

Sixth Pastoral Letter

Together towards the Future

«Behold, I make all things new» (Revelation 21: 5)

Christmas 1999

INTRODUCTION

To our brethren the Bishops, priests, deacons and monks, to our sisters the nuns, and to all the faithful: we *bring you* “good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10-11)

Good News

1. With this Good News we begin our sixth Pastoral Letter that we are addressing to you after our ninth Congress, held at the Maronite Patriarchal headquarters in Bkerkeh, from 3 to 6 November, 1999, welcomed by H.B. Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir, and with the participation of all the Catholic Patriarchs of the East. Although we are perhaps used to hearing the words of Good News, they still retain a special meaning, not only because this Letter comes to you as Christmas draws near, but also because it appears on the eve of the Great Millennium celebrations for the two thousandth year after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and the mystery of his glorious Incarnation.

Jesus Christ is himself Good News, always the same and ever-new, down the centuries. We carry him in our hearts, in our own persons and in our communities, so that he may become a source of living water making our life fruitful and renewing our joy, our life and our commitment.

The Spirit of the Letter

2. The spirit of the Letter is inspired by the verse of Revelation incorporated into our title: “Behold, I make all things new.” (Revelation 21: 5) The Holy Spirit renews the face of the earth, (cf. Psalm 104: 30) the face of our Churches and each one of us. The one who is new, above all, is Jesus Christ himself. And the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16: 13) enlightens us, enabling us to grasp the mystery ever more closely, (cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 3) until we reach “*the fullness of Christ.*” (Ephesians 4: 13) Jesus Christ is God’s “*new man*” in the world of humankind. After two thousand years of our history, we are still meditating on this great mystery, finding in it “*things new and old,*” (Matthew 13: 52) so renewing our faith and our joy.¹ What is also new, is what our Churches are striving to live out in future, in the light of our faith in Jesus Christ, our past history and our current social context. What is new, in fact, is what the Spirit is awakening in our Churches: that desire to act together in order to prepare the future; whence the title of the Letter: “*Together towards the Future.*” In this spirit of renewal, we look to the

¹. St. Gregory of Nyssa says: “A new birth has occurred, a different life, a new kind of life, a transformation of our very nature ... It is the beginning of another creation: on this day God creates a new heaven and a new earth, as the Prophet says.” (Paschal Homily)

future with joy and hope, free from every fear, or discouragement, for the Lord tells us, *“Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”*(Matthew 14: 27)

The special nature of this Letter

3. We have adopted the habit, beloved brethren and children, of addressing to you, after every Congress, a Pastoral Letter on the subject of our meditations and studies. This Letter differs from preceding ones for several reasons: firstly, the Millennium permeates our consciousness and elicits all sorts of initiatives in our various Churches. We hope that all these initiatives will benefit the spiritual welfare of all our Churches, and through them all our societies. Secondly, the first Congress of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East has just taken place last May: this was a bold step, unique in the life of our Catholic Churches in the East. Thirdly, all the participants expressed the desire to translate the ideas shared into concrete, tangible realities: in that way thought becomes action and life in our Churches.

That all gives this Letter a special stamp, and turns it into an introduction to specific action for the Church in the coming decades of the third millennium. We are endeavouring in this Letter to gather the fruits of collaboration between our Catholic Churches, which has evidently been ongoing at more than one level over past decades, so as to transform it into a methodical, regular operation in our overall pastoral care. We invite you to take into consideration these practical directives, so that they become a guide for everyone of us in future and a stimulus for taking timely initiatives in every domain.

Contents and divisions of the Letter

4. All these circumstances make up the content of this Letter. We invite you to meditate on them with us, so that we may discover together the will of God for us in the important historic moment that we are living through, and so that we may be conformed to this will with generosity, upheld by a real spirit of faith, hope and charity.

In the first part, we shall meditate on the Millennium of the Year 2000, which should be a new starting point for our Church life, for our vocation and mission.

In the second part, we shall hark back to the First Congress of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East, dwelling on its different ecclesial meanings: we should like to strengthen them in our Churches and make of them a new way of thinking which will inspire us in future.

In the third part, we shall dwell on the lines of action defined by this Congress, to make them, for our Churches, into a plan of action which will have to be lived out progressively in different areas of our Church life.

FIRST CHAPTER
THE MILLENNIUM OF THE YEAR 2000

“The Word became flesh” (John 1: 14)

5. The Millennium of the year 2000 places us first of all before the great mystery of the divine Incarnation, announced by the angels to the shepherds, before the Good News which is Jesus the Saviour and Christ the Lord, (cf. Luke 2: 10-11) summarised by St. John, in the prologue of his Gospel, in these concise, wonderful words: “*The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1: 14) That is the mystery which Christians continue to reflect on down the centuries, with astonishment, praise and thanksgiving. Through the Incarnation, God took the initiative, came to meet man and invited him to return to his original, authentic image and to the fullness of his renewed humanity in the Lord Jesus Christ, “*perfect man and perfect God.*”² The Incarnate Word is the gift of God to humanity, a gift which exceeded all its hopes, all aspirations and all desires. In this mystery, God and man meet. It is the encounter of God’s eternity with man’s time.³ Through this mystery, God has sanctified time and made it, with all its circumstances and particularities, a space for our vocation, mission and witness. God through Christ has entered into our human history so as to make it into a history of salvation of which we are witnesses, for we live in history without forgetting eternity, and we live in eternity without forgetting human history. Through the Incarnation “time and eternity become two aspects of a single project of salvation, whose aim is to restore to man the beauty of God’s image.”⁴

And when we meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation, we understand the role which God has willed to reserve for the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, in the wonderful divine economy. She accepted this mystery: “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy word,*” (Luke 1: 38) and she was filled with joy: “*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.*” (Luke 1: 46) She made it the subject of her meditation: “*But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart,*” (Luke 2: 19) and she gave it to the world: “*And she brought forth her firstborn son.*” (Luke 2: 7) That is why she became the image of the Church, which is, in its turn, a Marian icon: for she welcomes the mystery of the Incarnation, rejoices in it, meditates on it and gives it to the world.

We invite you, beloved brothers and children, to continue with us the meditation on this dazzling mystery, throughout this millennial year, so that it may fill us with its beauty and renew us as individuals, as groups and as a Church.⁵

From the mystery of the Incarnation to the Church of the Incarnation

6. From the mystery of the Incarnation, and the mysteries organically linked to it, the Redemption and the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Church, the mystical body of Christ, was born. When we say the Church, we are thinking primarily of our Eastern

¹. Cf. the themes discussed in the First Congress of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, no.10

². Ibid. no.9

³. Ibid. no.10

⁴. Cf. Tertio Millennio Adveniente, John Paul II, especially nos. 2-8

Churches. The East is the place chosen by God for that unique divine epiphany, which means that we are the first affected by the celebration of the Millennium. From Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the Good News spread everywhere. First it reached all parts of Palestine, and thence other Eastern countries where the great centres of Christianity (Alexandria, Antioch, Edessa, Nisibeh and others, alongside Rome and Constantinople) arose. We also know the extent to which the mystery of the Incarnation became the centre of Christian reflection in the East: we recall, by way of example, the vehement disputes on the identity of Christ during the first Christian generations in the East. In this land our Churches took shape, with their various expressions of the same mystery, in Liturgy, theology, spirituality and every tradition. We all know too how Eastern Christians, down the centuries, tried to explain this mystery to their brethren and fellow-citizens who did not share their faith, as the Arab Christian heritage shows. In this regard, neither can we forget that the variety of expressions of the same mystery led unfortunately to the various divisions, from which we are still suffering today. Yes, our Churches are supremely Churches of the Incarnation. They bear the indelible mark of the ever-living Christ.

The mystery of the Incarnation and present and future demands

7. Our traditional way of understanding the mystery of the Incarnation is a foundational feature of our Eastern Churches, inviting us to continue meditating on this mystery in the current circumstances of this part of the world. In this meditation, we shall dwell on the following three aspects:

- a. **Ecumenical action:** In the past we quarrelled about the question of the identity of our Lord Jesus Christ and about the mystery of his Incarnation. But we also know that for some years now, Churches in general and Eastern Churches in particular have tried to engage in dialogue, with a view to bridging the gulf between them and together finding formulae that express the same faith in the person of Jesus Christ, formulae that unite them and invite them to meet each other. We hope that the Millennium will be for us in the East the opportunity to give a new thrust and a new impact to these ecumenical dialogues: may we thus discover, through the light of God and his Holy Spirit, that the various expressions of the mystery of Christ complement each other without contradiction, each expressing some aspect or other of the unfathomable mystery, that no description can limit and whose depth cannot be measured. That is why we shall avoid all rigidity, tension or sterile controversy, meditating in a spirit of humility and adoration on the mystery revealed by God in the fullness of time, *“for us and for our salvation.”* (Creed) This ecumenical effort remains one of the greatest challenges for the Church in the third millennium.
- b. **Churches of the Incarnation here and now:** We mentioned the great centres of Christianity born in the past in the East around the mystery of the Incarnation. These centres continue to nourish our Churches through the wealth of their thought and heritage. But we cannot remain prisoners of the past. These great Christian capitals of the past do not isolate us, but rather introduce us to the present-day capitals of our countries, Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Jerusalem, and others, where God calls us to live out the mystery of the Incarnation today. This invites us to integrate further into our societies, with all their present circumstances, in order to be witnesses of the mystery which still challenges us – us and every human being everywhere and in every age.
- c. **The new meanings of the mystery of the Incarnation:** The Incarnation is a mystery

whose depths we cannot measure and whose every meaning we can never exhaust. God calls us to discover, in the light of our present experience in the Middle East, new aspects and new dimensions of the old and new mystery in every period of our history. What are the aspects of this mystery which God calls upon us to explore further in this current period in order to respond to the demands of the present time, to its challenges and appeals? How are we called to be incarnate today according to Christ's example, and in what fields? We have already meditated with you on these questions in our second Pastoral Letter.⁶ We invite you to look at them again, on the occasion of the Millennium of the year 2000, as they now take on a new meaning and a special significance.

Call to prayer, meditation and action

8. You see then, beloved brothers and children, that the Millennium cannot be confined to outward celebrations. Rather, these celebrations have to be accompanied and supported by solid periods of silence, prayer, meditation and reflection. We invite you all, individuals and groups, to take spiritual initiatives for this purpose. On the threshold of the third millennium of our history, we are in a propitious period, during which the Holy Spirit wills to make manifest to us God's plan for us in the different domains of our Church life. The Millennium is a special gift granted us by God. It invites us to meditate on all its aspects and requirements, to absorb it and draw life from it. You know that we are living in a significant, even critical historical phase, which contains many challenges, difficulties, new features, appeals and hopes. Amidst all that, we are faced with choices to be made, decisions to be taken and actions suited to this historic moment. We urgently need to pause, to be silent, to think, to meditate, to pray and to go into our inner depths, as individuals and groups, so that God may inspire us with whatever is good for our Churches. Our model is that of the Virgin Mary who meditated on everything in her heart, (cf. Luke 2: 19) in order to absorb what was happening in and around her, to find the will of God for her and to fit into the divine plan of salvation. These moments of silence and recollection will enrich us and will give birth in our Churches to new strength for action in the service of the Kingdom.

Pastoral Letters

9. We have acquired the habit, since the foundation of our Council, of addressing to you Pastoral Letters⁷ on matters that we considered most significant. In these Letters we have tried, on the one hand, to be attentive to your needs, your concerns and your expectations, and, on the other, to listen to the voice of God in ourselves and in you. The goal of these Letters, as we said in our second Letter, is to open up with you "a door for reflection, exchange and consultation. If that happens, it cannot but arouse practical initiatives, thanks to which, little by little, we shall see take shape the nature of our presence and witness for the glory of God and the service of all people."⁸

⁶. Cf. The Christian Presence in the East, Witness and Mission, especially ch. III entitled "An incarnate presence," nos. 26-33

⁷. The first Letter in August 1991, after the First Congress; the second, *Christian Presence in the East, Witness and Mission*, Pascha 1992; the third, *Together before God for the welfare of the individual and of society: living together among Muslims and Christians*, Christmas 1994; the fourth, *The Mystery of the Church: I am the vine and ye are the branches* (John 5:15), Christmas 1996; the fifth, *That they all may be one: the ecumenical movement*, Pascha 1999.

⁸. Christian Presence in the East, Witness and Mission, no. 59

Unfortunately these Letters do not adequately reach all the faithful, due to lack of communication in our Churches. We invite you, on the occasion of the Millennium to look at them again; they could help us all to continue reflecting on these topics, in order to find our way towards the third millennium. We are sure that we shall find in them matters for reflection capable of illuminating our way towards greater integration and involvement.

Together towards the third millennium

10. So this is how, beloved brothers and children, we are heading towards the third millennium. We are sure that God is preparing a triumphal way for us. But the triumphal way can only be a way of the cross too, since our Churches are stamped with the mark of the glorious Resurrection. St. Paul says of his spiritual experience, that he forgets the road he has run, that he is going straight on, in order to attain the mark. (cf. Philippians 3: 13-14) This spiritual vitality experienced by St. Paul is an invitation for us all to absorb the past in order to prepare for the future. The spiritual vitality which in the past has enabled us to overcome various historical episodes will help us also to go forward together into the future with a lively faith, a burning hope and an ever-renewed love. Jesus Christ is the Lord of time, the universe and history: he is able, through the power of his Spirit, to make us capable of acting “to prepare the new spring of Christian life”⁹ in our countries, a spring that we can build together.

⁹. Tertio Millennio Adveniente, nos. 10 and 18

SECOND CHAPTER
THE FIRST CONGRESS OF THE CATHOLIC PATRIARCHS AND BISHOPS
IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
THE EVENT AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The event

11. Speaking of the future brings us to the second part of our Letter, which is the Congress of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East, held in Lebanon from 9 to 20 May 1999. It gathered all the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops, besides representatives of the Holy See, Churches of North Africa, Turkey and Iran, some Episcopal Conferences, sister Churches, lay-people, men and women, and representatives of social media, in all about 260 persons, coming from different countries. This Congress comes directly under the heading of preparatory initiatives for the year 2000, with the goal of “consolidating relations between Churches according to an old tradition linking Churches to one another through regional synods for study, consultation and collaboration.”¹⁰

That Congress was held under the sign of life, as it took as its slogan the Gospel verse: “*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*” (John 10: 10) The final communiqué recalls that motto affirming that the Father, in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, “has brought us abundant life and has called us to enjoy that life.” The communiqué adds that God has granted this life to our Churches throughout their history, by means of their various heritages from which they still draw nourishment, through the merit of “our martyrs, saints and fathers.” God continues to give that life to us today in our Churches, “so that new life should shine forth in them.”¹¹

The event and its context

12. This Congress was not an isolated event or marginal to life. It belongs rather in the framework of a general orientation in our region’s Catholic Churches, aimed at creating new links, new opportunities for meeting and collaboration. Besides the traditional structures of communion (such as each Church’s synod), other structures came into being gathering together Catholic Churches, such as the Assemblies of Patriarchs and Bishops in each country (Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, the Holy Land and others), and the Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs. The entry of the Catholic family into the Middle East Council of Churches created new links and new collaboration with all the sister-Churches and Christian communities in the East. Catholic Churches have taken several initiatives to the same effect, such as, for example, the Middle East Youth Congress, the Congress for Laity and other meetings convoked by the Church itself or by movements and various bodies. The Synod for Lebanon was in this context a significant initiative taken by the universal Church. The Congress of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East was as it were the crowning of all those initiatives, a continuance and a new stimulus for further initiatives in the future. We refer to all these forms, in order to thank God for everything that he

¹⁰. Final Communiqué, no. 1

¹¹. Ibid. nos. 2-3

does for his Church and to act together to enter upon this new way of working, become an active part of it and make it grow.

The event and its meaning

13. This Congress is a great sign in the progress of our Catholic Churches. For the first time since their birth, our Churches are meeting at this level. No doubt that this event and the context in which it took place is a sign of the times that merits our pausing awhile to interpret and discover the wealth of its meaning and importance and the future horizons which it opens up to us. The final communiqué pointed out some of its aspects: “This Congress has allowed us to live with joy a profound spiritual and ecclesial experience, in the context of our common prayers and ceremonies. It has informed us about the situation of our Churches, and thanks to the deliberations and recommendations we reached, we have envisaged the creation of organisations tasked with ensuring the continuance and co-ordination of the work.” “We thank God for gifts received during this congress, and for the encounters and moments passed together, according to the word of Scripture: ‘Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!’”(Psalm 133: 1)¹² In our turn we dwelt on, in our ninth Congress, those various aspects whose echoes are to be found in the final communiqué. In this Letter we would like to enumerate them and develop them, so that they remain a sign indicative of our Church life.

Conversion and repentance

14. The Final Communiqué of the Congress of Patriarchs and Bishops sees the Millennium to be for us “a propitious opportunity for sincere repentance which is translated into a return to God and mutual forgiveness, through a more profound rootedness in Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. Living through his Spirit, we take inspiration from him to renew ourselves and to witness to him.”¹³ Our Churches have often lived in the past along parallel rather than complementary roads. We indulged in a spirit of rivalry, suspicions and conflicting personal interests. Repentance is a change of direction, and we see that our Churches are walking along the road of unity, complementarity and collaboration, overcoming, in their mutual relations, the various difficulties whose deadly and destructive consequences we have all experienced. We cannot but discern in this new orientation a response to Christ’s call for unity “*that the world may believe,*” (cf. John 17: 11, 21-26) and to the repeated and insistent invitation of St. Paul to unity of the community of believers. (cf. e.g. Philippians 2: 2-5; 1 Corinthians 1: 10-16)

Mutual acquaintance

15. Our Churches often live alongside one another rather than living with one another. Catholic Churches were glad, during the Congress, of the mutual acquaintance they had acquired, thanks to the contributions concerning the different Churches in all regions of the Middle East. This acquaintance was a joyful surprise for many. It awakened in us more esteem and mutual respect. Members of Congress listened attentively and with interest to the contributions of some little Churches, possessing but limited manpower and material resources, of which we had little knowledge, such as the

¹². Final Communiqué, nos.1 and 19

¹³. *ibid.* no. 20

Churches of Iran, Turkey and North Africa. That helped us to get out of our isolationism and widen the borders of our concerns and the matter of our communion. We wish to reaffirm to them here our love and our friendship. We want to strive to increase communion and communication between us, in faith, action, concerns and hopes. We are resolved, according to our possibilities, to open the door to more missionary collaboration with the Churches of these regions.

Openness

16. Through this Congress, the Catholic Churches had no intention of turning in on themselves and thinking of their own interests. They wanted it to be an opportunity for opening up, in various ways, according to the tradition these Churches have had for years. This openness was evident on three complementary levels: the first, **ecumenical openness** to all sister Churches and to various ecclesial communities. This topic was one of the themes for reflection prepared for the Congress¹⁴ and was recalled in the Final Communiqué.¹⁵ The second is **openness to other religions** in a spirit of dialogue, “in order to cleanse our historic memory, and to pursue a constructive dialogue and sincere co-operation for building a society in which plurality and religious freedom are respected.”¹⁶ The third is **openness to societies** in which our Churches are living and solidarity with them, trying to be close to the poor and needy, and attentive to questions of peace, justice and human rights.¹⁷

The Catholic Churches have understood that the choice of ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue and solidarity with societies is an indispensable choice for the future. This choice guarantees the building of living, witnessing Churches and healthy societies, in which all the members are equal.

Communion

17. The profound ecclesial communion experienced by everyone was the outstanding feature and most important fruit of that Congress. You may remember, brothers and sisters, that our Pastoral Letter, “The Mystery of the Church,” laid particular emphasis upon the meaning of communion and the need for reflecting on it.¹⁸ In this Congress, this meaning became a visible event and a tangible fact, in which everyone touched with their finger this profound communion beyond the diversity of rites, structures and theological and spiritual tendencies. Members of Congress did not rest content with merely experiencing momentary communion: a real desire for concrete sharing arose in them for communion to become a permanent reality, collaboration and co-ordination in various domains. This communion, which is sharing, collaboration and co-ordination, does not require the annulment of the special character of each Church. It requires our special characteristics not to be an obstacle to our encounter and collaboration, but a help and mutual enrichment.

A sign of hope

18. The Churches and faithful, in our countries, are confronting very many

¹⁴. Themes for Reflection, nos. 17-31

¹⁵. Final Communiqué, no. 7b

¹⁶. Ibid. no.7c and Themes for Reflection, nos. 36-38

¹⁷. Ibid. nos. 15-17 and Themes for Reflection, nos. 36-38

¹⁸. Cf. The Mystery of the Church, nos. 17-22.

challenges and difficulties which lead some to pessimism and discouragement. This Congress was a great sign of hope, on the eve of the third millennium. That is why we wanted to reaffirm in the final communiqué of our ninth Congress that this meeting “spread calm, joy and hope among the faithful.”¹⁹

Many have discovered that our Churches, despite their limitations and difficulties, are living Churches. The Spirit acts in them, and thanks to him, they are capable of confronting changes, innovations and challenges. With this constant and renewed hope, wakened by the Spirit in us, we are walking calmly towards the third millennium, without giving way to fear and confusion. Rather, we place our trust in God who has promised to be with us always, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, unto the end of the world. (cf. Matthew 28: 20)

¹⁹. Cf. The Final Communiqué of the ninth Congress of Patriarchs

THIRD CHAPTER

PLAN OF ACTION FOR THE FUTURE

From hope to action

19. The Congress of Patriarchs and Bishops dealt with several topics. Some remarked that the quantity of topics put forward could be injurious to the depth. However, in this first Congress, the aim was to gain a comprehensive overview of the matters that concerned us, in the hope of revisiting them gradually in future and going into them further. With this overview, there was also, and this is very significant, the desire expressed by everyone of going into action, in order to answer the pressing question: “What then? What are the real results?” We again referred to this desire in our final Communiqué: “Only, the determined long-term pursuit of the *proposals* of the Congress guarantees to transform them into palpable reality in the life of our Churches.” So it is up to the Churches to reflect on the *proposals* and “translate them into real life in future.”²⁰ It is sure that this desire to move into action is a sign that we must understand and which requires an answer. Only thus, will our Churches be a comfortable and welcoming haven for their sons and daughters, and for all those who turn to them.

The recommendations of the Congress

20. This desire was revealed in concrete fashion in the 84 *proposals* or recommendations, covering various domains of ecclesial and pastoral life.²¹ Certainly they set out a very extensive programme. In the third part of our Letter, we refer to them because we are convinced of their importance, and because we have decided to commit ourselves to them in future. It is sure that we shall not be able to do everything at once, because these directives issued require long-term action. But we shall put all our efforts, in the coming decades of the third millennium, into applying them progressively, on a concrete, secure and well-studied basis.

We summarise, in the following paragraphs, the six chapters of these *proposals*, trying to collect them according to content, to make them into a basis for action of our Council in future, and for the creation of structures and procedures in Church, from top to bottom. The Congress is on the one hand an arrival point and on the other a departure point. We are all responsible for ensuring its application and continuity, according to a common method of functioning and programming, in order to act according to the proposed lines of action, in a progressive and constant fashion.

Firstly: Identity of our Eastern Catholic Churches and co-ordination between them

21. Our Catholic Churches in this region are Eastern in their roots and their apostolic, patristic, liturgical and spiritual heritage. On the one hand this heritage is held in common with the Orthodox Churches and, on the other, our Catholic Churches are in communion with the universal Roman Catholic Church. They are bearers, with the

²⁰. Idem.

²¹. These proposals have been published in a separate booklet under the title “Proposals of the First Congress of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East.”

diversity of their traditions and expressions of faith, of living, evangelical Christian values. Faithfulness to our rich and varied patrimonies is imperative. They are the requisite basis of any renewal. But structures must be created which guarantee continuity and co-operation between our Eastern Churches.

- 1. Emphasise our Eastern heritage through theological and spiritual educational institutes and pastoral activities at different levels, and deepen knowledge of common patristic theological thought, and of Arab Christian heritage, and place them at the service of our Churches in their current context.**
- 2. Set up an executive structure which would be dependent on the Council of Catholic Patriarchs and in relation with the Synods of different Catholic Churches. Also form a Union of Councils of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops currently in Middle Eastern countries, and a joint committee to co-ordinate pastoral work in the countries where the different Churches are to be found.**
- 3. Enable the Patriarchs' authority to extend to all their faithful, wherever they may be.**²²

Secondly: Church life

22. On the threshold of the third millennium, our Churches are invited to follow a renewed spiritual road and to witness to Christ in a world in perpetual change, necessitating a new evangelisation. The Congress emphasised the new evangelisation which relies on the evangelical witness of individuals and various Church institutions. Their work to nourish faith through deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ aims to promote the faith of believers of inherited confessional adherence and superficial practice, to a conscious, responsible and lively faith.

- 4. For a new evangelisation: establish an extended catechetical programme, animating faith amidst current changes; bring clergy, monks, nuns, as well as lay-people to put this programme into action, in conformity with the demands of the present time and the primary needs of the faithful, having recourse to modern methodologies and means of action.**
- 5. Religious education: sustain and develop the Catholic Catechism Committee, dependent on the Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs.**
- 6. Holy Scripture: sustain the Catholic Biblical League existing in the Middle East, and strengthen every initiative aimed at distributing the Bible and study and meditation on it. Work towards a unified translation for liturgical use.**
- 7. Liturgy: renew liturgical life in such a way that it becomes a real celebration of divine salvation, through faithfulness to the heritage and through listening to the demands of modern times, and sustain this renewal through timely means (publications or other) which facilitate active, lively and fruitful participation by the faithful. Strive to prepare specialists in liturgy and liturgical animators in eparchies and parishes. In this area, the Creed and the Our Father should also be unified in Catholic Churches.**
- 8. Missionary spirit: encourage and increase missionary vocations, and listen to the needs of Churches which are asking for our help (North Africa, for example.)**

²². Cf. Proposals 1-7.

9. Pastoral action: take care of pastoral action, insisting on theological training, using suitable modern means, using language understood by our time and society. Create a common pastoral committee in order to co-ordinate efforts of various parishes existing in the same region.²³

Thirdly: Apostolic pastoral involvement

23. All the Church's children, bishops, priests, monks, nuns and lay-people, are called to contribute to build up the Church of Christ, each according to the specific nature of his or her vocation and mission. God distributes the charisms, in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to all categories of the faithful. If each person used his gift for common edification, under the responsibility of the Bishops, we would reach a common and effectual apostolic and pastoral action, for the service of the Kingdom.

10. The relations between the religious Congregations and the Bishops and the relations among the Congregations themselves: find the suitable structure for collaboration between Bishops and religious Congregations, and enable the Congregations to participate, in some way, in the activities and structures of the Councils of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of each country. Encourage co-ordination among religious Unions at the level of the Middle East, in order to exchange experiences, distribute powers, activate pastoral action and respond, as much as possible, to the appeals of countries in need, in the Arab world and elsewhere.

11. Lay-people: activate the role of the laity in our Churches in a serious and real way; create, after a serious, deep preparation, the councils mentioned in the codes of canons of the Church.

12. Families: dedicate particular care to families; ensure continuous and sustained action with them, on condition of the creation of an institute at the level of the Middle East for pastoral studies especially to do with families; create in each eparchy or parish an organism which is concerned with families and preparation for marriage.

13. Women: develop pastoral care for women, so that they may take their place and role in family, society and Church and, on the basis of their specific mission, activate their participation in Church and their role in centres of responsibility and decision; strengthen the role of consecrated women in pastoral, apostolic, administrative and Church action.

14. Young people: take care of young people, inviting them to participate in Church life and encourage them to become involved in various institutions and movements for lay-people; organise meetings for young people at the level of the Middle East.

15. Emigration: create a special organism to take care of the faithful and to limit their emigration; follow the emigrants to help them keep their identity of faith and Church, in collaboration and co-ordination with host Churches.²⁴

Fourthly: dialogue

²³. Cf. Proposals 5- 27

²⁴. Cf. Proposals, 28-45.

24. The choice of dialogue is a choice made by our Churches; we have spoken about it at length in our second Pastoral Letter.²⁵ Despite the many difficulties and challenges, we are determined to follow this way of dialogue, since it is important for our Churches, for all the Christians in the East, and for all our societies. We have already travelled down a long road in the various forms of dialogue: we must pursue the work begun and continue to take concrete, practical steps which sustain and make it over time into an ever more proven reality.

16. Ecumenical involvement: insist on prayer for Christian unity, on the ecumenical dimension in the training of clergy, monks, nuns and lay-people; sustain the dialogue of faith through the dialogue of charity in all fields, and especially in the field of service and common witness; specify the characteristics of Eastern theology and encourage liturgical studies and research with the sister Orthodox Churches; take timely, concrete ecumenical steps (for example, unification of the date of Pascha or others).

17. Relations with other religions: deepen the sincere rapport with Muslim fellow-citizens on evangelical grounds, persevere in Islamic-Christian dialogue, and give this dialogue a place in training in seminaries and theological institutes. Similarly, develop the dialogue with Judaism in the present circumstances, while taking into consideration the demands of justice, peace, reconciliation and common religious denominators.

18. Participation in citizenship: deepen our membership in our contemporary societies, encourage involvement in public life in every area, demand that Christians be able to participate in a complete way in the life of their societies.²⁶

Fifthly: Social service, education and social means of communication

25. Social service (charitable service as welfare and development) is an aspect of the Church's mission: the Church carries it out for the service of humanity in the various circumstances of real, daily life. This social service comprises the various domains of education, teaching, thought, culture, social means of communication and others. The Churches would like to remain attentive to all those areas of our societies' life in order to contribute, through the collaboration of all their members, to building up a healthy, stable and evolved society.

19. Social service: remain attentive to the social teaching of the Church, studying and applying it; exchange experiences, ensure co-ordination between the Middle East's Churches in this field and try to avoid the difficulties proper to that service; take practical initiatives in all fields and train the faithful for this service and its demands.

20. Education and teaching: contribute to the national effort in the field of education and teaching; give particular attention to the poor in this area; develop our academic and educational institutions in such a way that they can respond to the demands of folk in our societies.

21. Thought and culture: create an association of Christian thinkers, intellectuals and artists in the Middle East; encourage Christians to get involved in

²⁵. Cf. Christian presence, Witness and Mission, ch. V, nos. 39-44 and ch. VI, nos. 45- 52.

²⁶. Cf. Proposals, 46-61

intellectual, cultural and scientific life of their countries; take a constant interest in culture, given its importance in the life of humanity; develop a theological way of thinking that speaks to people of our region and create to this end a league of theologians of the Middle East.

- 22. Means of communication: take care of means of communication because of their growing importance in today's world and in our countries; follow and support Christian media under all their aspects in our countries; educate consciences to put to good use different means of communication, and create specialist bodies to act in this domain.²⁷**

Sixthly: Human rights

26. Human rights occupy a prime place in today's world. They are based, from the Christian point of view, on the fact that man, individually or collectively, is created in the image of God. We are constantly invited to strengthen everything that can make that image grow and prevent everything that can efface or deform it.

- 23. Human rights: call to respect human life in all its phases; defend the rights of human beings whoever they may be and wherever they may be, especially prisoners, captives and children. Set up and activate commissions of Justice and Peace in the Middle East and create suitable contexts for co-ordination and collaboration between them, so that they can be an instrument helping the Patriarchs and Bishops to adopt expedient positions in this field.**

²⁷. Cf. Proposals, nos. 53-77.

CONCLUSION

Joy and hope

27. We began our Letter with the joy of the Good News, which, through the operation of the Holy Spirit who makes all things new, becomes in us a source of living water, making our life fruitful, renewing it and directing it into the paths of the present and the future. We can only, in concluding this letter, remember the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel with which he concludes his book, the vision of the abundant waters springing from the temple and making the whole earth fruitful. (Ezekiel 47) Christ, the Jubilee of whose Incarnation we are celebrating, is the temple whence the abundant waters spring, becoming in us fruitfulness, hope and life. Let us then walk confidently together towards the third millennium “strong in faith, joyful in hope, in the fellowship of love,”²⁸ with the blessing of Almighty God, One and Triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

- + *Stephanos II Ghattas*, Patriarch of Alexandria for the Coptic Catholics
- + *Maximos V Hakim*, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem, for the Melkite Greek Catholics
- + *Nasrallah Cardinal Boutros Sfeir*, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East for the Maronites
- + *Ignace Moussa Daoud I*, Patriarch of Antioch for the Syrian Catholics
- + *Raphael I Bidawid*, Patriarch of Babylon for the Chaldeans
- + *Nerses Pedros XIX*, Patriarch of Cilicia for the Armenian Catholics
- + *Michel Sabbah*, Patriarch of Jerusalem for the Latins

Council of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs

Christmas, 25 December 1999

²⁸. Final communiqué of the Congress of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East, no. 20