

SEVENTH Pastoral Letter

PASTORAL LETTER TO PRIESTS

“As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” (John 20:21)

Feast of the Dormition, 15 August 2004

INTRODUCTION

To our beloved sons and brothers, the priests,

“Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1 Timothy 1: 2) We greet you with the salutation of the Apostle Paul to his disciple, Timothy, feeling with him that we always have need of the “mercy and peace of God,” just as we always have need of renewal in the understanding of our faith and priesthood, which binds us in a peculiar way to “God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.” We renew our faith, so as to become ever more ready to accept our priesthood, and assume our mission in our society.

The Rabweh Meeting

We held our twelfth annual meeting at Rabweh (Lebanon), from 27 to 31 October 2002, welcomed by our brother H.B. Gregorios III, Patriarch of Antioch, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem for the Melkite Greek Catholics. We studied together the nature of the priesthood, its holiness and everything to do with our priests, confided to our care and dear to our heart. Following on from that meeting, we address this letter to you, dear priests, to express to all celibate and married clergy, our esteem and gratitude for your efforts to make the Word and Love of God present in our Churches and societies.

Object of the letter

“We thank God at every moment for you,” dear priests, who are working in the vineyard of the Lord in all our eparchies in the Middle East, in the countries of the Gulf and in the distant countries of emigration. “We...remember... without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.” (1Thessalonians 1: 2-3) We know the trials, solitude and difficulties that you encounter in your mission and we thank God at the same time for your perseverance and faithfulness, as well as for the esteem and love that your faithful have for you.

We are addressing this letter to you today so as to meditate together on the meaning of our priesthood and our sacerdotal responsibilities. We are experiencing nowadays a period of faith and reawakening in our Churches, which are trying to renew themselves through synods and ecclesial assemblies, such as the Synod for Lebanon, the Assembly of the Chaldean Church in Iraq, that of the Church of Alexandria for the Coptic Catholics, the Maronite Patriarchal Synod, the Synod of Catholic Churches of the Holy Land, the Patriarchal Assembly of the Armenian Catholic Church and the Eparchial

Assembly of Damascus of the Melkite Greek Catholics.

We are also experiencing at this time in our East days full of difficulties and challenges: bloody conflicts in the Holy Land and Iraq, and a difficult road for all countries towards freedom and real democracy born of our traditions and culture. We are also confronting globalisation which encompasses everything with its positive and negative effects. Our societies are evolving and being transformed from within, as are people's attitudes as believers and citizens. All that has an impact on our mission, in our effort and battle to strengthen faith and contribute to educating our faithful, as believers and citizens, involved in the life of their parish, city, village and whole country.

Our societies are in search of stability and leaders who can serve with loyalty and disinterestedness. Today's society needs persons who offer their life for it. That is the place of the priest and the meaning of his consecration to God in society: to offer his life for others, to be a disinterested servant, administering the good things of the Spirit, and contributing as much as possible to the good management and distribution of the goods of the earth, according to the requirements of justice and the dignity of every human person.

Society needs someone who can link it to God, faced as it is with many forces that tend to distance man from God, either by totally excluding God from life, or by creating confusion among souls through the proliferation of foreign sects, or by trivialising moral values and ethics in general. There are also those who transform the relationship with God into rivalry and dispute between believers of the various denominations and religions. Society needs men who connect it to God, despite all challenges and opposing forces, and who collaborate with each believer in God, for the edification of a new human society.

Church Documents

The Vatican II Council devoted two texts to priests:

- 1) Decree on the ministry and life of priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*;
- 2) Decree on priestly training, *Optatam totius*.

But it also speaks of priests in many other documents, in particular in:

- 1) Dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*;
- 2) Decree on the pastoral office of bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*;
- 3) Constitution on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*.

Since then, the Holy Father and the Roman Dicasteries have published several other documents on the training, life and ministry of priests. The main ones are:

- 1) H.H. John Paul II, Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 25 March 1992;
- 2) Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory on the ministry and life of priests*, 31 January 1994;
- 3) *The priest, pastor and leader of the parish community*, Instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy, 4 August 2002.

All those texts contain many theological and spiritual riches and we encourage you, dear brother priests, to turn to them regularly for your permanent training and reflection. As you will see, we are drawing abundant inspiration from them and referring to them frequently in this letter.

Outline of the letter

In the first chapter, we shall try to reflect together on the priest, his identity and his call to holiness. Through priesthood, he is configured to Christ in a special way. On the day of his ordination, an ontological transformation is wrought in him. With Christ, he offers the sacrifice and accompanies the people in their earthly progress as their leader. In the second chapter, we speak of the human qualities requisite for this task. In the third chapter, we speak of the main areas of the priest's pastoral activity. And finally in the fourth chapter, we shall be talking about the permanent formation of priests according to the different ages and stages of their life.

CHAPTER I

The priest: Identity and Call to Holiness

The divine plan of salvation (or divine economy of salvation)

The identity of the priest can be defined on the basis of the divine will for salvation: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."* (John 3: 16) In the framework of that divine plan, the Word of God became incarnate and became the high priest of the new humanity, redeemed by his blood: *"Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God."* (Hebrews 10: 5-7) It is in that divine plan (or economy) that the priest is called to participate through his priestly ordination.

The first feature of the priest's identity is the link with eternity, with the eternal will of God to save humanity. The second feature of his identity consists in his acceptance of and obedience to the Father's will. With Mary and like her, he too says, *"Behold thy servant, be it unto me according to thy word."* (cf. Luke 1: 38) And like Christ, who *"humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."* (cf. Philippians 2: 6-9), the priest obeys the will of God. He too is obedient unto death, and to the acceptance of all sorts of deaths to which his priestly life is exposed.

Having accepted responding to the call of God, Jesus sends us, priests and bishops, as the Father sent him: *"As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."* (John 20: 21) And the order given to the Apostles to perpetuate the eucharistic sacrifice is given by them to us too: *"This do in remembrance of me."* (Luke 22: 19; cf. Matthew 26: 26-28, Mark 14: 22-24) Christ sent the Apostles, and after them, thanks to the apostolic succession, he continues sending bishops who, in their turn, call priests to participate in their priesthood and be their collaborators.

Through their sacerdotal ordination, an ontological transformation is wrought in the priest, as formerly in the Apostles, a transformation wrought by the direct words of Christ, who invests him with his powers as intermediary between God and people, and gives him power to remit sins and offer the propitiatory sacrifice. The priest henceforth does what Christ did and exercises the same powers. *"Priestly identity ... is a fruit of the sacramental action of the Holy Spirit and completely oriented to the service of that work*

in the Church as it unfolds in history. ... He is the servant of Christ. Through Him, with Him, and in Him, the priest becomes the servant of mankind. His very being, ontologically assimilated to Christ, constitutes the foundation of being ordained for the service of the community. Total commitment to Christ ... places the priest at the service of all.... The very life and work of the priest - his consecrated person and his ministry - are inseparable theological realities.¹”

We can say then that the identity of priests is defined by several relationships: the first with God’s plan of salvation, the second with the Church through the intermediary of the bishops whose collaborators they have been constituted, the third with the world to which they have been sent to continue the work of Redemption. On the one hand, there is their link with God and obedience to his will, and on the other, their commitment to humanity, for whom they are bearers of God’s grace, in the framework of the Church’s action through the ordination conferred on them by the bishop.

The priest, man of sacrifice and prayer

The priesthood of Christ is mediation and intercession with God. His mediation was a prayer to the point of giving his life and dying on the cross. It was at the same time sacrifice, forgiveness and reconciliation, and he “*was heard in that he feared.*” (Hebrews 5: 7) “*For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, made higher than the heavens.*” (Hebrews 7: 26) So it is with the priest who offers sacrifice, prays and intercedes for people. His main prayer is the eucharistic sacrifice or the Divine Liturgy. And the priest who offers the sacrifice must transform all the areas of his private and public life into sacrifice, that is, he must free himself from everything which is the “old man,” from all the forces of evil in him, so as to be able to intercede, correct sinners and reconcile them with God.

That is why the priest must find special moments during the day, in order to place himself in the presence of God. In silence and prayer, he will bring before God his work, his whole parish, with all the grace that God has granted him and the concerns which it brings. Before God, he will renew his acceptance of his vocation, and ask for strength to continue to carry out his mission. Only these moments of prayer and silence before God will make his mission possible and will fill him with *joie de vivre* amidst multiple difficulties. It is, in fact, painful to see the priest become a frustrated, isolated man, closed in upon himself, depriving himself of life, when he is sent to give life and joy of living to others. Knowing that the faithful have need of him must continually rekindle courage and enthusiasm in the priest, whatever the difficulties that he may encounter from those with whom he has to do, be they his superiors or his parishioners.

Prayer, and especially liturgical prayer with the Church and in its name, is a continual presence before God and an essential component of the nature of priesthood. The priest’s mission consists in making God present among people and he fulfils that mission if his very life is a permanent presence before God. He is sacrificial intercessor and leader to God. Therefore he must be, at every moment of his life, in every action, present before God. “*Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?*” (Luke 2: 49) said Jesus one day to his parents. That is what the priest should always say. He is the person of the sacraments which give grace to people. He deals every day with holy things. He is God’s man. That is indeed what he is. That is what God wishes. That is what people want him to be, and it is thus that they think of him.

¹. Pastor and leader, 5

The priest, people's companion along life's ways

The priest accompanies people along their earthly way towards God. He wished to bring "*many sons unto glory*," says the Epistle to the Hebrews. (Hebrews 2: 10) There too is a meaning of the priest's mission: to lead folk to God's glory, poor and rich, weak and strong, and the oppressed. He leads them all to the glory of God in *this* life, so that each one becomes aware of his own greatness and dignity, before God and before other people, thanks to the love that God has for each.

The heart and foundation of the priest's mission is the love of God for mankind: "*God so loved the world...*" (John 3: 16) This mission consists of leading people towards that love, so that they become aware of it and respond to it, and so that it becomes the principle of stability and tranquillity in their daily life amidst the many troubles that they must confront. God loved the world: that is why he sent his Son to save it. That mystery is rooted in the events of our private and public life; it is our guide and in its light we perceive the meaning of what is happening in our contemporary history. The priest is the one who recalls that presence and divine activity. He teaches and calms. He gives peace and stability, through the power of the Holy Spirit and its transforming and sanctifying activity.

Call to holiness

"All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.²" The affirmation of the Council addressed to all those who believe in Christ applies most specially to priests. "They are called not only because they have been baptized, but also and specifically because they are priests.³" Jesus says, "*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.*" (Matthew 5: 48) This perfection is obligatory for priests in a special way. When they received ordination, they were consecrated to God in a new way to be living instruments of Christ, the Eternal Priest, and empowered to continue down the ages that wonderful work by which, in his sovereign power, he has restored the whole human community.⁴

Jesus Christ is the goal and model that the priest tries to imitate. That is the criterion of all revision and every examination of conscience in the priest's life. On that basis, the priest criticises himself and defines the value of all his activities and projects. "The Christological dimension, like the Trinitarian dimension, springs directly from the sacrament which ontologically configures the priest to Christ the Priest, Master, Sanctifier and Pastor of his People.⁵"

That is why there are basic requirements in priestly life. Chief among these values and requirements is the life of personal union with Jesus Christ. "*I am the vine*," he always says to us, "*ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.*" (John 15: 5) The conciliar text on priests continues by indicating another important attitude of the spiritual life of the priest: seeking Jesus. "In a certain sense, the spiritual life of the person who is preparing for the priesthood is dominated by this search: by it and by the 'finding' of the Master, to follow him, to be in communion with him...This 'seeking' will also have to continue throughout the priest's life and

². Lumen Gentium, 40

³. Pastores dabo vobis, 19

⁴. Pastores dabo vobis, 20

⁵. Directory, 6

ministry.⁶”

So the priest’s life is a continuous effort towards perfection. Hence it is quite natural for his efforts and numerous activities to be imbued with this permanent desire for perfection. If the activities are not the fruit of this desire and union, he will be broken off like the dry vine-branch.

Sources of the priest’s spiritual life

1. The Word of God

The priest, in his progress towards holiness, feeds on the word of God, the Eucharist and the other sacraments that are sources of grace, especially the sacrament of reconciliation.

The word of God is a primary source of the priest’s spiritual life. “Since they are ministers of God’s word, each day they read and hear the word of God, which it is their task to teach others. If at the same time they are ready to receive the word themselves they will grow daily into more perfect followers of the Lord.⁷” The priest is above all the servant of the word of God; he is consecrated and sent to announce the Gospel of the Kingdom to all. He must then create in himself a deep and intimate relationship with the word of God, not only on the level of language and exegesis – necessary though that is – but also by welcoming the word of God with a docile, obedient and prayerful heart. So it will penetrate all his ideas and feelings and create in him a new mind and new thought, the “*mind of the Lord*.”(cf. 1 Corinthians 2: 16)

The priest will only be a perfect disciple of the Lord, if he remains in his word. He must be the first to believe in it, convinced that it is the Lord who opens hearts and that the efficacy of his activity comes from the power of God and not from himself. The priest “is not the master of the word, but its servant. He is not the sole possessor of the word; in its regard he is in debt to the People of God.⁸”

That is why it is a word to be meditated upon every day, studied, explored in depth, understood, assimilated, digested, applied to life and proclaimed. It is impossible to manage that without a personal, spiritual life that allows one to taste the word of God in calmness and silence. Silence in the priest’s life is spirituality in itself. Silence means moments of presence before God, of adoration, abandonment to his will, supplication and intercession, with an examination of conscience which brings the priest to return to the essential and to the foundation of his priestly life, with the help of the Holy Spirit who will “teach all things, and bring all things to ... remembrance, whatsoever [Jesus has] said.” (cf. John 14: 26)

In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Orientale Lumen*, Pope John Paul II says: “The starting point for the monk [priest] is the Word of God, a Word who calls, who invites, who personally summons, as happened to the Apostles. When a person is touched by the Word obedience is born, that is, the listening which changes life. Every day the monk [priest] is nourished by the bread of the Word. Deprived of it, he is as though dead and has nothing left to communicate to his brothers and sisters because the Word is Christ, to whom the monk [priest] is called to be conformed.⁹”

⁶. Pastores dabo vobis, 46

⁷. Presbyterorum ordinis, 13

⁸. Pastores dabo vobis, 26

⁹. Orientale Lumen, 10

2. The Eucharist

The Eucharist is the real centre of the priest's spiritual life, its foundation and peak. The priest lives by the power of the Eucharist and for it. For when he celebrates the Divine Liturgy and offers the sacrifice every day, he learns how to become himself a holy sacrifice before God. "The other sacraments, as well as with every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are tied together with the Eucharist and are directed toward it. The most blessed Eucharist contains the entire spiritual boon of the Church, that is, Christ himself.... In this light, the Eucharist shows itself as the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel.¹⁰" It is the pinnacle and source of Christian prayer, sacraments and liturgical acts: hence its importance and essential role in the life of the priest.

That is why the priest will make every effort to acquire the virtues inspired by the sacrament of the Eucharist: namely, thanksgiving, the disposition to offer himself with the eucharistic offering, love which comes from the sacrament itself as a sign of unity and communion, and, finally the desire for meditation and adoration of Jesus Christ, really present in the offering.¹¹ The priest thus becomes the model of the believing community, through his eucharistic piety and, as far as possible for him, his assiduousness in contemplation before the Lord present in the Eucharist. A special moment of adoration before the divine power could occur during the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, which will constitute, during the day, a real prolongation of the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.¹²

One should also recall here the communal dimension of the Eucharist and the importance of animating the liturgy and enabling the assembly to participate, for the liturgy is the sacrament of communion and of unity in the life of the Christian community. For it is in intimate communion with the human community which has been entrusted to him that the priest feeds on the bread of life, which makes his life more united to God and to his parish community, and, beyond the parish, to the Body of Christ throughout the whole world. This bread come down from heaven will make his activity more fruitful in grace and holiness for himself and for the people whom he is charged with making holy.

Holiness in the priest's life is not separated from the life of the community entrusted to him, but rather a common way forward for the pastor with his faithful. The pastor consecrates himself and the assembly of faithful supports him in this longing for holiness.

3. Sacrament of penance

The sacrament of penance follows upon the Eucharist and emanates from it. The priest has been made its minister, so as to be a sign and witness among people of God's welcoming and forgiving compassion. That is why he begins by practising it himself. For, "like any good faithful, the priest also needs to confess his own sins and weaknesses. He is the first to realise that the practice of this sacrament reinforces his faith and charity toward God and his brothers. In order to effectively reveal the beauty of Penance, it is essential that the minister of the sacrament offer a personal testimony

¹⁰. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 5

¹¹. Cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, 48

¹². *Directory*, 50

preceding the other faithful in living the experience of pardon.¹³”

“The ministers of sacramental grace are intimately united to Christ our Saviour and Pastor through the fruitful reception of the sacraments, especially sacramental Penance, in which, prepared by the daily examination of conscience, the necessary conversion of heart and love for the Father of Mercy is greatly deepened.¹⁴” Pope John Paul II insists on it in the post-synodal exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*: “I would like to make special mention of the sacrament of penance, of which priests are the ministers, but ought also to be its beneficiaries, becoming themselves witnesses of God's mercy toward sinners. Once again, I would like to set forth what I wrote in the exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*: ‘The priest's spiritual and pastoral life, like that of his brothers and sisters, lay and religious, depends, for its quality and fervour, on the frequent and conscientious personal practice of the sacrament of penance. The priest's celebration of the Eucharist and administration of the other sacraments, his pastoral zeal, his relationship with the faithful, his communion with his brother priests, his collaboration with his bishop, his life of prayer - in a word, the whole of his priestly existence, suffers an inexorable decline if by negligence or for some other reason he fails to receive the sacrament of penance at regular intervals and in a spirit of genuine faith and devotion. If a priest were no longer to go to confession or properly confess his sins, his priestly being and his priestly action would feel its effects very soon, and this would also be noticed by the community of which he was the pastor.’¹⁵”

In conclusion, in order for the priest fully to live according to his identity, he must have an intense spiritual life. That is why, in the life of every priest, spiritual training constitutes the “heart” which unifies and enlivens his being and priestly life. “They should be accustomed to adhere to Him as friends, in an intimate companionship, their whole life through. They should so live His paschal mystery themselves that they can initiate into it the flock committed to them.¹⁶”

CHAPTER II

The Priest as Human Being

Identity and need for training

“For every high priest [is] taken from among men.” (Hebrews 5: 1) The grace of God will fill him and transform him. But, as man, he will remain “in all things...like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God.” (Hebrews 2: 17) As a human being, with his strengths and weaknesses, he will remain the instrument of grace, while at the same time as priest he will be working to grow through God’s grace and his pre-ordination training, and afterwards, through the ongoing training to which he will submit. The Holy Spirit will give him the necessary power and work in him the necessary transformation, if he himself makes every effort to transform his soul, making it ready for God to work in him.

The apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* says that, without adequate human

¹³. Directory, 53

¹⁴. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 18

¹⁵. *Pastores dabo vobis*, 26

¹⁶. *Optatam totius*, 8

training, all the priestly training becomes baseless, separated from its requisite foundation: “The priest, who is called to be a ‘living image’ of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church, should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible, the human perfection which shines forth in the incarnate Son of God.” So he will try to acquire “a series of human qualities, not only out of proper and due growth and realisation of self, but also with a view to the ministry. These qualities are needed for (priests) to be balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities.” Hence, there is a need for them to be educated “to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgment and behaviour.¹⁷” For dealing with parishioners and other people, there are qualities rightly appreciated by them, because they invite them to co-operate and build together, such as “goodness of heart, sincerity, strength and constancy of mind, zealous pursuit of justice, affability, and others. The Apostle Paul commends them saying, ‘Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.’ (Philippians 4: 8)¹⁸” It is on that solid basis that our priestly life will be built.

Self-knowledge

One of the primary human virtues is the art of dealing with oneself and others. The priest will know himself and accept himself as a gift from God and his love. He is what he is, with his strengths and weaknesses, called to a lifelong inner struggle, to develop his qualities and free himself from the weakness which hampers his priestly ministry. The priest must also know himself to know how to deal with the faithful to whom he is sent. He will find among them, and among all those whom he will meet along the ways of his ministry, people who are less favoured by life than he is, and others who surpass him, in terms of knowledge and virtue. He will find among them friends and others less well disposed towards him. With them, he will remain humble, while recognizing both the gifts which God has granted him and the limitations of his own personality. With them, he will remain faithful to the genuineness of his vocation, thus preserving his dignity and the respect he owes others.

Relations between priests and bishop

The priest’s relationship with the bishop is very important for his everyday life, both material and intellectual, spiritual and pastoral. It is based on the sacrament of the priesthood itself: “All priests, in union with bishops, so share in one and the same priesthood and ministry of Christ that the very unity of their consecration and mission requires their hierarchical communion with the order of bishops.¹⁹” That relationship comprises everything peculiar to the priest’s mission and presupposes human relations founded on respect and love, despite any difference or contrast of personal standpoints in proclaiming the message, since it is the same sacrifice, the same Eucharist and the same intercessory prayer for humanity that they celebrate every morning. It is in a relationship of prayer, and in an attitude of presence before God, that they can carry the message of salvation and of “life in abundance” to all those who are entrusted to them.

¹⁷. Pastores dabo vobis, 43

¹⁸. Presbyterorum ordinis, 3

¹⁹. Presbyterorum ordinis, 7

This relationship means that bishops “should regard priests as their brothers and friends, and be concerned as far as they are able for their material and especially for their spiritual well-being [...] exercise the greatest care in the continual formation of their priests. They should gladly listen to their priests, indeed consult them and engage in dialogue with them in those matters which concern the necessities of pastoral work.” The document adds: “Priests, never losing sight of the fullness of the priesthood which the bishops enjoy, must respect in them the authority of Christ, the Supreme Shepherd. They must therefore stand by their bishops in sincere charity and obedience.²⁰”

That unity between bishop and priest extends to become a unity among priests themselves. The demand of pastoral charity requires the priest to remain, in a particular and specific way, in a personal relationship with the presbyterate under the supervision of the bishop.²¹ For, what establishes that relationship of profound unity between priests is precisely the bond of brotherhood stemming from their having received the sacrament of ordination itself. “Older priests, therefore, should receive younger priests as true brothers and help them in their first undertakings and priestly duties. The older ones should likewise endeavour to understand the mentality of younger priests, even though it be different from their own, and follow their projects with good will. By the same token, young priests should respect the age and experience of their seniors; they should seek their advice and willingly cooperate with them in everything that pertains to the care of souls.²²”

Common life

Common priestly life is also a means of brotherly collaboration and renewal in the priestly life. That common life is a good experience: we recommend its practice wherever possible, especially in cities where the number of parishes is considerable. If the demands of pastoral work make it difficult to have a common place of residence for priests, let those who live in the same city make every effort to meet at certain times during the day, such as for meals and prayers, so that such moments can be times of brotherly solidarity and spiritual renewal for them. In general, priests’ personal lives must become ever more open to priestly brotherhood, establishing hospitality, encounter and prayer among them. The presbytery should become a place where brother priests are welcome at any time. This welcoming receptivity is in itself a support for the priest in his solitude and a protection against the dangers of isolation and the search for compensation that it can provoke. “Besides the advantage which comes to the apostolate and its activities, this common life of priests offers to all, to fellow priests and lay faithful alike, a shining example of charity and unity.²³”

Emotional development

Emotional maturity is an important and decisive thing in training for true, responsible love. This maturity presupposes being conscious of and attentive to the importance of love and the fundamental place that it occupies in people’s lives. It is a fact that human beings cannot live without love, even if contemporary society is opening up nowadays to the winds of pervasive globalisation and is inclined to more permissiveness. That is why the priest must acquire, amidst that society, a healthy emotional education, based

²⁰. Presbyterorum ordinis, 7

²¹. Pastores dabo vobis, 23

²². Presbyterorum ordinis, 8

²³. Pastores dabo vobis, 81

on an all-embracing, balanced Christian outlook on everything to do with the body and Christian ethical behaviour, so as to be able himself to remain faithful to his consecration to God and to the love that longs for the absolute, and so as to be able to guide the faithful in the Christian life which considers the body, with all its material and spiritual demands, as being bound up with the very holiness of God. On that topic, Saint Paul tells us: *“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”* (1 Corinthians 6: 19-20)

The priest attains an emotional balance when he is able to create unity between the rhythm of his life as a consecrated person and his innate desire for loving and being loved. That is shown in his ability to have healthy priestly friendships. This is possible if the priest sets himself a clear and sublime priestly objective, directing towards it all the feelings and affections he has within him. That goal can only be sublime and absolute love, for only that love can satisfy the great energy of human love, when it is directed towards that supreme and absolute good.

Life of priestly celibacy

These remarks prepare the way for the love and appreciation of consecrated chastity, which is a vocation to a life built upon absolute love. Education for responsible love is indispensable for every person called, like the priest, to consecrated celibacy, that is to say, to give his person, all his love and all his attention to Jesus Christ and the Church, responding freely to their call with a conscious will. Thus, consecrated chastity, for the one who has taken such a decision, is not simply a law of the Church, but a choice of living and personal love for Jesus Christ and the Church, with all that that implies of total, complete sacrifice of self.

This presupposes a true self-knowledge, a real evaluation of the emotional life and a clear awareness of the demands of consecrated chastity as a gift of self for God and for the brethren. It is important, in any case, that the choice be clear, frank and lived with joy for the Kingdom, that is to say, for the highest good. This requires deep prayer and constant presence before God and real humility, together with great trust in the grace of God, for whom nothing is impossible. Priestly friendship has a role to play there, especially when a priest is undergoing difficulties in that regard. Charity and brotherly common life are the best support for him to enable him to confront difficulties.

“Insofar as perfect continence is thought by many men to be impossible in our times, to that extent priests should all the more humbly and steadfastly pray with the Church for that grace of fidelity, which is never denied those who seek it,²⁴” especially if they make the necessary effort to lead a chaste life and to transform it into a great love.

Vocation of married priests

We are also speaking to our priests who have made the choice of serving the Lord in marriage. Thereby, they have decided to take on the responsibility of a human family at the same time as that of the great family of God represented by the parish and all those faithful entrusted to them. On the one hand, they witness to what marriage entails in terms of values and holiness willed by God, and on the other, they too aspire to perfect

²⁴. Presbyterorum ordinis, 16

their love and sacrifice after the example of Christ's love, which reaches its summit and perfection through consecration and total gift of self for those he has loved. (cf. John 13: 1) God has sent them also to be witnesses, in marriage and in priesthood, of that supreme and infinite love which alone can save humanity. We express our gratitude to them too for the service that they undertake and for the grace whose instruments they are and which they dispense to the faithful who are confided to them. We invite all priests, celibate and married, to collaborate, to exchange their experiences and to support each other in a brotherly way in their apostolate.

Money

Another of the priest's human virtues is the relationship which he has with and to money. This relationship to money, like every other relationship in the priest's life, depends on the degree of his freedom. On the day when he went in for ordination, he put his freedom in God's hands and thereby freed himself from every earthly tie, the better to sanctify the earth and all its goods, and so that he and all the men and women whom he would serve, would become better equipped to use them in such a way as to make them a source of life in abundance for everyone. Money, in the life of the priest, as in every human life, can be a means or an obstacle to doing good. That is why Christ warned us saying: the believer cannot serve two masters: "*God and Mammon.*" (Matthew 6: 24)

Money, for the priest, is a means and not an end, and above all, it must not become a master in his life. The priest needs money to lead a suitable life and to fulfil the duty of hospitality required by his priestly life, to help the poor and to face up to the various demands of the apostolate in general. In any case, money must not become a condition *sine qua non*, without which pastoral work is not carried out and mission is not fulfilled. We fulfil our mission, in every circumstance, and in every circumstance we proclaim the Word of God, whether the requisite money for that be available or not, recalling that Jesus had nowhere "*to lay his head.*" (cf. Matthew 8: 20)

Even if daily bread be lacking, we shall continue to fulfil our mission, as Jesus did, in total poverty, without any building or material structure. With a view to facilitate this priestly readiness to serve, the diocese must, as far as possible, provide the priest with stability in his material life, so that he does not spend his time in search of his "daily bread," since he must provide spiritual bread, and sometimes material too, for everyone, and so that material poverty does not become a cause of increased solitude and the alteration of his life's values.

"It is true that '*the labourer is worthy of his hire*' (Luke 10: 7) and that '*the Lord hath ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel*' (1 Corinthians 9: 14), but it is no less true that this right of the apostle can in no way be confused with attempts of any kind to condition service to the Gospel and the Church upon the advantages and interests which can derive from it. Poverty alone ensures that the priest remains available to be sent wherever his work will be most useful and needed,²⁵" even at the cost of great personal sacrifice on the priest's part. That is the fundamental readiness to serve which brings the apostle to set off [on the roads of the apostolate], without provision or trammel, with the will of the Lord who sent him as his sole support. (cf. Mark 6: 8)

²⁵. Pastores dabō vobis, 30

The topic of the relationship of the priest to money is part of the education of the priest in responsible and conscious freedom. If he is spending his personal money, he must, when making use of it, have regard to the living standard of the poor in his parish, and, consequently, spend it at all levels (accommodation, means of transport, holidays, etc.) with a spirit of moderation, which enables him to maintain his dignity and keep him in the affection of the poorest folk. This considerate behaviour extends also to public money, the Church's, the parish's, or that belonging to various projects run by him and under his responsibility. Besides the spiritual attitude with regard to money, the priest must accept positively the principle of book-keeping according to the rules; so he will commit himself to respect the principles of official accountancy in the administration of money, whether he does it himself or gets help from specialists.

Ecclesiastical goods will always be used "for the carrying out of divine worship, for the procuring of honest sustenance for the clergy,²⁶ and for the exercise of the works of the holy apostolate or works of charity, especially in behalf of the needy." The offerings of the people must be habitually used either for the service of the church, or for the poor.²⁷ "Thus they are not to seek ecclesiastical office or the benefits of it for the increase of their own family wealth. Therefore, in no way placing their heart in treasures, they should avoid all greediness and carefully abstain from every appearance of business."²⁸

"The example of Christ should lead the priest to conform himself to him, with an interior detachment as to the goods and riches of this world. The Lord teaches us that the true goodness is God and that true richness is reaching eternal life... The priest, although not having assumed poverty as a public promise, must lead a simple life and avoid anything which could have an air of vanity."²⁹

The Priest as Pastor

The bases of pastoral care

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) That is the model presented to us, and the criterion of good pastoral care: the shepherd gives his life for his sheep. Feeding the sheep, caring for their needs, their sufferings and their hopes, is the priority and most important thing in the shepherd's life. The duty of feeding them imposes on priests the need to know their faithful: *"I am the good shepherd and know my sheep and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father."* (John 10: 14-15) It is a knowledge which transcends the human level and is rooted in the mutual knowledge between the Son and the Father, *"as the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father,"* (John 10: 15), with all the depth and holiness contained in those words; a knowledge like that with which God knows people,

²⁶. "Clerics have the right to a suitable sustenance and to receive a just remuneration for carrying out the office or function committed to them; in the case of married clerics, the sustenance of their families, unless this has been otherwise sufficiently provided, is to be taken into account." CCEC, canon 390.1 cf. also canon 1021.2 about social security and medical assistance.

²⁷. "All offerings except those treated in canons 715-717 which are received on the occasion of performing the pastoral function by the pastor and other clergy attached to the parish are to be put into the parish account unless it is obvious that such would be contrary to the will of the donor in the case of voluntary offerings; the eparchial bishop is competent, after consulting the presbyteral council, to establish regulations which provide for the allocation of these offerings as well as those which provide for the remuneration of the pastor and other parish clergy according to the norm of can. 390." (ibid. canon 291)

²⁸. Presbyterorum ordinis, 17

²⁹. Directory, 67

a sublime love then, like the love of God himself for the people we serve. That knowledge requires the priest to go out permanently from himself and his own human needs for material stability, to which every priest and spiritual missionary is inclined, when he starts being too concerned about his own interests, house and everything that he needs as a human being.

It should also be remembered here that “pastoral charity faces the danger, today especially, of being emptied of its meaning through so-called ‘functionalism’. It is not rare, in fact, to perceive, even in some priests, the influence of an erroneous mentality which reduces the ministerial priesthood to strictly functional aspects... Such a reductive conception of the identity of the ministry of the priest risks pushing their lives towards an emptiness, an emptiness which often comes to be filled by lifestyles not consonant with their very ministry.”³⁰

The areas of pastoral activity

The priest’s activities are multiple and varied: whether it be parish service, studies, teaching (in seminaries, universities, schools), or administrative activities and other kinds of work in different sectors of society. In all his work, the priest is a pastor and teacher who enables Jesus Christ to be known; he is his witness in what he says and does. For the principal responsibility to which the priest is sent is parish ministry, the ministry of faith in the souls of the faithful. No priest then may consider himself dispensed from pastoral ministry, whatever his mission or ministry in the Church or in society.

Catechism

The priest is the servant of the Word. He is the catechist in the parish in general and in schools in particular, in the parish’s Catholic schools, as well as in every other school whether private or public. “The priest is the primary and immediate auxiliary of the bishop in this task: he is the teacher and faith educator in his parish. He fulfils his role first and foremost through the fact that he is himself the teacher of catechesis, and the organiser of teaching of the word in his parish, in enabling to help him lay teachers whom he trains and accompanies in their mission, in enabling his parishioners to become aware of their mission of teaching (*awareness-raising*), and by collaborating with them in the organisation of catechesis at parish level (*collaboration*). Catechesis remains a fundamental part of the life and pastoral mission of the priest. This requires of him a really active and concrete effort and commitment.”³¹

The priest must stimulate the spirit of real timely responsibility for religious teaching among members of institutes of consecrated life, just as he must especially ensure basic religious and spiritual training, and the permanent formation of catechists. He himself must be the catechist of catechists. He will take care that catechism should take pride of place in the Christian formation of the family and of apostolic movements, so that it can reach all categories of the faithful.

Visiting families

Family visiting in the parish is a fundamental task in the pastoral care of our parishes in the East. The priest is the father, and his visit is wished for and considered as a blessing. It allows the priest to meet all members of the family, and so all the members of the

³⁰. Directory, 44

³¹. General pastoral plan, 23

parish. The priest's visit to the family is the only way to meet those who do not come to church and those who are far from it, and there are many such. Various apostolic activities enable us to reach many of our sons and daughters, but family visiting enables us to reach them all. That is why we recommend keeping up this habit and praiseworthy tradition in the life of our parishes.

Preparation and celebration of the sacraments

Since Vatican II, preparation for the sacraments, especially for marriage, has become a tradition followed in very many of our parishes. Several have also started inviting sponsors and parents to take part in sessions or meetings for preparation for baptism, for solemn communion (and for confirmation in Latin rite parishes.) Thus the grace granted to the children will be an opportunity to revive the faith of the parents and god-parents too. A number of Churches, including our own, have composed books especially for that purpose. And, if the sacrament is not to be a mere social custom, but a step of faith, it has to be surrounded by pastoral action that helps its meaning to be understood both in the life of the family concerned and in that of the local Christian community, the parish.³²

Priests must celebrate the various sacraments in a suitable way, so that the celebration expresses the meaning of the sacrament and the grace that it bestows. That is true above all for the sacrament of the Eucharist, but it also applies to the other sacraments. Thus, the faithful who receive the sacraments will gather abundant fruit from them, and the priest himself will also find in them renewal for his personal calling and holiness and his relations as minister with the community confided to him.

Working with lay-people

The apostolate of lay-people is founded on baptism and confirmation which make each believer in Jesus Christ a full member of the community of believers, participating in its life and apostolate, collaborating and remaining linked with all categories of the one people of God. Vatican II drew the attention of the Church and its faithful to the mission of lay-people and its importance in the Church, and it is today one of the great signs of the Church's life and an indicator of the Holy Spirit's work in it.

The faithful lay-people's identity and genuine dignity are revealed to be at the heart of the Church's mystery, and on the basis of that identity we can define their vocation and mission in the world and in the Church. "As members, they share a common dignity from their rebirth in Christ; they have the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection. They possess in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church's mission. But among the lay faithful this one baptismal dignity takes on *a manner of life which sets a person apart, without, however, bringing about a separation* from the ministerial priesthood or from men and women religious."³³

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation, "*A new hope for Lebanon*," takes up this theme and asks for "the faithful to be able to participate actively and responsibly in ecclesial life, in the various structures and pastoral councils, to the extent of their skills. They should become involved in the life of the Church at all levels, but they often wait

³². General pastoral plan, p. 44

³³. *Christifideles laici*, 15

for it to appeal to them and show them evidence of its trust.³⁴”

“Priests must sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity and the part proper to them in the mission of the Church. They must willingly listen to the laity, consider their wants in a fraternal spirit, and recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity... Likewise, they should confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the Church... Finally priests have been placed in the midst of the laity to lead them to the unity of charity.³⁵” “In the awareness of the profound communion which binds him to the lay faithful and to the religious, the priest will make every effort ‘to awaken and deepen co-responsibility in the one common mission of salvation, with a prompt and heartfelt esteem for all the charismata and tasks which the Spirit gives believers for the building up of the Church.’³⁶”

The parish council

“The Church is a mystery of communion, the theological and trinitarian communion of each faithful person with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, which is spread and poured out into the fellowship of believers among themselves, gathering them into a single people.³⁷” The priest is required to act with the parish which he serves, with the aim of establishing a lively fellowship after the example of the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is why he has recourse to consultation, discussion, evaluation and work in a team spirit. The parish council is one of the consultation structures recommended by Vatican II. Even before that, it was present in our Eastern Churches, under various forms, in some of our parishes. Many parishes have recently made the effort to create theirs, while others have not so far been able to comply, because of difficulties inherent in the context of the parish, or because of the prevalent concept of the parish and of the role that the lay-person is supposed to fulfil. That is why it is up to the parish priest to educate the faithful in common pastoral work, and in the role of the lay-person, and to educate himself too to work as a Church with all the faithful entrusted to him.

The Parish Council of each parish is “the organisation which reunites around the pastor all sectors of the parish, must be consolidated and extended. Prominence should be given to its role, spirituality, way of acting, bases and statutes, so as to ensure ecclesial fellowship in each parish, with due regard to experience already acquired and to the social and ecclesial reality that we experience in our parishes.³⁸”

Looking after the poor, sick and abandoned

The love of the poor is evident in the Gospel through the life of Jesus Christ. We find in the Book of Acts of the Apostles, (cf. Acts 2: 42-47; 4: 32-35; 5: 12-15) that the first Christian community led a life of effective sharing of material goods, so that “*neither was there among them that lacked.*” (Acts 4: 34) In the history of the Church, hermits and monasteries chose the life of poverty and self-denial, so as to highlight the sublimity of spiritual life and to invite believers to self-denial and then to sharing their earthly goods. Preference for the poor, highlighted by Vatican II, takes inspiration from and stems from that spirit of the Church in every age and place, and reminds the

³⁴. A new hope for Lebanon, 45

³⁵. Presbyterorum ordinis, 9

³⁶. Directory, 30

³⁷. General pastoral plan, p. 67

³⁸. General pastoral plan, 71

children of the Church and of our time of the necessity of paying attention to all the poor in our human societies and of the need to share with them according to the demands of love and justice.

The pastor's love must go to all the faithful, both poor and rich. "Although they have obligations toward all men, priests have a special obligation to the poor and weak entrusted to them."³⁹ "Friend of those most in need, he will reserve his most refined pastoral charity for these, with a preferential option for all poverty, old and new, tragically present in our world, always remembering that the first misery from which man must be liberated is that of sin, the root of all evil."⁴⁰

The Church is not content with pitying the poor and suffering. It makes every effort to work for such a person to be aware of his place and effective role in the Church, despite his poverty, illness or affliction. The sufferer fills up in his flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for his Body, which is the Church. (cf. Colossians 1: 24) "In his activity in society, the Christian must take inspiration from the word of God which invites him to adopt straight away the Lord's concern for the orphans and the poor, who 'have put on the face of Christ' and who are God's beloved."⁴¹

Attention to the poor person, offering him the requisite spiritual and material help, is among the essential duties of the priest. But it is also the mission of the whole parish. Indeed, it is the whole Christian community which is responsible for putting into effect the commandment of love, with respect to every brother or sister in humanity, and especially in the parish. Love goes beyond the idea of alms-giving, to be a fraternal collaboration and common growth in the good things of the Spirit and of the world. Thus it is that the parish becomes a single family, God's family, in which each person supports his fellow by his love and attention to all his difficulties and all his cares.

Ecumenical pastoral work

The parish priest should feel that he is at the service of every human person in the city or village which is entrusted to his responsibility; his love and interest must be addressed to every person, no matter what that person's religion, denomination, or social or political adherence. For, even if his mission is limited to a single parish, the apostle is sent by the love of God to all those whom he meets during the course of his day or activity. His parish does not set him apart from his neighbourhood, but rather sends him into every social setting, there to be an instrument of the grace of God for everyone.

Times of ecumenical openness and dialogue began some decades ago throughout the whole Church, as is also the case among our own Churches, and many began offering heartfelt prayers, asking God to grant us the grace of unity among those who believe in his holy name. Vatican II threw open the door to dialogue with everyone, with brothers and sisters of all Churches and with believers of different religions. In the same way, Churches started to move, feeling the need to talk to each other, and thus began the dialogue at world and local level.

The ecumenical reality in the Middle East is represented today by the Middle East Council of Churches which has brought Churches and their pastors together in this region. This rapprochement has not yet reached the level of all parishes, nor filled

³⁹. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 6

⁴⁰. *Directory*, 67

⁴¹. *A new hope for Lebanon*, 101

everyone's heart. That perfect unity willed by Christ will be the fruit of our mutual love, love which enables us to recognize that every believer is our brother and that consequently, we should look after him and work for his welfare.

Therefore we expect and hope to see that ecumenical love take root and grow in every parish among the various pastors. In fact we are all working for the glory of God, not for that of men or of human constructs and settings. We are living in a pluralist society which requires our unity, so that we may be able to be genuine witnesses to Christ the Redeemer and Giver of life to all, remembering what he said in his last prayer, "*that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*" (John 17: 21)

The post-synodal exhortation, "*A new hope for Lebanon*" tells us, "No minister can ignore the other ministers who work in the same field, whether they belong to his patriarchal Church or to another.⁴²" They must consider themselves as responsible for awakening a real ecumenical spirit among their faithful, by inviting them to prayer and action to bring about love among Christians of different Churches, whilst waiting for God to grant us the gift of complete unity. The same document says also on the subject of ecumenical activity, "Their ecumenical openness and their capacity for collaboration and dialogue, without confusion and in respect for persons, will help the faithful in their turn set up warm relations with their brethren, thus furthering the cause of unity between Churches.⁴³" It is clear that, in our desire for unity, we do not then live out some form of confusion or anarchy among Churches, but each Church clearly retains its own aspect, identity and faithful. Rather everyone's soul will open up to love of the other Church, esteem for its heritage, its mission, love and service to its faithful.

The link between the priesthood and ecumenism is obvious. It is one of the primary goals for which the priest is working, as he continues the mission of Jesus Christ and repeats his prayer for unity. Offering the sacrifice and intercession for people is our first responsibility, but it is also our responsibility to confess that the sacrifice is one and that we ought to move towards one day being able to offer it together. Besides, the one and only commandment that Jesus gave us is: "*Love one another, as I have loved you.*" (John 13: 34) As priests and as Christians, we shall account for our mutual love, though we may differ and relations between us may be sometimes difficult.

That is why we are inviting our priests to become aware of their responsibility in the field of ecumenism, though they may encounter difficult realities or rejection. Love, like genuine and sincere faith, knows neither weariness nor despair. All we do is for God, and every brother is really our brother; so we embark upon our relationship with him with the logic of love rather than rivalry. So we shall be an example for our faithful, for them too to pray sincerely for longed-for unity, and fill their hearts with the love which is the royal road to it. Ecumenism is an arduous way, which sometimes demands acceptance of failure and humility, and requires an evangelical patience under every affliction.

Interfaith dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is also one of the main areas of our pastoral activity, because it constitutes part of our reality which encourages us to live with other religions. So it is then one of the requirements of our reality and society, which we cannot ignore. We cannot live alongside our brethren without loving them with the love that God has for

⁴². A new hope for Lebanon, 59

⁴³. A new hope for Lebanon, 62

them. We and our Muslim fellow citizens are children of the same society and the same homeland. We have to build it together. Sometimes, we shall not be allowed to build. Despite that we shall not retreat, we shall not despair and we shall never shirk the service that we ought to give, just as every citizen should in his own country. During the generations and centuries that have gone by while we have been living together, besides many positive things, prejudices and negative attitudes have set in on both sides, generation after generation. We have to extricate ourselves from all that is past to attain a new reality.

In the past, there was collaboration and mutual respect, and there was also hostility. At certain points, there were sometimes confrontations. Today a new state of affairs must arise in the Arab world, from both Muslims and Christians together. We are shaping a single reality which we have to build together. We have an identical destiny, and we have to build it together. That is God's will; let us obey him and fulfil it. Equality between citizens is still non-existent. It is a wish towards which we are moving, however long the road. It is normal for it to be long. What has taken root over centuries will not be changed in a few years. It demands generations of collaboration, minds and hearts illumined by love and service.

The apostolic exhortation, "*A new hope for Lebanon*" says, "Dialogue must be pursued on several levels. First, in daily life, in work and in life in the city, individuals and families learn to appreciate each other.... Religious dialogue cannot be neglected. It should help everyone look with respect, discern and recognize the greatness of his brethren's spiritual search, a search which leads to pursuing the path of the divine will and which allows spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values to make headway both among individuals and in collective life."⁴⁴

As for our priests in the Holy Land, inter-religious dialogue begins for them too with the dialogue with Judaism, which is also a religious and human reality that they must consider in the atmosphere of bloody conflict in which they and their faithful live. In their dialogue they must look at each human being as such, whatever his national or religious adherence. Within that framework, their dialogue will take place with love, realism and a spirit of Christian responsibility which encourages Christians to contribute to building up their society. The conflict does not stop intensifying and taking on inhumane aspects. Despite that, in this confrontation too, we say to all our faithful who find themselves sorely tried: let us neither weaken nor despair. Our love will persevere until the reality of conflict and oppression imposed on them gives way to a new reality made up of peace, freedom, equality of rights and duties, mutual recognition and respect. Besides, we know that our faithful who live in the Holy Land, land of Redemption and reconciliation, land in which the barriers of hatred and death must disappear, are carrying their cross in their daily tribulations whilst carrying in their hearts the joy of the Resurrection and the power of love.

Political stability and freedom

Public affairs have to do with our own responsibility and not merely that of others. We are not alien onlookers in the society in which we are living. We are an integral part of it and we are charged with fulfilling every service and obligation. That is why human rights, political stability, justice and peace also constitute part of the field of pastoral work. It is also part of the life of every missionary pastor to be a peace-maker. "*Blessed*

⁴⁴. *A new hope for Lebanon*, 91

are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God,” says Jesus. If they are to be peace-makers, they must be “pure in heart so as to see God, merciful to obtain mercy and meek to inherit the earth.” (cf. Matthew 5: 1-12)

The whole region of the Middle East is going through difficult times and there are numerous victims. There are prisons, tortures; religion is being turned into extremism. That is all a matter of concern to us and it is important for us to integrate it into our love, as we work for justice and the dignity of each person and of society in general. We are bringing up our children who are called to this mission, we encourage them and teach them to fulfil it with constancy and persistence, while accepting the necessary sacrifices, and to fear only God their creator and not the injustices or oppression of men.

All that is part of our prayer and concern too. It may be that as priests, we are not asked to act directly in this domain, but we know that some of our faithful are involved in the search for justice, freedom and democracy, and we cannot remain indifferent. Everything which touches human beings concerns us, and makes up an integral part of our pastoral work.

The love of the pastor for Christ and the parish

“This same pastoral charity is the dynamic inner principle capable of unifying the many different activities of the priest. In virtue of this pastoral charity the essential and permanent demand for unity between the priest's interior life and all his external actions and the obligations of the ministry can be properly fulfilled... Only by directing every moment and every one of his acts toward the fundamental choice to ‘give his life for the flock’ can the priest guarantee this unity which is vital and indispensable for his harmony and spiritual balance. Priests attain to the unity of their lives by uniting themselves with Christ whose food was to fulfil the will of him who sent him to do his work.” (John 4: 34)⁴⁵

CHAPTER IV Permanent Formation

Reviving the grace of priesthood

“Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.” (2 Timothy 1: 6) *“Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.”* (1 Timothy 4: 14-16) In fact, the priest has received a gift and a mission. He is responsible for his own sanctification and that of others. He is God’s *consecrated one* in his parish and society. He carries on the work of Redemption begun by Jesus Christ. To that end he received the requisite training in the seminary, until he reached the day when he received ordination at the hands of his bishop. In order to keep the grace received and renew his acceptance of his priesthood, lest the latter becomes a habit, a daily routine void of its wealth of meaning, the priest always has need of ongoing training, whether arranged by himself or organised by the bishops as a permanent structure in all our eparchies.

⁴⁵. Pastores dabo vobis, 23

Ongoing formation has the aim of reviving the grace of God in us and renewing our human knowledge in all fields, humane, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral. It is not “a repetition of the formation acquired in the seminary, simply reviewed or expanded with new and practical suggestions. Ongoing formation involves relatively new content and especially methods; it develops as a harmonious and vital process, which - rooted in the formation received in the seminary - calls for adaptations, updating and modifications, but without sharp breaks in continuity. On the other hand, long-term preparation for ongoing formation should take place in the major seminary, where encouragement needs to be given to future priests to look forward to it, seeing its necessity, its advantages and the spirit in which it should be undertaken, and appropriate conditions for its realization need to be ensured.⁴⁶”

Faithfulness to the priesthood and to pastoral service

On the day of his ordination the priest expressed his readiness to serve God and people. Ongoing formation is one of the most important ways of assisting in that. It is faithfulness both to the priesthood and to pastoral love. The community which is in his care needs all the grace God gives him. His formation and his aptitude to live his ministry are not a personal matter, but a commitment with regard to the faithful. He must grow so as to help the faithful grow in their faith. He must pray better and love better so as to help those for whom he is responsible to pray better and love better. “Consequently there is a *‘follow me’* (John 21: 17-19) which accompanies the apostle's whole life and mission. It is a *‘follow me’* in line with the call and demand of faithfulness unto death. (cf. John 21: 22)” Permanent formation allows him that. “Thus permanent formation is a requirement of the priest's own faithfulness to his ministry, to his very being. It is love for Jesus Christ and fidelity to oneself. But it is also an act of love for the People of God, at whose service the priest is placed.... The heart and form of the priest's ongoing formation is pastoral charity... All this constitutes the object of ongoing formation, understood as a conscious and free decision to live out the dynamism of pastoral charity and of the Holy Spirit who is its first source and constant nourishment.⁴⁷”

Times of on-going formation

The various priestly meetings throughout the year, the regular monthly meetings, the occasional study days, the times of fellowship among priests themselves to reflect and pray to together, and to take stock together, are various forms of ongoing training for priests. All those meetings help the permanent renewal of the priest, as do “the meetings of the bishop with his presbyterate, whether they be liturgical ..., or pastoral and educational, related to pastoral activity or to the study of specific theological problems.⁴⁸” It is important to make this initiative into an institution and to dedicate a certain time to it every year, in addition to the annual spiritual retreat. A week or more should be devoted to it, and speakers invited with expertise in various areas.

“Notwithstanding pastoral urgency, and precisely to face up to these problems adequately, priests must be provided with time, as much as reasonably possible, so as to facilitate longer periods spent with the Lord Jesus, thus recovering strength and courage

⁴⁶. Pastores dabo vobis, 71.

⁴⁷. Pastores dabo vobis, 70

⁴⁸. Pastores dabo vobis, 80

to continue the road to holiness.⁴⁹” These periods are dedicated to prayer, study and to renewal of our human and theological knowledge.

Permanent formation for all ages

“Permanent or ongoing formation... should always be a part of the priest's life. In every phase and condition of his life, at every level of responsibility he has in the Church, he is undergoing formation.⁵⁰” It is just as necessary for young priests, as for middle-aged and older ones. “The elderly priests or those advanced in years who merit special consideration, enter in the vital circle of ongoing... They can benefit appropriately from special periods and workshops to go deeper into the contemplative sense of the priest's life... they can share with others their own experiences, and encourage, welcome, listen and convey serenity to them. They can also be available whenever they are asked to ‘become effective teachers and mentors of other priests.’⁵¹”

“Also those priests who because of the burden of work or illness find themselves in a condition of physical weakness or moral fatigue can be helped by an on, going formation which will encourage them to keep up their service to the Church in a calm and sustained fashion, and not to isolate themselves either from the community or from the presbyterate.... Ongoing formation will help such priests to keep alive the conviction - which they themselves have inculcated in the faithful - that they continue to be active members for the building up of the Church, especially by virtue of their union with the suffering Christ and with so many other brothers and sisters in the Church who are sharing in the Lord's passion.⁵²”

Spiritual direction

Spiritual direction too is a means which “contributes in no small way to the ongoing formation of the priests. It is a well - tried means and has lost none of its value. It ensures spiritual formation. It fosters and maintains faithfulness and generosity in the carrying out of the priestly ministry. As Pope Paul VI wrote before his election to the pontificate: ‘Spiritual direction has a wonderful purpose. It retains its beneficial effect at all stages of life, when in the light and affection of a devout and prudent counsel one asks for a check on one’s own right intention and for support in the generous fulfilment of one's own duties. It is a very delicate but immensely valuable psychological means. It is an educational and psychological art calling for deep responsibility in the one who practises it. Whereas for the one who receives it, it is a spiritual act of humility and trust.’⁵³” It is a practice that should stay with us well beyond the time of training in the seminary. For the priest cannot live out his priesthood for himself alone. He has need of a spiritual father who accompanies him and who carries with him the “burden and heat of the day,” while at the same time bringing him the necessary light and showing him understanding full of tenderness in the difficult moments of his life. The spiritual director will normally be also the confessor, another necessity in the life of the priest, so that he remains persevering and faithful in his priesthood.

Pope John Paul II speaks in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Orientale Lumen*” of the *spiritual father* who accompanies the monk in his journey. What appears as a necessity

⁴⁹. Directory, 83

⁵⁰. Pastores dabo vobis, 76

⁵¹. Directory, 95

⁵². Pastores dabo vobis, 77

⁵³. Pastores dabo vobis, 81

for the monk in monastic life, is also for the parish priest and for every other diocesan priest in his priestly life, “A monk's way is not generally marked by personal effort alone. He turns to a spiritual father to whom he abandoned himself with filial trust, in the certainty that God's tender and demanding fatherhood is manifested in him.... In this quest, the East in particular teaches that there are brothers and sisters to whom the Spirit has granted the gift of spiritual guidance. They are precious points of reference, for they see things with the loving gaze with which God looks at us... Our world desperately needs such spiritual guides.⁵⁴” We priests too, have great need of spiritual fathers, objects of our trust, who guide us and support us by their love and their advice.

Bishop’s and priest’s responsibility

“The Bishop must observe a very special diligence in all that refers to the permanent formation of his priests... [He will take particular care] to guard and promote the true nature of their ongoing formation, to educate their consciences regarding its necessity and importance, and finally, to plan the necessary structure and appropriate persons to carry it out.”⁵⁵ “It is the priest himself who is the person primarily responsible for ongoing formation. In reality, this duty of being faithful to the gift of God and to the dynamism of daily conversion falls upon each priest. Such a duty is derived from the fact that no one can take the place of the priest in watching over himself. (cf. 1 Timothy 4: 16)... He, therefore, should participate actively in the formative encounters, making his own contribution based on his capacities and specific talents and will strive to furnish himself with books and magazines with sound doctrine and of proven utility, for his spiritual life and the fruitful development of his ministry.⁵⁶”

We should insist here on the importance of personal reading and its direct relationship with the mission of the priest and with the preparation of his sermons and his accompaniment of apostolic movements. So he ceaselessly renews himself, and shows the respect due to his parish, whilst providing them with suitable nourishment, far from any boring repetition. An hour of pastoral work or meeting with his faithful must be preceded by hours of prayer, reading and serious preparation. The priest, a man of prayer, is also a man of knowledge and hence of ongoing study and reading, so that he may become ever more fit to enable God’s grace to reach his parishioners.

“Fight the good fight of faith. Follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.” (1 Timothy 6: 12a, 11b) In fact the priest must accept that his priestly life may be a life of continuous struggle. Every day he renews his acceptance of the gift of God, and every day he grows the various gifts which God has given him, so as to proclaim at every time and place the Good News of God’s salvation and love for all.

⁵⁴. Orientale Lumen, 13

⁵⁵. Directory, 89

⁵⁶. Directory, 87

CONCLUSION

Priestly vocations

Jesus said one day to his apostles, *“Behold, I say unto you: Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.”* (John 4: 35) This saying still remains true today. The harvest is still plenteous but the labourers are few. It is up to the priest to generate priestly and religious vocations, to continue the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. A good workman in the vineyard of the Lord must find other labourers and ensure the succession in the proclamation of the Word.

It is increasingly difficult to find any welcome in society for the grace of the priestly vocation. Amongst us, although we are already exposed to all the winds of globalisation and consumerism, vocations are so far, thank God, fairly numerous, though still insufficient. Societies are evolving rapidly and one day we shall have to face up to a generation which rejects or has difficulty in welcoming the grace of vocation. Hence the importance of not losing sight of the authentic meaning of our own vocation, so that our priestly life can be a witness bringing young people to welcome the grace of God calling them. It is equally important to accompany, attentively and with concern, the evolution of our societies, so as to be able always to find persons ready to give themselves to giving life to others. Through prayer, by example, through the joy of giving, through word and direct invitation, we ought to bear this responsibility. Jesus told us: *“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”* (Matthew 28: 20) By the power of that promise, we can face up to all difficulties, and help young people to reach the fullness of their youth through self-giving, so as to obtain for their societies God’s “abundant life.” The priestly vocation is the responsibility of the whole parish community who must pray and encourage vocations in their midst.

In giving ourselves for others, we teach them this gift of self and thus bring to God new vocations full of life. We too embolden ourselves, and make our priesthood an inner well-spring of life. Whatever our difficulties, and there are many, we ceaselessly hear God telling Saint Paul and us too, *“My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”* (2 Corinthians 12: 9) We are experiencing difficult situations, and, yet, as leaders, it is our role to accompany and fill other men and women with courage and hope, for they have need of us to gather their strength and persevere in hope and life. Many will live if we know how to give them life. Many will die, if when we meet them, we are incapable of making God present in their life. The measure of our love is that of God himself, who *“so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* (John 3: 16)

Invocation to the Holy Spirit

We invoke the Holy Spirit, asking him to fill us with his wisdom, power and love. Jesus had promised us: *“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”* (John 14: 26) As he descended on the apostles and filled them with grace and courage to announce the Good News of the Resurrection and Redemption, he will also fill us with that same courage and enthusiasm for proclaiming the Resurrection. Strengthened by the presence of the Spirit in us, we shall persevere in giving ourselves for our societies and parishes, so as to give

them the joy of living and the courage necessary to face up to all challenges.

Under Mary's gaze

We are writing this letter to you, beloved sons and brothers, on the Feast of the Assumption into glory of the Virgin Mary. We look up to her. We meditate on her faith. At the beginning of her life, she said to the angel, "*Be it unto me according to thy word.*" (Luke 1: 38) She accepted the call of God, without understanding whither grace would lead her. The will of God was revealed to her in the course of the events of her life and that of her son, Jesus. She did not understand everything. That is why she kept it all in her heart. She made it the subject of her meditation and abandoned herself to the divine will. She meditated and adored, until the day that God's plan was revealed to her on the Cross, with all its demands. She had to go on until death, the death of her son, which was also a death for her. But the Cross had fulfilment in the glory and joy of the Resurrection.

It is the same with the priest. He says yes on the day of his ordination, and does not see whither the grace of God is going to lead him: he will know successes and consolations, but will also have to face up to sacrifices, difficulties, temptations and trials from people, parishioners or officials. He will have to confront all the demands of his own personality, with all its content, his desires and passions... He too will have to meditate, adore, fight the good fight of the Spirit, and abandon himself to God's will. His priestly career could lead him to death, to a daily death, which will require from him at every moment a renewal of his choice and the acceptance of his priesthood. But for him too, death will lead to resurrection. Through it, he will be capable of dying every day, of becoming stronger and giving, by his death and life, life to others. "*For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.*" (Romans 14: 8)

We place our priesthood under the protection of our Lady, the Virgin Mary. As she accompanied Christ as priest, she will accompany us too in our priestly life. She will enable us to participate in the glory of her Son, and in the glory that God gave her in a very special way on the day of her Assumption to heaven.

May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, come upon you, accompany you and remain with you. Amen.

- + ***Stephanos II Cardinal Ghattas***, Patriarch of Alexandria for Coptic Catholics
- + ***Nasrallah Boutros Cardinal Sfeir***, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East for the Maronites
- + ***Gregorios III***, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem, for Melkite Greek Catholics
- + ***Ignace Pierre VIII Abdel-Ahad***, Patriarch of Antioch for Syrian Catholics
- + ***Emmanuel III Delly***, Patriarch of Babylon for Chaldeans
- + ***Nerses Bedros XIX***, Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics
- + ***Michel Sabbah***, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs

On the Feast of the Dormition, 15 August 2004

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