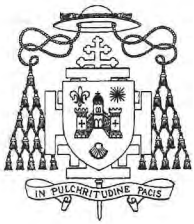
« In pulchritudine pacis »



Pastoral Letter
of H.B. Msgr. MICHEL SABBAH

Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

On the occasion of the centennial of the death
of Father Joseph Tannous,
Co-founder of the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters

Jerusalem – August 15, 1992

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

May the peace and love of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

On September 30, 1992, we will celebrate the centennial of the death of Father Joseph Tannous, a diocesan priest of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the co-founder, with Mother Marie Alphonsine, of the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters.

On this occasion, I am addressing this Pastoral Letter to the entire diocese, but especially to the members of our patriarchal clergy and, in a very special way, to the Rosary Sisters who would like the centennial to be a time of prayer, meditation, and renewal of their religious life.

I. BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Tannous, son of Tannous Khalil Yammin, head of the Latin community in Nazareth, was born in Nazareth on November 1, 1838. The family was deeply religious and practicing. When Tannous Yammin came to present his greetings and those of his community to the newly appointed Patriarch Valerga, the first Latin patriarch of Jerusalem in modern times, he was accompanied by his son Joseph who was 10 years old at the time. The Patriarch was so impressed with the remarkable character and exceptional qualities of this child that he suggested to the father that he send him to Lebanon to study for the priesthood. Recognizing the voice of God in that of the pastor, the father gladly responded to the call. The child also was pleased because he wanted to be a priest.

Joseph spent four years in Lebanon. He then pursued his studies in philosophy and theology at the Patriarchal Seminary in Jerusalem that the Patriarch had just founded.

Ordained on May 30, 1863, the young priest was first appointed to the Seminary as dean of discipline. He also taught sacred chant and the Hebrew language.

In 1866, when he was only 28 years old, Patriarch Valerga appointed him secretary of the Apostolic Delegation in Syria and, two years later, chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem where he won the esteem of everyone. He accompanied the Patriarch on his apostolic visits and journeys, and especially to the First Vatican Council, where he served as the Patriarch's theologian and secretary.

In 1880, he was appointed spiritual leader of the Latin Catholics and their official representative to the Turkish government. He carried out this responsibility with devotion and dignity.

Co-founder of the Rosary Sisters

All of these responsibilities did not stop him from engaging in direct pastoral work. He focused his attention especially on the advancement of women. He founded two confraternities: one for Christian mothers, the other for young girls. It was the latter that gave birth to the Congregation of the Rosary whose purpose was to care for the education of poor girls, especially in the villages. The foundation encountered many difficulties. It nevertheless had the encouragement of Patriarch Valerga and especially of an Arab religious of Jerusalem, Sister Marie Alphonsine, of the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Apparition, who had come to the Holy Land in 1848.

This religious had received visions from the Blessed Virgin asking her to found a community of indigenous religious who would carry the name of the Rosary. Father Tannous listened with admiration to the message transmitted by the religious. Both decided to found the new congregation.

As of July 24, 1880, he dedicated himself to the formation of the future religious. In March 1885, five of them pronounced their first vows and were sent to various parishes.

In 1892, at age 53, Father Tannous fell gravely ill. He predicted that he would die before the feast of the Rosary. In fact, he passed away peacefully on September 30 in his native city of Nazareth.

Father Tannous had many human and spiritual qualities: honesty, faithfulness to duty, prudence, respect for others, and

humility. He was a zealous priest, respectful of authority, and faithful to prayer. Despite his various administrative responsibilities, he gave first place to preaching and catechesis. He loved the poor and remained personally poor and detached. He had a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and bequeathed his love for her to his religious.

II. THE SPIRITUAL HERITAGE OF FATHER TANNOUS

Birth and expansion of the Congregation

The Congregation of the Rosary Sisters was founded in the Ottoman Palestine of the second half of the nineteenth century. The religious situation was difficult. The faith of the faithful was simple and strong, but it also suffered from ignorance and a lack of religious and general education. Daily life was also difficult. In the very first years following the foundation, the first religious accepted to carry the mission to the first parishes of Palestine and Transjordan, bearing joyfully all of the material and moral difficulties of life: problems involving communications and travel, isolation, and a lack of all forms of material comfort.

The Congregation lost no time in expanding beyond Palestine and Transjordan, bringing the same spirit and devotion to Lebanon, then to Syria. In the second half of the twentieth century, amid particularly difficult pastoral circumstances, it courageously extended itself to the countries of the Gulf, serving the thousands of Christians who went there from various Middle Eastern countries in order to find work. In 1991, it returned to Syria and began humbly in Egypt.

The Rosary Sisters and the diocesan clergy

The principles of spirituality enumerated below and bequeathed by Father Tannous to the Sisters of the Rosary can apply just as well to the members of the patriarchal clergy. Indeed, this centennial offers the Rosary Sisters as well as the priests of the Patriarchate an occasion for all of us to take stock of our common mission in light of the life

and spiritual heritage of this priest who preceded us in the vineyard of the Lord. For this reason, whatever is addressed in this pastoral letter to the Rosary Sisters applies equally to the priests of the Patriarchate who, like Father Joseph Tannous, work in the parish apostolate and in collaboration with the Rosary Sisters.

The centennial is also the occasion for the sisters to take stock of their own mission and of their collaboration with the diocesan clergy in the various dioceses where they are currently located.

The Rosary

In her apparitions to Sister Marie Alphonsine, the Blessed Virgin had asked for an indigenous congregation that would carry the name and spirit of the Rosary. For this reason, the Rosary is the first and basic characteristic of the spirituality of the Congregation. It is a prayer and a meditation on the fundamental dogmas of Christianity, made in company with the Virgin Mary as she lived them herself. Mary is the woman chosen by God, the first person to whom he revealed the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption. She is the one who, from the very first call she received, believed and obeyed the will of God. She is the one who accepted not to understand everything that was happening and to suffer as she walked in the ways of the Lord. Through the prayer of the Rosary, the Blessed Virgin helped Sister Marie Alphonsine, especially when she was undergoing difficulties that seemed humanly impossible, to make the proper choices. She became the woman who always looked to God and who never forgot her vocation or what God and her brothers and sisters expected of her.

The Mystery of the Holy Land

Related to, and, in fact, an integral part of this first characteristic of the spirituality of the Congregation is the Holy Land itself where the Congregation was born in view of serving the needs of this land as well as those of the neighboring countries. It is the land where God chose to reveal himself. It is the land of the Incarnation, the Redemption, Pentecost, and the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the land of the first monks, anchorites and Fathers of the Church, as well as the homeland of all believers in God and a place

of reconciliation and peace, though in its past and present history, it has been and remains the center of many local and international conflicts.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is therefore, and in a very special way for a Rosary sister, her primary book of prayer and meditation, one that she is to read and meditate as did the monks, anchorites and early Fathers of the Church in this very land.

In second place, after the Gospel, comes a physical or spiritual pilgrimage to the Holy Places in order to meditate and live the divine mysteries they recall as well as the human drama that takes place around them today.

Finally, the Holy Land's cultural and religious pluralism invites every Rosary sister to enrich her prayer with a spirit of openness, charity and dialogue toward all.

At the service of the Arab countries

All of the Arab countries are fields of apostolate for the Congregation. This, too, is a basic defining characteristic of its mission and spirituality. Today, the Arab countries are going through a difficult period of formation and change in all areas of life, political, social and religious. What must be done is to identify the hopes and sufferings of the men and women of the region, to faithfully and constantly pray for them with a loving concern for circumstances and persons, and, through wise and prudent counsel amid difficulties and sorrows, to guide the young girls and women who have placed their trust in the sisters and in the charitable work of the Congregation.

In this regard, the religious must avoid a double danger. The first consists in distancing themselves from or developing a self-centered indifference toward the sacrifices and sufferings of the people to whom they are sent on mission. The second is to fall into national particularisms or political chauvinism. This would detract the sisters from their fundamental vocation of making God present in the midst of his people during difficult and decisive times in their history. Only a presence that is in keeping with the sisters' fundamental vocation will help the nations to be open to each other and to work together at reconciliation and improvement.

With those who hunger and thirst for justice

In times of crisis like those we are experiencing throughout the entire Middle East, every Rosary Sister is called upon to redefine herself in relation to those who hunger and thirst for justice and to those who suffer and die either in body or in spirit. Each sister bears a responsibility regarding the present situation of suffering and trial. The Blessed Virgin wanted a Congregation based in the Holy Land and dedicated to the service of the Arab countries. The Congregation should therefore offer its help and its light in these times of trial that are affecting all of these countries. For this reason, solidarity with those who are suffering and actions fostering justice and peace must be part of the Congregation's spiritual life. Through prayer and meditation, each religious is called to experience the difficulties involved in learning how to love, to forgive and to be reconciled, thus completing in her body and soul what is lacking in the sufferings and passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Love of the poor

In the work of Father Tannous, love of the poor, who are a reflection of the face of God, must be underlined. It was because he loved the poor that he accepted to participate in the foundation of the Congregation. He himself lived a life of poverty and self-denial. The rejection of the poor and the temptation of an easy life are ongoing temptations for all religious. However, the poor are privileged by Christ, the Gospel and the Church. As long as they are present among us, and as long as we are concerned about loving them, they will vouch for our salvation, authenticity and truth.

Link with the parish

The Congregation of the Rosary Sisters was founded by a diocesan priest of the Latin Patriarchate to help with parish work. This original bond and the continued faithfulness of the Congregation to parish work, including all of its diverse and humble tasks as well as its human and spiritual richness, require of each sister a constant attention to others and a constant renewal of self within the framework of the community's common life. Also, they are signs of the authenticity of each religious and of the Congregation itself.

Advancement of women

The Congregation was founded to promote the advancement of women, to promote them totally and truly before God and before men. Since its foundation, much progress has been made both by society at large and by the Congregation. However, much remains to be done in terms of redefining and reconquering the type of freedom that allows for their authentic and complete advancement.

This objective supposes a wide range of activities from the cultural, intellectual and spiritual points-of-view. The mission of a Rosary sister, as mentioned above, is to offer help and light to women and young girls in the Arab world in order to help them build up their country and, in doing so, to continue the work wanted by God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Master of history.

Father Joseph Tannous did a lot to promote the advancement of women. His work must be continued, especially in schools that educate both the rich and the poor. Indeed, poverty must never become an obstacle for young girls who would like to continue their secondary and university education.

Religious vocations

The sign that the Congregation is alive and successful is the renewal of its life through the renewal of its members. Each sister is the first recruiter of vocations by the witness of her life and by her fidelity to her consecration and to the mission with which she is entrusted. She is the one who, first of all, has the duty to help generous souls to hear the voice of God who is calling them to his service and to that of their brothers and sisters. These souls are numerous, but they need others to show them the way and to help them discern their vocation.

The example of Father Tannous reminds us of the urgent need for vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life. Like Patriarch Valerga who himself called the young Joseph to the priesthood, we call on our young people not to be afraid to follow the Lord in the complete giving of themselves in the priesthood or the religious life. We exhort the young with the same words used by Pope John Paul II in the message he sent to the participants in the World Day of Vocations held on May 10, 1992:

Let yourselves be charmed by Christ, the Infinite who appeared among you in visible and imitable form. Let yourselves be attracted by his example, which has changed the history of the world and directed it toward an exhilarating goal. Let yourselves be loved by the love of the Holy Spirit, who wishes to turn you away from worldly things to begin in you the life of the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and true holiness (cf. Eph 4:24).

You the young, do not be afraid of the difficulties that might lie ahead. Your strength does not come from yourselves but from the One who called you. It is he who will work in you and with you, for he will make you his co-workers (Rm 16, 3 and I Cor 3, 9). *Also, the Lord will not be less generous than you. To those who leave everything to follow him, the Lord gives a hundredfold already in this life and in the eternal life to come.*

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude this message by expressing my gratitude for all the good accomplished by the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters in our diocese. I thank God for it. I praise God for the work accomplished by his priest, Father Joseph Tannous and by the generations of religious who followed him, those who have died as well as those who continue until today to carry out their mission with joy and devotion. I can do no more than invite you, dear Sisters of the Rosary, to remain firm and united in the grace you have received by imitating Christ who called you to serve him in this land and in the neighboring countries. In your work as teachers, catechists, nurses, and in all your other tasks, as humble as they may be, be imitators of the Lord in his prayer, his charity, his poverty, his virginity, and his obedience to the Father.

To all the sisters, on the occasion of this centennial, I repeat the words of Paul VI:

"Without religious life, there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold.

Society would lose the living example of these consecrated persons who have left everything for the kingdom of God. A sister is, par excellence, the salt of the earth and the light of the word. She tries to become that for which we were chosen "before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love" (Eph 1: 4 and *Evangelica Testificatio* 3).

On the occasion of this centennial, may the Blessed Virgin Mary grant to the entire Church of Jerusalem, to the Rosary Sisters, and to all the dioceses where the sisters are present, the grace of discovering the ways of the Lord in the various countries of the Middle East so that his will might be done in this part of the world.

May Almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+ Michel Sabbah, Patriarch

Jerusalem, August 15, 1992
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary