conversation with the whole of humanity. In this blessed land were born the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Historic circumstances, ancient and modern, have often put the faithful of these religions into a posture of strife and dispute. Yet they have also experienced centuries of communication, exchange and collaboration in the shadow of the Muslim Arab civilisation. That is why current difficulties must not be changed into an ineluctable, fatal destiny. Everyone must make an effort to go beyond them and create the requisite conditions for a frank and constructive encounter, for the good of the region and the world.

The Middle East looks today, with much hesitation, doubt and fear, towards new horizons of peace, justice and reconciliation. It is a moment when members of all religions are invited to put their hands to the plough, each on the basis of their own heritage. We are convinced that all have as part of their heritage the spirit of friendship and tolerance which will enable them to play the role of pioneers in bringing everyone together. Positive relations between religions in the world today may be largely influenced by the relations they have in the East, where each sees its source and origin. That is why we are invited to take on this civilising role, from which not only our region can benefit, but also the whole world.

FIFTH PART

Pastoral guidelines

Generous involvement

43. Brothers and sisters living in our dear East, we are addressing you, in the last part of this letter, especially as pastors who carry in our hearts, before God, your wishes and hopes, your preoccupations and questioning, “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.” (2 Corinthians 4: 5) How can anyone suffer without our suffering with him, or rejoice without us rejoicing with him? (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:28)

The message that we address to you is an invitation for you to rid yourselves of the minority complex. Don't become marginalised, as if public affairs did not concern you or were not within your competence. Be at the heart of society, involved in every service that you could give. Do not say that it is impossible for you to harmonise your Christian faith with service to a society built on Arab Islamic culture. Your Christian faith is an effective agent for serving in this society. You should not harbour a mentality of fear, isolation or alienation in your homeland. Remain open with respect to each Arab homeland whose members you are and where you are brothers to each person. Take part in its construction with commitment and generosity, especially at this time when the outline of the future is being traced. Christians must prepare as best they can in order to serve better.

Christ, in whom we have believed and whose teaching remains our guide, is not an obstacle between us and our society. On the contrary, he is our way towards it; we are going towards it to serve it in the spirit which he recommended to us himself in the Gospel: “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? Ye are the light of the world.... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16) He also says: “...love one another; as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. “(John 13:34-35) And St. John says in his first epistle: “Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.” (I John 3:18)

Spiritual solidarity and responsibility before God

44. Spiritual solidarity is one of the best means to consolidate the relations between Muslims and Christians and thus to reach the best types of coexistence. Spiritual solidarity means that each Muslim and Christian brings before God the cares, sufferings, hopes and desires of his brother.

It is, in the first place, a common prayer before God, for oneself and for the other. Before God we cannot be alone. We bring before him the feelings and cares of our brethren, different from us, as we bring our own feelings and anxieties. We call upon him for their sakes as for our own. For whenever we wish to place ourselves before the divine presence, God wants us to present ourselves to him with all our

brethren, both those who believe as we do and those who believe differently. St. Paul says in his Epistle to the Philippians: “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: 4-5)

Secondly, it consists in assuming together the same responsibility before God, especially that of coexistence. God calls us and wants us to be together and construct a single homeland together. And in that common construction, he has made us responsible for one another. That is why the other’s presence is God’s voice in our life. Our relations with them thus become an essential part of our spiritual identity. We said in our previous letter: “Dialogue is primarily a spiritual attitude. Man stands in dialogue with his God, which elevates his soul and purifies his heart and conscience, so that this is reflected in his dialogue with himself and others, individuals and communities. Dialogue is spirituality which transplants us from exclusion to assimilation, from rejection to welcome, from classification in categories to understanding, from disfiguring the other to respect, from judgment to compassion, enmity to harmony, from competition to complementarity, from antipathy to meeting and from hostility to fraternity.”¹⁰

In the spirit of spiritual solidarity, coexistence between Christians and Muslims is not a parallel coexistence, side by side, peaceful, without communication, encounter or exchange, without clash and without dialogue. It must comprise rather an intimate encounter in faith in one God, in the hope that rests on his effectual grace and on the love of God and others. Spiritual solidarity purifies relations at the level of daily life and strengthens them. Each identifies with the other; with him, in God’s presence, in an attitude of submission and conversion, he lives the same difficulties, the same challenges and the same hopes or wishes that he would like to see come true.

Beginning from your living faith

45. Brothers and sisters, in order to live out your involvement in society, you must let yourselves be guided by your faith in Jesus Christ. You must serve, in all areas, taking inspiration from deep knowledge of your Christian faith, as a source of principles and existential behaviour. Christians who discard their faith diminish themselves; they reduce their personality and distort their role and service in society.

Our society is impregnated by a religious mentality. Christians can only render service in the best way if they live their faith and takes inspiration from it in all their behaviour. To assume their authentic role, carry out their mission and serve their society and homeland, they must preserve their faith, make it grow and take inspiration from it in all areas of life. Their Muslim brethren and their homeland require them to put their Christian values into practice, justifying their Christian name and proving that they are different through their faith, in the same country. Loyalty to their homeland demands loyalty to their faith; it requires our attitudes and initiatives to be fructified through the values and strength contained in that faith.

¹⁰. “Christian presence” N°47

The first rule in all Christian behaviour consists in Christians showing themselves as such by their actions and not just in name. If they believe, they must live in conformity with what they think. In all their actions they must be a living Gospel witnessing to Christ.

Witnesses to the Gospel in our society

46. Our relations with Muslims bring us back to the demands of our faith. That means that they invite us to raise ourselves to the level of our responsibilities, of our real identity and of our mission in this region of the world. Relations between Christians and Muslims will only be able to be positive and decisive on condition, for us, of returning to the pure sources of evangelical values, as they are expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. (cf. Mt 5: 6, 7) The Beatitudes especially, with which Jesus opened this sermon, remain the way of every Christian life. St. Paul resumes them in these terms in his Epistle to the Galatians: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.”(Galatians 5:22)

For the human person and for society

47. Christians, particularly Arab Christians, are not looking for privileges, in which they can only find a false security. All they want is the privilege of serving every human person and the whole society. In our previous letter, we spoke about suffering people in our East.¹¹ They are the people with whom we wish to be in solidarity and we wish to serve in taking the lead to protect them, when they are hungry, unwell, abandoned and exposed to all sorts of oppression, frustrations, injustices and trials. We are not alone in this task. Many in our society, from all sides, put people at the top of their list of concerns. We join hands with them to go to meet all those who are suffering. Others’ suffering, rather than abstract ideas, unites people. On the other hand, we know very well that everything we do for one of our suffering fellow human beings we do for Christ himself: “For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.... Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” (Matthew 25:35-36:40)

CONCLUSION

Together before God

48. Brothers and beloved children, we end this letter as we began it: “Together before God.” We, Christians and Muslims, do not form two fronts or two opposing parties. Above all, we are all present before God. He is the Creator of the universe and belongs exclusively to no-one. We belong to him. We all come from him and return to him. We are absolutely incapable of welcoming others whom God puts in our way, if

¹¹. “Christian presence,” N°53

we do not succeed in welcoming him first. As we discover God, we discover the sacredness of human beings, as every human person is a unique creature, created by God “in his image and likeness” to “inherit the earth.” Our coexistence derives its strength from our presence before God. Together before him, let us seek his will for our society and through it, for the whole world. United together spiritually in the name of God, we glorify him, through our union, in our East, and we ask him to keep it always as fertile soil for adoring him and for the progress of the human person.

We ask God to help us in our mission with a view to consolidating love in our homelands and to building the civilisation of the future, the civilisation of love, in our Arab countries. We ask him to guide us all, Christians and Muslims, towards the best ways to fulfil his will for us and our countries.

For you, beloved brothers and children, wherever you are, we ask almighty God to fill you with his Spirit, to pour out on you his love and to fill you with his blessings, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

- + **Stephanos 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 Boutros Cardinal Sfeir**, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East for Maronites
- + **Raphael I Bidawid**, Patriarch of Babylon for Chaldeans
- + **Jean Pierre XVIII Kasparian**, Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics
- + **Michel Sabbah**, Patriarch of Jerusalem for Latins

COUNCIL OF EASTERN CATHOLIC PATRIARCHS

Christmas 1994