

Christmas Letter 2011

Gregorios, by the grace of God,
Patriarch of Antioch and of All the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem:
May divine grace and apostolic blessing rest on and embrace
my brother bishops, members of the Holy Synod
and all the faithful clergy and laity of our Melkite Greek Catholic Church.

Communion and Witness

Communion and witness are both expressive of profound Christian thought and theology, and Church teaching and presence in society. These two terms are the core and heart of Jesus Christ's teaching in the Holy Gospel and most apt expressions of the mystery of the divine incarnation that we are celebrating during the glorious Feast of the Nativity.

Christianity begins with Jesus Christ, God and man, One of the divine Trinity, and with the founding of communion on the supreme model of complete divine communion, the Trinitarian Mystery, and finds its fulfilment in the radiant communion between God and man in the person of Jesus Christ, who came "to gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad," (John 11: 52) "reconciling all things unto himself...whether they be things in earth or things in heaven." (Colossians 1: 20) That is the real, true, whole, deep meaning, I think, of the wishes expressed by the hymn so melodiously sung by angels in the Shepherds' Field at Beit Sahour and by thousands of human tongues and through the arts of music, icon-painting and prayer; the eternal hymn that every believing Christian, young or old, knows, and that our Muslim brethren know and repeat at interfaith meetings with their Christian brethren and when exchanging good wishes for our feasts, for the Feast of Christmas: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men."

This hymn is the splendid expression of communion and its content. Thou, man, dost reflect the glory of God on earth. Through this glory thou dost obtain peace and spread joy and gladness amongst men. With this hymn the beautiful Christian news begins, calling all to unity: unity of God, unity of the human race, unity of the cosmos.

So the Gospel (or Good News), the canon of Christianity and Christians, ends with the sending, or mission, and call to bear witness. So Jesus Christ, after his glorious resurrection and before his ascension to heaven, addresses his call, commandment and testament to his holy apostles, saying,

"Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." (Matthew 28: 19-20)

We find this same commandment towards the end of the Gospel of Saint Mark, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16: 15-16) And Saint Mark continues, "And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following." (Mark 16: 20)

This same commandment is repeated by Christ as he says farewell in Saint Luke's Gospel:

“Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.” (Luke 24: 46-49)

The same commandment is given in another extract from the Gospel according to Saint John the Evangelist and Beloved:

“Peace be unto you. As the Father hath sent me, so send I you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them and saith unto them, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.’” (John 20: 21-23)

Saint John the Evangelist expresses this very point about mission and witness by telling the story of the miraculous catch of fish, when Christ orders his apostles, some of whom were fishermen on Lake Tiberias in Palestinian Galilee, saying, “‘Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find.’ They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.” (John 21: 6) This constitutes the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise to his disciples when he called them at the beginning of his apostolate and preaching. He said to Peter and his brother Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” (Matthew 4: 19 cf. Mark 1: 17 and Luke 5: 10)

Jesus exercised his disciples in apostolate during his life and rambles through the villages and towns of Palestine. “He sent them out two by two,” (Mark 6: 7) saying to them, “The harvest is truly plenteous but the labourers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9: 37-38)

It is good to see that the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, (the true cradle of Christianity) has taken as its motto two terms that symbolise and are key to the Holy Gospel’s mission, for Christians of the Middle East are recipients of this apostolate or mission, and are called to this Christian vocation and must live their faith in their Arab, Muslim-majority society in the context of communion, union, solidarity, mutual help and harmony, so as to be capable of giving witness and bringing the good news of the Gospel to and in their society.

There is a further topic related to our Christmas Letter this year, 2011: that is, the next Synod, which Pope Benedict XVI has convoked to be held in October 2012, two years after the Special Assembly for the Middle East, and whose topic will be the New Evangelisation. It might almost be said that this 2012 Synod is really the continuation of the Special Synod for the Middle East. Indeed Eastern Christians are called to communion and witness and to bring the ever-new, attractive, effective, impressive, clear message of the Gospel to their society at all levels and among all sorts of communities and challenges.

Communion in the first Christian community

The apostles and first Christians felt the importance of communion after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven. They wished to respond through communion to their divine Master’s prayer, “that they all may be one... that the world may believe...,” (John 17: 21) as we find in the Acts of the Apostles, arguably the best description of the life of the first Christian community.

Indeed they wanted to keep the very important symbolic number of twelve apostles and the first communal and joint act that they carried out in the Upper Room, (where before their Master's passion, they had celebrated with him the Eucharistic Mystery, the Mystical Supper or Mystical Thanksgiving in the Mystery of Bread and Wine) was the election of the witness, who had to take the treacherous apostle Judas' place, and so he became one of the Twelve (Acts 1: 26) in that same Upper Room where the Holy Spirit had descended on the apostles and on Mary, Mother of Jesus and other men and women present.

Here it can be seen that ecclesial communion comprises not only the apostles and disciples, but the faithful men and women gathered as the first Christian community.

Communion also appeared in the unity of the Holy Spirit, who descended on everyone, and the first-fruits of communion in the Holy Spirit were common language and speech understood by all the people, though diverse in their language, culture and heritage.

Communion also figured in the speech of Saint Peter, where we read that he talked with the eleven. The apostles preached together, through the mouth of Peter, who gave the first sermon in Christian history. (Acts 2: 14-36)

Communion appears as the distinctive feature of the Church in its infancy and that communion is eloquently described by Saint Luke in chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles:

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2: 42-47)

We find in chapter four of the Acts of the Apostles another splendid description of the life and communion of the first Christians, summed up in this verse, which has become the motto for the Churches of the Middle East: “And all were of one heart and of one soul.” (Acts 4: 32) Luke continues by describing this communion in detail:

“Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the prices of the things that were sold. And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.” (Acts 4: 32-35)

In the Acts of the Apostles we find a further very fine example of communion: that is the prayer of the apostles and the faithful together, in the times of difficulty that the new-born community confronted in its infancy:

“..They lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, ‘Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven and earth, and the sea and all that in them is: who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, ‘Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of

the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.' For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatening: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus." (Acts 4: 24-31)

I apologise for citing that paragraph at length, but it is a magnificent extract describing the need of the Church yesterday, today and forever, of praying together, especially in difficult times, in persecution, suffering, anxiety and distress that can hamper the faithful's progress. Today we very much need that common prayer in the circumstances that our Arab countries are going through, when everyone is afraid of what is to come and what the dark future will imminently bring forth.

The zeal of the apostles and the first community to keep communion and unity among the faithful appears in the founding of the diaconate headed by Saint Stephen to ensure the service of communion and love for the growing community. (Acts 6: 1-7)

Communion also features in all the chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, which can really be called the Gospel of Communion and Witness. Again, we see the church praying together in spiritual communion with Peter, languishing in King Herod's prison. We read, "Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." (Acts 12: 5) And when God wrought the miracle with Saint Peter, freeing him from prison, "He came to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose surname was Mark: where many were gathered together praying." (Acts 12: 12)

Saint Luke concludes his description of the life of the first community, before moving on to his description of Paul's doings, by telling how the community passed through times of persecution with prayer and preaching, "but the Word of God grew and multiplied." (Acts 12: 24)

After disputes in the first community about the reception of Gentiles into their midst and their admittance to ordination, ecclesial communion shines forth pre-eminently through the holding of the first Christian council at Jerusalem, before the holding of the subsequent great Ecumenical Councils. It can be called the Apostolic Council. Saint Luke describes it in chapter fifteen of Acts. He reports the words of some participants in the dispute over the acceptance of pagans and what should or should not be imposed on them. Among the speeches mentioned are those of Peter, Barnabas, Paul, James and others and then the decision was taken by "the apostles and elders, with the whole church." (Acts 15: 22 and 25) That means that lay-people, men and women, participated in the discussion on this very important topic in the history of the Church and determined the direction of its progress and openness to the Gentile world. We read in the common synodal decision of this first council in the history of church councils, the very beautiful opening phrase, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us..." (Acts 15: 28)

Yet the Church knew that the greatest danger was that of losing communion and unity, and with that in mind, Saint Paul prayed, in his very touching speech, taking his leave of the Church of Ephesus,

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. ... And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.” (Acts 20: 24-32)

Through this sense of the experience of communion in the life of the primitive Church in the Acts of the Apostles, it can be seen that communion and witness are closely interlinked: to the extent that communion is strong, deep and well supported, witness is strong, effective, impressive and fruitful.

We do not mention such things merely to extol bygone ancient glories, but to point out that faithful souls have to be buoyed up by their faith and values, in order to overcome difficulties and confront crises.

We wish to mention these things to help our faithful children have wisdom, prudence and patience and be unafraid like our predecessors, not swept away by destructive tendencies.

The primitive Church thus lived communion in good times and bad, in very varied conditions for community life, in prayer and supplication, in the celebration of breaking bread (the liturgy) and in sharing goods, in alms-giving to the poor and needy, even in difficult times, calamities, persecutions, famines. Communion was then the first Christian community’s daily experience and practical lifestyle for coping with difficulties and problems: a spiritual, practical and effectual communion.

Communion in the Epistles

We have been discovering the experience of this communion in the Acts of the Apostles. We shall now turn to the Epistles of Saint Paul and other apostles, where we shall find theoretical and practical teaching on communion. We find this especially in Saint Paul, who greatly emphasises communion and counters all sorts of divisions, disputes and schisms in the churches that he founded at Antioch, in Asia Minor and in Greece.

Now Saint Paul, in his apostolic method, practised ecclesial fellowship, based on real communitarian, synodal communion and implemented practical assistance, solidarity and mutual aid, to which he also summoned the faithful, as we expounded and explained in our fourth letter for the Year of Saint Paul (June 2009) entitled *The Collaborators of Saint Paul*. We had explained this too in our Christmas Letter, *Poverty and Development* (2003). In order to clarify all this, we should like to explain what we read in Saint Paul about communion. Saint Paul said, “We who are strong should support and help the weak.” And he himself worked in an exemplary way to collect funds from the churches of Rome, Asia and Cappadocia for Jerusalem’s poor. Communion through service and material support, financial and other, was the first care and concern of Saint Paul. Anyone reading Saint Paul’s letters realises all that. (See especially Romans 15 and 2 Corinthians.)

We see that underpinning Saint Paul’s teachings, and playing a large part in his letters, is a concern for communion, union, solidarity and mutual help, and a rejection of and refusal to participate in any

sort of schism. We should like to review some passages, especially in the letters to the Corinthians and to the Ephesians.

In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul launches an attack against the enemies of communion. (1 Corinthians 10-13)

In chapter three, he draws our attention to strife and disputes among them over differences between Paul and Apollos. (1 Corinthians 3: 3) He reviews some instances of practical issues which are causing divisions among the Corinthians as they disagree over how to deal with them. That is all a prelude for two extraordinarily beautiful chapters of Saint Paul's teaching about communion and unity among the faithful. (Chapters 12 and 13)

In chapter twelve, Saint Paul speaks of different spiritual gifts all having the same origin in the one God. Their goal is the same: communion or unity among the faithful, who must use these gifts for the community's welfare. Saint Paul likens the community to the body, depicting with great eloquence the relationship between the Church and the body, between communion in the Church and in the body. It is enough to mention these brief, but expressive sentences:

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12: 12-13)

Saint Paul reaches the high point of his teaching on communion and unity in the well-known chapter thirteen on charity, depicted as the foundation of ecclesial communion and the best, most sublime aspect of that communion. Charity is above every gift, rank, station, title or service and we know the beginning of this chapter: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." (1 Corinthians 13: 1)

Charity is the basis for communion, which unites practically all gifts and enables them to be placed at the service of the body - the community, society, church, parish and so forth. And indeed, charity is above prophecy, knowledge, faith, alms-giving and even self-sacrifice. (1 Corinthians 13: 2-3) We see again, Saint Paul reviewing the attributes of love, effectual, working charity, and finishing with this expression, "Charity never faileth." (1 Corinthians 13: 8) And he continues, "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." (1 Corinthians 13: 13)

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, there are repeated appeals to this communion, based on charity, which is the bond of perfection and basis for communion among the faithful. Paul prays on his knees for the faithful of Ephesus, that they may be "rooted and grounded in love." (Ephesians 3: 17) After that there is a very fervent appeal for unity:

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." (Ephesians 4: 1-6)

Through this reading of the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles of Saint Paul, we see that communion based on charity characterised the primitive Church's life, existential experience and holy teaching-guide.

We have spoken of communion among the faithful and yet this communion, as we said at the beginning of this letter, is based on the communion of the Holy Trinity, the unity of the Creator God and on communion in Jesus Christ, especially through the sacraments that give the faithful the possibility of living the mystery of Christ in the believing community.

Witness in the first Christian community

We read at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles what are really Jesus' last words to his apostles before his ascension to heaven and that are a call to witness:

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” (Acts 1: 8)

It is interesting to note that this chapter is read on Easter Day during the Feast of the Resurrection in the Churches of Byzantine Greek tradition. The mission of all faithful believers in Christ stems from Christ's resurrection, as it is required of them “to be ready always to give answer to every man that asketh... a reason of the hope that is in [them],” (1 Peter 3: 15) which is the hope of the resurrection, faith in the resurrection that is the foundation of our Christian faith.

Indeed, the first, still small, Christian community, the “little flock,” lived its witness alongside communion. Despite the fact that this community had to endure most cruel persecution from the Jewish Sanhedrin and the pagan empire, an extraordinary, miraculous reality should be noted: the persecutors themselves in some way helped to spread the Christian faith in every region where Christians were scattered down the centuries in the one Roman Empire and the (now Arab) East. Similarly, we see that the unified Roman Empire, stretching westwards and eastwards without limiting borders, very much helped the apostles' journeys from East to West. It also helped Christianity to spread and the apostles and early Christian community to bear witness to Jesus Christ and Gospel values in the pagan world. So Psalm 18: 4 (LXX) was realised, “Their voice is gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” Immediately after the ascension of their Master and Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles, motivated by their duty of witness, hastened to elect Matthias in Judas' place, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “[There] must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection,” (Acts 1: 22) and to succeed Judas in his service and mission. (Acts 1: 25)

Witness and mission started immediately after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the fiftieth day after the resurrection in the upper room of Sion in Jerusalem, as we read:

“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2: 4)

On the same day, the message of the apostles' witness reached thousands of Judeans and other Jews present at the event of Pentecost, who came from sixteen countries or regions known in those days, that now comprise the Middle East, North Africa and modern Europe. That witness was confirmed by Saint Peter, the leader of the apostles, in his first speech, the first Christian sermon,

"This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses." (Acts 2: 32)

The first Christian community also gave witness first and foremost through its life, as we said earlier, speaking of communion and of the Church's life in its infancy: so the life of the first community was its witness. And we all know what was said by the pagans about the first Christians at Antioch, "See, they say, how they love one another." (Tertullian *Apology* 39: 7¹)

Luke says, in the Acts of the Apostles, that they all "[had] great favour with the people." (Acts 2: 47) Thus the wonders wrought by the apostles were a support for their witness. Furthermore, courage filled the hearts of the faithful, who gave testimony, despite all threats. Witness abroad was always supported and based on inner vision, as we read: "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts 4: 20) So, the story continues, "they spake the word with boldness." (Acts 4: 31)

Saint Peter declares in the name of the apostles and before the High Priest, "And we are his (Jesus') witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him." (Acts 5: 32) "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." (Acts 5: 42)

After the martyrdom of Protodeacon Stephen, "there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem." (Acts 8: 1) "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." (Acts 8: 4) So the faith was transmitted by means of witness and Philip's catechism, as far as Ethiopia in the first weeks after Pentecost, through the eunuch, steward of the Queen of Ethiopia. (Acts 8: 26-40)

One result of the apostles' courage is the conversion of Saint Paul, (Saul, a Jew from Tarsus) before the gates of Damascus. A great persecutor, roaring like a killer-lion, was about to enter Damascus, but there he encountered the risen Christ and was more transformed by that than any other apostle, acquiring more courage, strength and enthusiasm for witnessing to and spreading the Christian faith in every region of the Roman Empire. Leaving Damascus, he went on to Jerusalem, Tarsus and thence to Antioch. (Acts 9: 30) When the Church came to open its doors to Gentiles of all nations, the first church to do so was in the city of Antioch, a capital of Hellenic, pagan culture, "and the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." (Acts 11: 26)

The Acts of the Apostles continues with the deeds, words and travels of Saint Paul and his companions who proclaimed the word, despite persecutions, sufferings, difficulties and crises. So Paul proclaims and testifies before kings and princes of East and West, till the time he witnesses with Peter, chief of the apostles, in Rome. So the Acts of the Apostles closes with this description of Paul, who is rightly styled, Apostle to the Nations,

¹ http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-05.htm#P425_201743

“And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.” (Acts 28: 30-31)

Saint Paul himself describes the difficulties hindering his witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians,

“Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness, beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11: 23-29)

Saint Paul describes the difficulties that the apostles and martyrs encountered throughout salvation history. He calls the faithful to witness on the basis of their faith and defence of that faith in Jesus Christ, as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

“[Time would fail me to tell of all those] who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.” (Hebrews 11: 33-40)

And he continues, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12: 1-2)

We certainly feel that these words are addressed to each one of us, today’s Christians, especially in places where we are feeling the heat, in Arab countries, in Syria and elsewhere. We must all put on the armour of holy faith in these difficult conditions that we are all experiencing, not only we Christians, but all citizens, because of the prevalent chaos and real lack of vision and the lack of a real alternative.

Communion and witness in the Synod for the Middle East

We have reviewed the meaning of communion and witness in reading Holy Scripture, especially the Acts of the Apostles and seen how these terms were linked in the experience of the primitive Church.

Now I deem it requisite to review how these terms were dealt with in our Synod, the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, in the speeches of His Holiness, the Pope, in the final Message, and in the conclusions and resolutions that were voted upon by the Fathers of the Synod, the Patriarchs and Cardinal Bishops and others, and that really represent the thoughts of all of us who participated in the Synod.

In this last part of this Christmas Letter, I offer to our Church the Quinquennial Plan I wrote and which was discussed by the Synod of the Patriarchal Church in June, 2011. In fact this five-year plan is a summary of the results of the Synod and a working programme based on the conclusions and basic guidance of the Synod.

The Holy Father gave two speeches, one at the opening of the Synod (10 October 2010) and the other at its close (24 October 2010.) In the opening speech, he said that the Church in the East should be united in communion and witness. Through them, the Church realises the divine plan, the economy of salvation. His Holiness also said “Without communion there can be no witness: the life of communion is truly the great witness.²” As Christ said, “By this, all men shall know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13: 35)

In his speech at the close of the Synod, His Holiness analysed the current situation that Christians are presently experiencing in the Middle East and that has a negative influence on living in communion and on successfully witnessing to Christian faith in society.

His Holiness said,

“Our thoughts go to our numerous brothers and sisters who live in the region of the Middle East and who find themselves in trying situations, at times very burdensome, both for the material poverty and for the discouragement, the state of tension and at times of fear. Today the Word of God also offers us a light of consoling hope.³”

Later the Holy Father said,

“The words of the Lord Jesus may be applied to Christians in the Middle East: ‘There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.’ (Luke 12:32) Indeed, even if they are few, they are bearers of the Good News of the love of God for man, love which revealed itself in the Holy Land in the person of Jesus Christ. This Word of salvation, strengthened with the grace of the Sacraments, resounds with particular potency in the places in which, by Divine Providence, it was written, and it is the only Word which is able to break that vicious circle of vengeance, hate, and violence. From a purified heart, in peace

² The Holy Father’s Homily for the Opening Mass of Synod of Bishops for the Middle East
<http://www.radiovaticana.org/EN1/Articolo.asp?c=429009>

³ Homily of H. H. Benedict XVI at the Papal Mass for the Closing of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20101024_chiusura-sinodo-mo_en.html

with God and neighbour, may intentions and initiatives for peace at local, national, and international levels be born.”

Later in his speech, the Holy Father dwelt on that very important condition for living communion and witness, the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

“Conflicts, wars, violence and terrorism have gone on for too long in the Middle East. Peace, which is a gift of God, is also the result of the efforts of men of goodwill, of the national and international institutions, in particular of the states most involved in the search for a solution to conflicts. **We must never resign ourselves to the absence of peace. Peace is possible. Peace is urgent. Peace is the indispensable condition for a life worthy of humanity and society. Peace is also the best remedy to avoid emigration from the Middle East.**”

Further on still, the Holy Father outlined the other condition for living communion and witness, which is freedom in all its aspects, a right for every person, whatever his religion or belief:

“Another contribution that Christians can bring to society is the promotion of an authentic freedom of religion and conscience, one of the fundamental human rights that each state should always respect. In numerous countries of the Middle East there exists freedom of belief, while the space given to the freedom to practice religion is often quite limited. **Increasing this space of freedom becomes essential to guarantee to all the members of the various religious communities the true freedom to live and profess their faith. This topic could become the subject of dialogue between Christians and Muslims, a dialogue whose urgency and usefulness was reiterated by the Synodal Fathers.**”

We wish to state here what was said in the final Nuntius about unity in communion and witness. In this report, we see what the Fathers of the Synod, especially the Easterners, have to say about this topic, as it also represents our thoughts, those of the Patriarchs and bishops of our Churches, for as we know, H.E. Salim Bustros, of our Church, was the president of the commission that drew up this document.

The final Message is addressed to the members of the Churches of the Middle East, breathing into them a new spirit of a new Pentecost, strengthening their energy with this expression,

“Jesus says to us: ‘You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.’ (Matthew 5:13-14) Your mission in our societies, beloved faithful, through faith, hope and love, is to be like ‘salt’ which gives savour and meaning to life; to be like ‘light’ by proclaiming the truth which scatters the darkness; and to be like the ‘leaven’ which transforms hearts and minds.⁴”

The final report also addresses an appeal tailored to different elements and groups of society, parishes, eparchies, priests, monks and nuns, the faithful in general, the sons and daughters of our Churches, Christian families, especially mothers, young people, both boys and girls, workers, teachers, information services, prayer groups, apostolate and youth movements, strengthening them and thanking them for their gifts and their witness through their lives and responsibilities in their Church and society.

⁴ *Message to the People of God* of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, II, 4.1 http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_24_speciale-medio-oriente-2010/02_inglese/b23_02.html#MESSAGE_TO_THE_PEOPLE_OF_GOD

The Nuntius calls for the increase and intensification of communion and witness and unity with Orthodox and Protestant Churches:

“Together we work for the good of all Christians, that they may remain, grow and prosper. We share the same journey. Our challenges are the same and our future is the same. We wish to bear witness together as disciples of Christ. Only through our unity can we accomplish the mission that God has entrusted to us, despite the differences among our Churches. The prayer of Christ is our support; the commandment of love unites us, even if the road towards full communion is still distant for us.⁵”

We are happy to refer our readers to a practical application of this recommendation, in Proposition 28 (para. 6) on Ecumenism: “**working for a common date for the celebrations of Christmas and Easter⁶,**” and “having as an ultimate goal, a common testimony to our faith, the service of our faithful and of all our countries.⁷” The Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs has recently responded to this resolution, (previously formulated by the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East) in Resolution 3 of their biennial meeting this year,⁸

“The council recommends a serious quest to unify the dates of Easter between all Churches, and to find requisite practical means to fulfil this pressing request from all Christians, especially in our Arab countries, as is the case in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine.⁹”

The final Message also makes mention of the importance of working together and of solidarity, of dialogue with Jews for a better future for the Holy Land:

“We hope that this dialogue can bring us to work together to press those in authority to put an end to the political conflict which results in separating us and disrupting everyday life in our countries.”

Further on, there is a paragraph which draws attention to disputes and arguments in society, and advocates peace and the rejection of negative theological stances:

“It is time for us to commit ourselves together to a sincere, just and permanent peace. Both Christians and Jews are called to this task by the Word of God. In his Word, we are invited us to listen to the voice of God ‘who speaks of peace:’ ‘Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his holy ones.’ (Psalm 85: 9) Recourse to theological and biblical positions which use the Word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable. On the contrary, recourse to religion must lead every person to see the face of God in others and to treat them according to their God-given prerogatives and God’s

⁵ *ibid.* III, 7

⁶ *Elenchus Finalis Propositionum* of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20101026_elenco-prop-finali-mo_en.pdf

⁷ *Message to the People of God* of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, III, 7

⁸ 20th. Assembly of the Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs, Bkerkeh, Lebanon 14-17 November, 2011

⁹ Source Fady Noun *Eastern Catholic Patriarchs invite Christians to remain in their own countries* <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Eastern-Catholic-Patriarchs-invite-Christians-to-remain-in-their-own-countries-23224.html>

commandments, namely, according to God's bountiful goodness, mercy, justice and love for us.¹⁰”

We should like countries to respond to this appeal, especially as the Palestinian President has presented an official request to the world to recognize the Palestinian State alongside the Israeli State. We should also like to say frankly that we reject entirely the expression “the Jewish State.” We think, with all due respect, that this attitude is tantamount to collective suicide. Furthermore it contributes to fragmenting the region into religious statelets and will ferment a communitarian or sectarian mentality of hostility and helps no-one in the region, neither Jews **nor Muslims nor Christians**.

The final appeal also calls for mutual help and life dialogue with Muslims, as a supplementary tool for the life of communion and witness. Further to what we said above about the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is an essential condition for Christians to be able to implement the Synod’s motto about communion and witness and dialogue in our Arab society.

On the topic of dialogue with Muslims, the report says as follows:

“We say to our Muslim fellow-citizens: we are brothers and sisters; God wishes us to be together, united by one faith in God and by the dual commandment of love of God and neighbour. Together we will construct our civil societies on the basis of citizenship, religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Together we will work for the promotion of justice, peace, the rights of persons and the values of life and of the family. The construction of our countries is our common responsibility. We wish to offer to the East and to the West a model of coexistence between different religions and of positive collaboration between different civilisations for the good of our countries and that of all humanity.”¹¹”

This paragraph is prophetic and applies to all reasonable demands, which may well be the true programme for all demonstrations, revolutions and slogans, rather than terror, hatred, destruction and bloodshed and spreading more fear, terror and hatred among citizens by exploiting religious, sectarian and tribal mentalities.

This paragraph of the appeal echoes what we asked in a note that we sent to the kings, princes and heads of State of Arab countries on the occasion of the Feast of the Fitr at the end of Ramadan in August, 2011:

“We wish to express our wishes for a blessed Eid ul Fitr this year, as a bouquet of considerations and thoughts inspired by the painful situation of our Arab countries, for as Arab Christians rooted in our Arab world, we feel aware of our comprehensive responsibility with regard to this Arab world of ours. Indeed, we have lived through our common history (1432 years¹²) in solidarity with our Muslim majority Arab world; we co-operated in its foundation, culture, civilisation, poetry, Arab character and also in its wars. This gives rise to our spiritual conviction that we make up one body and “whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.” (1

¹⁰ Message to the People of God, IV, 8

¹¹ Ibid. V, 9

¹² Reckoned by the Hijrah Calendar, or 1389 years by the Christian Calendar

Corinthians 12: 26) As the respected hadith says, “The example of the believers in their affection, reciprocal compassion and sympathy, is like the body; if one of its members suffers, the whole body will suffer too and remain awake and feverish.¹³” We expected the whole Arab world to move on the occasion of these tragic events: and for the Arab Muslim countries to convoke summits in consequence, to address the pains and aspirations of their peoples and for there to be some interaction with the revolutions of the rising generations. Together they would have analysed the causes and parameters of these revolutions, their extent, goals, risks and opportunities that they represent for us all instead of allowing foreign forces, whatever their intentions, to get involved in our affairs and dictate their ideas to us...

The opportunity is still there for leaders in our Arab world to take into good and due consideration the slogans that have been ringing out in the squares of our capitals, towns and villages. They must be gathered and made into a common Arab, Eastern, even, let us say, Muslim-Christian plan of action, for a better future for our young generations who have taken to Arab streets...The rights should be enshrined in a modern Arab Human Rights Charter. We cannot and do not have the right to ignore these voices, slogans, demands, whatever the underlying motives and reasons. **We are convinced that our Arab world needs an intellectual, spiritual, social, political and economic revolution. But just not in the way that we have been seeing on our television screens since the beginning of this year 2011.**¹⁴”

We are writing this letter frankly and emphatically, based on our faith and responsibility as Patriarch, holding Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian and Egyptian passports and as spiritual leader of a community which has excelled in showing itself, very strongly, frankly, decisively, and designedly concerned in the Arab world’s problems, especially the Palestinian cause. On the basis of this principle, we may sum up the results of these problems, which have recently appeared in revolutions, as we have already done in a goodly number of articles, interviews, radio and television broadcasts and letters previously sent to kings and leaders of the Arab world, to countries of the European Union, South America and Australia, to the United States and Canada, to cardinals, bishops and heads of Episcopal Conferences in the Catholic Christian world, and also on the occasion of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, held in October, 2010.

I wrote:

“On the basis of our faith in God and country and our spiritual and national values and convictions we invite our brothers and sisters to work together in these difficult circumstances to preserve our Arab national unity, and **our Muslim-Christian unity, by overcoming this ordeal and these wounds and by working for a civilised Arab society in which social, denominational and ethnic differences disappear and in which all our hopes of justice, equality, dignity and religious and personal freedom are realised, where corruption is fought, the countryside developed, the poor and dispossessed supported, especially in the provinces and areas disadvantaged by nature and deprived of modernisation.**

We have to work together to realise these prerequisites for political, social and family reform in the Arab world, proclaiming our solidarity with it, for we love it and want to be

¹³ Reported by Bukahri no. 2238 and Muslim no. 2586

¹⁴ Good Wishes for Eid ul Fitr, Patriarch Gregorios III http://www.pgc-lb.org/english/News3_Fitr-2011.html

builders of a better society, where the civilisation of peace, brotherhood and love prevails between the many, different denominations which have been living alongside each other for centuries.

Thus we continue the way of living together as Christians of different Churches and Muslims of different denominations, as is the case in all Arab countries.

Thus we shall give to the world after these revolutions a unique Arab Muslim-Christian pattern, which will help the dialogue between the Middle East and the West, and Islam and Christianity throughout the world. **After all these problems, we can form through these values a modern Arab Human Rights Charter. It is desirable for Arab countries to work at putting this charter as a conclusion and will for interaction with current realities of their peoples.**

Thus will be put into practice the call of the Qur'an, 'Come to a common word between us and you.' (Al 'Imran 3: 64) And thus we bring about Jesus' prayer from the Gospel, 'That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.' (John 17: 21)

There is the promising programme! There is the new order! There is the new Middle East! There is the flourishing future that Arab countries will be able to bring about if they are united in solidarity. There is the real roadmap for realising the hopes and expectations of the young generations and of citizens of all classes, a roadmap for bringing about just, lasting and global peace that will pave the way to prosperity, development and sovereignty, freedom and dignity for all the peoples of the region.¹⁵

The Message to the People of God continues with an appeal to governments and political leaders, especially in the Arab world, asking them to recognize equality of citizenship, which is an essential condition for living together, and for living communion and witness in Muslim-majority, Arab society:

"We appreciate the efforts which have been expended for the common good and the service to our societies. You are in our prayers and we ask God to guide your steps. We address you regarding the importance of equality among all citizens. Christians are original and authentic citizens who are loyal to their fatherland and assume their duties towards their country. It is natural that they should enjoy all the rights of citizenship, freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and freedom in education, teaching and the use of the mass media.

We appeal to you to redouble your efforts to establish a just and lasting peace throughout the region and to stop the arms race, which will lead to security and economic prosperity and stop the haemorrhage of emigration which empties our countries of its vital forces. Peace is a precious gift entrusted by God to human family, whose members are to be 'peacemakers who will be called children of God.' (Matthew 5:9)¹⁶

The appeal is also addressed to the international family in clear, decisive terms with regard to the Palestinian question. These paragraphs of the appeal also express the Pope's, Patriarchs' and bishops' vision, together with that of the whole Catholic Church with regard to the Palestinian cause, supporting the right of the Palestinian people:

¹⁵ Good Wishes for Eid ul Fitr, Patriarch Gregorios III http://www.pgc-lb.org/english/News3_Fitr-2011.html

¹⁶ Message to the People of God of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, VI, 10 http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_24_speciale-medio-oriente-2010/02_inglese/b23_02.html#MESSAGE_TO_THE_PEOPLE_OF_GOD

“The citizens of the countries of the Middle East call upon the international community, particularly the United Nations conscientiously to work to find a peaceful, just and definitive solution in the region, through the application of the Security Council’s resolutions and taking the necessary legal steps to put an end to the occupation of the different Arab territories.

The Palestinian people will thus have an independent and sovereign homeland where they can live with dignity and security. The State of Israel will be able to enjoy peace and security within their internationally recognized borders. The Holy City of Jerusalem will be able to acquire its proper status, which respects its particular character, its holiness and the religious patrimony of the three religions: Jewish, Christian and Muslim. We hope that the two-State-solution might become a reality and not a dream only.¹⁷”

We are coming to the end of this appeal, to which I am affiliated as Patriarch, and through this very beautiful, encouraging text about communion and witness, I speak to all of you reading this letter, especially my brother bishops, members of our Patriarchal Synod, the male and female religious communities, the priests, monks and nuns and all our children everywhere, saying,

“Brothers and sisters, in closing, we say with the St. John the Apostle: ‘What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.’(1 John 1:1-3).

This Divine Life which has appeared to the apostles over 2000 years ago in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ and to which the Church has witnessed throughout the course of her history will always remain the life of our Churches in the Middle East and the object of our witness, sustained by the promise of the Lord: ‘Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the time.’(Matthew 28:20) Together we proceed on our journey with hope, ‘and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.’ (Romans 5:5)¹⁸”

Practical guidance: the five-year plan

I have come in this letter to the practical part, relating to the practice of communion and witness. This is what has been recommended by the Synod in Propositio 43, entitled the Follow-up to the Synod:¹⁹

“The Churches which have taken part in the Synod are called upon to ensure that it is properly followed up by working together with the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East and the official structures of the relevant Churches, with a greater involvement of priests and lay and religious experts.”

¹⁷ *ibid.* VII, 11

¹⁸ *Ibid.* VII, 12

¹⁹ See Elenchus Finalis Propositionum, No. 43

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20101026_elenco-prop-finali-mo_en.pdf

Beginning from this forty-third resolution and in acknowledgment of my responsibility as Patriarch, *pater et caput* of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, I have tried to gather together, so to speak, and summarise the Synod's recommendations and guidance in a complete project, launched under the title, *The Quinquennial Plan*, which I proposed to our Church's Synod in June, 2011. I consider this joint, Five-year Plan to represent a practical directive for our pastoral work and ecclesial service in the various aspects of Church life, so that we shall be able to take inspiration from it for a multi-faceted plan of action. It further includes many practical, useful points to enable us to live our communion and witness in our eparchies, parishes and societies during the coming five years. I propose holding an eparchial synod in each of our eparchies, in Arab countries and the countries of the expansion, that will have as its theme, the subjects proposed in this five-year plan. So the Synod will remain alive and active in our Church.

Here I would like to content myself with merely mentioning this Five-year Plan and place it as an Appendix at the end of this year's Christmas Letter. I also believe that adopting this Quinquennial Plan would be an anticipated implementation of the topic of the General Synod to be held in October, 2012, as I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, and whose theme is, *The New Evangelization*.

Now I should like to offer a short extract from the Conclusion to the *Lineamenta* for the New Evangelization, as an anticipation of that theme:

"In his coming among us, Jesus Christ made us sharers in his divine life which renews the face of the earth and makes all things new. (cf. Revelation 21: 5) His revelation made us not only recipients of the gift of salvation but also its proclaimants and witnesses...

The new evangelization does not mean a 'new Gospel,' because 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Hebrews 13: 8), but rather, a new response to the needs of humanity and people today in a manner adapted to the signs of the times and to the new situations in cultures, which are the basis of our personal identity and the places where we seek the meaning of our existence. Consequently, a 'new evangelization' means to promote a culture more deeply grounded in the Gospel and to discover the new man who is in us through the Spirit given us by Jesus Christ and the Father...²⁰"

"We therefore approach the new evangelization with a sense of enthusiasm. We will learn the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing, even at times when proclamation might seem like a seed sown among tears. (cf. Psalm 126: 6)

'And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with

²⁰ Lineamenta 23. Pentecost: the basis of the "New Evangelization" - XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html

fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world.’²¹”

At the end of this letter, I should like to express my friendship and affection, to all my colleagues, the bishops, and our brothers and children, the priests, monks and nuns, and all lay-men and -women in these very difficult times that our Arab world is experiencing, in order to tell them once more, as I’ve said, “Fear not.” I think that fear comes from lack of faith and lack of love. If we love one another, we are not afraid. If we have strong faith we are not afraid, despite the fact that there are fearsome things. And I always say, as Pope Benedict XVI has said, “Where God is, there is the future.”²²” There is no future without God.

These are our wishes to all our children, especially those who are suffering in Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Libya and all other Arab countries – in Lebanon, where we have a significant presence; to everyone, a holy, happy Feast of Christmas, and a New Year, which will really be the true Spring of the Arab world, a Spring with a future, which is God, incarnate for us, a New Creature, to renew our earth.

Gregorios III

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East,
Of Alexandria and of Jerusalem

²¹ Ibid. Lineamenta 25, citing PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 80: AAS 68 (1976) 75.

²² “Where God is, there is the future,” the motto of Pope Benedict XVI’s third visit to Germany, which began on 22 September, 2011

APPENDIX
THE QUINQUENNIAL PLAN
Containing proposals inspired by the *Elenchus Propositionum*
of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops
Communion and Witness

Re. Propositio 35 The Family

I propose to deal with The Family under the following headings:

1. Centres for preparation for marriage can be found in many eparchies. I expect that it will be obligatory in these centres to follow courses suitable to each eparchy's characteristics and parish direction.
2. Found listening centres in each eparchy, especially for matters to do with marriage and the family.
3. Train young couples, married for between ten to fifteen years, to accompany families and prevent problems.
4. Celebrate silver, gold and diamond wedding anniversaries.
5. Celebrate family days each year.
6. Foster the habit of family prayers, comprising:
 - a) reading from Holy Scripture with commentary,
 - b) praying together,
 - c) liturgical service. (See the liturgical leaflets taken from the four volumes edited by Lutfi Laham, for Christmas, Lent, Paschaltide and the whole year.)
7. Found or develop already existing training centres for lay-persons.
8. Found a social resort for families where Christians can live their Christian life in our parishes in a social atmosphere of humane, holy faith.
9. Found family councils in every eparchy, with the aim of developing, as far as possible, pastoral care for the family.
10. When celebrating baptism, chrismation and the ensuing communion, bestow a Christian name that is clear and known to the relatives and that they try to use in the context of the family and in the family atmosphere. Put a list of male and female saints from which families may choose. Similarly when celebrating baptisms, allow the family to choose a verse from the Gospel, the Holy Bible or the Psalms which will be like a word of life for this new-born Christian. A list of such verses can be offered from which families can choose.

Re. Propositio 36 Youth

Here are some proposals on this topic:

1. Found a special office for youth, with the help of lay-persons.
2. Hold an annual youth conference in every eparchy, called Youth Day.
3. Prepare or facilitate work opportunities for young people, through an employment bureau.
4. Have one priest specialised and free to work with young people in each eparchy.

5. Found a central commission to be concerned especially with young people, particularly university students, to put into place joint programmes for everyone.
6. Launch a website especially for young people, in which they themselves can participate or which they can organise and provide material for and develop.
7. Found a listening centre especially for young people and their problems.
8. Practical projects: support students, by founding a student fund in each eparchy.

Re. Propositio 30 Formation

1. Religious formation.
2. Ecclesial formation.
3. Develop a sense of social responsibility in the Church.
4. Prepare lay-leaders to work in the Church.
5. Foster the sense of Christian membership and belonging to the Church. That can help considerably in creating a growing awareness of responsibility and of the meaning and goal of our Christian presence in Arab countries. It could also help to reduce increasing emigration.
6. Witness to our Christian faith and Christian identity in our society. How can we bring the Christian message into our society, to Christians and non-Christians?
7. Involve Christians in the issues and affairs of our society and homeland, in education, politics, in social work, health care and economics.
8. How can Christians respond to these pastoral needs and realise their mission in life?
9. Catechism and the new evangelization.
10. Christian faith education in our schools.
11. Emphasise Christian identity. What are the basic elements of this identity? How can we keep it and show it in our life and conduct? In this respect, we have in mind the words of Blessed John Paul II, who said that the meaning of being Christian, the meaning of being human, was being with and for.

Re. Propositio 31 Pastoral Work

Develop, organise and activate pastoral work by available means.

For our purpose, I suggest using the proposals of the First Eparchial Synod in Damascus in 2003:

1. The priest must be always present in his parish like a father to the parish, exercising his role of father and shepherd, and really available for his parish. So he must reduce his other roles a little, so that he can really put his pastoral obligations into practice as he should, insisting especially on pastoral visits, evangelical vigils and on care for each section of the parish.
2. It is important for the parish council in each parish to include representatives of the different religious groups and activities, and to enable everyone to participate in them, so giving the opportunity for plenty of parishioners to participate in parish life.
3. Put into action a structure and clear annual plan for pastoral work based on the pastoral structure, which must be accountable for its work to the ecclesiastical authorities.
4. Make an office and secretariat in each parish, with a secretary to help the priest in the administrative work and finances. Identity cards have to be organised and printed for the

parish. The telephone has to be answered and parish archives kept using modern means, so that the priest can be liberated for pastoral work.

5. Train seminarians to be more open and welcoming, far from a domineering and selfish attitude and further their training through sessions at local level for a period of five years after their ordination as priests, thereby developing community life among the parish priests with the parish.
6. Prepare more lay-people for pastoral work with the priest according to their capacities.
7. Put a general pastoral system in the eparchy to be applied in each parish.
8. Have a member of the clergy or other person with a good formation ready to answer questions that parishioners may ask.
9. Launch the idea of district-based pastoral care, especially in large parishes, with a sub-committee for each district, to work with the priest to animate pastoral work in each district. This can be done in missions where there is no priest, especially in countries overseas, where there are small missions but not yet a priest.

(The above are the resolutions and proposals of the First Eparchial Synod at Damascus.)

10. Exercise and train people for working with apostolic movements, especially with children and young people.
11. Mount a special programme that really presents the history and identity of our Church, its heritage and mission.
12. Give a greater role to lay-people through their participation in church responsibilities, especially at the administrative and pastoral levels.
13. Give a greater role to women in church.
14. Give training to priests and lay-people as to how to be apostles in their work-place and profession.
15. Support Christian morale, based on the Word of God, our holy faith and on our responsibility and presence as Christian citizens alongside citizens who are not of our religion.
16. Emphasise identity and solidarity among the various parishes to strengthen the morale of the faithful and to encourage their identity to be lived in communion and witness.

Re. Propositio 39 Liturgy

Liturgical, spiritual and sacramental life:

1. Train priests for liturgical prayer, service and sacraments according to real, liturgical principles. Keep Church unity through its rites.
2. Implement the rules and proposals that were drawn up by the Patriarchal Liturgical Commission for liturgical animation.
3. Reflect and make a plan of how to make our rite, prayers and sacraments more popular, in the sense of allowing the people to participate in the Liturgy, and other sacraments, such as baptism and marriage, and in funerals.
4. Little spiritual, pastoral and liturgical booklets can be produced for each sacrament. (Such booklets have been written by Archbishop Lutfi Laham, with a preface about the symbols of each rite.)

5. Sessions of spiritual and liturgical teaching and guidance, especially on the occasion of meetings and celebration of sacraments, especially baptism, solemn communion and marriage, and marriage preparation studies too. The role of the god-parents and the relatives participating in these matters should be emphasised.
6. Through Sunday sermons make faithful Christians aware of and give them guidance about everything to do with Church sacraments.
7. Emphasise the explanation of the Divine Liturgy and other sacraments through courses given in catechism centres. To help with that, here are some books that may be of interest:
 - i) *The Manual of Pastoral Sacraments* by Fr. Joseph Lagine, (2007) after the Pastoral Synod at Damascus in 2003.
 - ii) *Introduction to Liturgical Services and their Symbolism in the Eastern Church*, by Lutfi Laham (First published in Arabic in 1998 and subsequently in English by Eastern Christian Publications in 2009)
 - iii) *Prayer-books in the Church and the Community*, by Patriarch Gregorios III (2005)
 - iv) A booklet containing all the *Introductions to the Liturgical Service-books* (in Arabic)

Spiritual and communitarian life among the clergy

1. Animate communitarian spiritual life at parish priest level, especially in neighbouring districts or regions, whether in the same eparchy or in neighbouring eparchies. (For example, in Lebanon, the South and the Shouf, then Beirut and Tripoli, then Zahleh and the Beqaa together.)
2. Hold meetings for each region to implement the Synod for the Middle East, *Communion and Witness*.
3. Have a meeting for the priests of each country.
4. Hold at least an annual meeting, let us say, for all the priests of the different parishes and eparchies in a country.
5. Have an annual spiritual retreat for bishops of all the eparchies of the Middle East, or for the eparchies of each country (such as Lebanon) and so forth.
6. Hold a spiritual retreat for all monks and nuns, either separately or together, or according to region or country.
7. We propose holding a congress for clergy, as was done in the time of our predecessor, Maximos V.

Re. Propositio 33 Media

Information technology and social means of communication

1. Found a commission on information in each eparchy, whose task will be to check everything that goes into print, or that concerns us in a television or radio review on religion, morality or ethics, or that may have a harmful influence on young people or families and keep each other informed in our different eparchies.
2. Found a centre entitled *Questions and Answers* in each eparchy or group of eparchies.
3. Encourage exchange between websites of different eparchies.
4. Discover ways to reach young people through means of social communication.

5. Use social networking to ensure that our newsletters reach people who are not regular church-goers.
6. Activate our presence through different local and international social means of communication.
7. Activate the websites of our various eparchies.
8. Find different ways to present our heritage to our faithful, especially youth.
9. Use social means of communication to make our presence felt among young people.
10. The Synod of 2012 will have as its theme, *The New Evangelization*. (See my Christmas Letter 2010, *New Creature*.)

The Tithing Project

This has to do with starting a programme and community and pastoral rules in our Church to revitalise the Church's commandment on tithing, especially in our various eparchies, taking as a basis my 2003 Christmas Letter, *Poverty and Development*, where a project for Melkite Solidarity is outlined, which may yet help in this matter of tithing.

Putting this commandment into action is one of the more significant means of giving a more practical sense to our ecclesial commitment. It is also a practical way of showing our Melkite collaboration and solidarity within the one Patriarchal Church. It is also a way of collecting the necessary money for realising the projects of the Quinquennial Plan in the various eparchies.

In fact it should not be forgotten that there have been efforts made in that direction in the Eparchy of Beirut, starting with Bishop Gregory Haddad, and later with Bishop Joseph Kallas. When I was Patriarchal Vicar in Jerusalem, I managed in part to put something into effect in the Dinar project.

Re. Propositio 42 Islam

Muslim-Christian Dialogue

The subject is very important, difficult and arduous, but we have to give it our greatest care. Our Christian presence and future, our Christian communion and witness are all linked to living together, collaboration and solidarity with Muslims. (See my 2006 Christmas Letter on *Peace, Living Together and the Christian Presence in the Arab Middle East*.) There are many proposals on the matter that have been put forward in books on dialogue, such as that of Rev Prof Theodore Adel Khoury, Professor Youssef Durrah al-Haddad and the basic principles that have appeared in Vatican documents. I would also like to emphasise the interventions made in the Synod for the Middle East, which addressed this problem.

Starting from all the above, I propose some ideas and stances:

1. Study the reality of the state of dialogue in each region, and on that basis, put into practice a plan for each region, eparchy or country. Then we can attempt to gain a global vision.
2. Write a paper, in which we outline some basic ideas for this dialogue, which could be prepared by specialists of our Church or elsewhere.

3. Undertake a study on the theme of how to present Christianity to Muslims, secure with regard to doctrine, morals, rites, devotions and customs.
4. By way of conclusion to the above, we can list as themes for joint study all the common values between Muslims and Christians. These can become lines of strength for common human, national progress together and can be also the subject of congresses, study circles or sessions and mentioned in educational catechism books.
5. Perhaps in this way we can manage to hold a Muslim-Christian congress or summit. We have had one in Lebanon and could have another such, at the level of each country and later at the level of Arab countries, as I proposed in the Synod for the Middle East.

Re. Propositiones 10-12 Christian presence and emigration

The relationship with the countries of the expansion

1. Make a study of the life of emigrants, and how to ensure an ongoing relationship between émigrés and those who remain in the country of origin. Study how to lessen emigration through different means. This could be done, with practical examples, at the level of every parish and eparchy. This topic has been studied by the Council of Eastern Catholic Patriarchs and their 1992 Paschal Letter was written on the topic, *The Christian Presence in the East, Mission and Witness*.
2. Form a Synodal Commission to work with the Conseil Supérieur in Lebanon to see how to develop relations between the different parishes of the expansion. (See Propositio 10 and Propositio 12 of the Synod for the Middle East.)

Re. Propositio 20 Vocations

Pastoral care for priestly vocations

Propositio 20 makes detailed mention of what must be done about this and I quote it in entirety:

“Vocations work requires:

1. prayers for vocations in the family, in the parish, etc.;
2. promoting Christian life in families so as to make possible the blossoming of vocations;
3. creating vocations committees in each diocese involving priests, consecrated men and women and lay people, to organize meetings for young people so as to present to them the various vocations in the Church and clarify their discernment;
4. devising a plan of substantial spiritual formation for young people involved in the ecclesial movements;
5. making parishes and schools more aware of the different kinds of vocations, priestly, consecrated and lay;
6. maintaining or setting up minor seminaries where feasible;
7. calling on priests and consecrated men and women to witness by the coherence between what they say and how they live;
8. intensifying the ecclesial communion among priests, which requires an openness to the different pastoral needs of dioceses, in order to address the lack of priests; and
9. attracting young people to consecrated life by the example of a deep, radiant, happy spiritual life.”

Re. Propositio 26 The Consecrated Life

Religious vocations for men and women

To that end, we can see Propositio 26 of the Synod about consecrated life:

“At the heart of the Church is consecrated, apostolic, monastic and contemplative life. The Synod Fathers express deep gratitude to consecrated men and women for their evangelical witness.

They remember especially the martyrs of yesteryear and the present day. They ask that the consecrated life, adequately renewed, be welcomed, encouraged, and integrated ever more closely into the life and mission of the Church in the Middle East.

Our Churches recognize the importance of the place of consecrated men and women religious in society, by virtue of their witness of faith, their disinterested service and their precious contribution to ‘the dialogue of life.’”

After this Propositio 26, we should like to add some proposals:

1. Emphasise the importance of languages other than Arabic in training centres for priests, especially French and English languages. It is absolutely indispensable that each priest should be able to express himself in either French or English, or both.
2. We should like to draw attention to the importance of the practical pastoral year before priestly ordination.
3. It is very important for seminarians to cultivate their spiritual life, as they prepare for priesthood.
4. I should like to draw attention to the need for excellent, cultural training for seminarians preparing for priesthood.

Re. Propositio 2 The Word of God

This proposal shows the importance of the Word of God, and the Fathers’ care for this subject. That is why we should like here to copy the two or three recommendations about the Word of God:

“The Word of God is the soul and foundation of Christian life and of all pastoral work; we hope that every family would own a Bible.

The Synod Fathers encourage daily reading of and meditation on the Word of God, especially ‘lectio divina,’ and the creation of a website about the Bible, including Catholic explanations and commentaries which are easily understood by the faithful. We would also like to see the preparation of an introductory booklet to the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, offering a simple way to read the Bible.

They also encourage eparchies / dioceses and parishes to introduce and promote Bible study sessions in which the Word of God is meditated upon and explained in a manner that answers the questions of the faithful, so as to help them to become more familiar with the Scriptures, deepening their spirituality and strengthen their apostolic and missionary commitment.”

Re. Proposito 7 Managing Goods

Financial Administration

This is a very sensitive topic, and that is why the Synod made a resolution on the matter, no. 7, calling for transparency and exactitude in everything to do with accounting, and dealing with material goods and money in the Church and directing different projects, as follows:

“For the sake of transparency, it is necessary to apply an audit system to the Church’s financial affairs that distinguishes clearly what belongs to the Church and what properly belongs to the Church’s personnel. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain the properties and goods of the Church and her institutions.

In any case, general and special Church laws are very clear in this regard. We think it would be very suitable to implement a joint system for finance, economy, management, and accounting in all eparchies, at least in outline. This programme would be practised and applied according to the needs and situation of each eparchy. Similarly, we should like, throughout the whole Patriarchate, to manage, in the coming years, to do all in our power for there to be local material self-sufficiency in our eparchies and religious congregations.”

Projects

Besides these papers concerning the Quinquennial Plan, we should like here to propose a collection of projects, which allow each eparchy or religious congregation to apply or implement according to its ability and need. Among these projects:

1. **Housing**; building houses. This is very costly, but every church could see how this might be realised, by some means or other. Especially, someone could offer land and groups of faithful could be constituted as housing unions or co-operatives.
2. The faithful could be encouraged to take advantage of local opportunities, wherever there are existing credit unions for houses, or companies building houses.
3. Encourage business-people of our Church to enter into collaboration with our Church, to realise such projects.
4. Present projects and proposals to the State for covering the needs of young people and newly-weds, in everything to do with housing.
5. Found, through parish benefactors, a **student fund** in every parish, to be topped up by the eparchy.
6. Develop **welfare societies**, which already exist in our many of our eparchies, so that they can help the prospects of poor people, by providing small loans, or jobs for the unemployed.
7. Collaborate between different welfare associations in neighbouring eparchies or regions, so that stronger associations can help the poorer or weaker parties.
8. Work to have **church halls** in each parish for weddings, funerals or other occasions. In this way there will be more communication between parishioners in each parish, where people can help each other and there is a healthy, Christian, pastoral, social atmosphere, which can help to further mutual solidarity, prosperity, involvement and identity in the Church. It can also prepare healthy marriages.

9. Similarly, it would be good to found **social centres**. These would be resorts for joyful occasions, a sort of club, especially for young people, with rooms, swimming-pools, popular restaurants where there would be a healthy Christian atmosphere for the family.
10. Be careful to apply social justice in our Church institutions.
11. Lobby Parliament to obtain sickness benefit and social insurance where at present there is none.
12. Try to find ways to found an association of business-people in each eparchy, so that they can support the eparchy's projects.

The Future of the Quinquennial Plan

This five-year plan was formed on the basis of the resolutions of the Synod for the Middle East. I have also taken into account some proposals of the First Patriarchal Assembly of September, 2007, as I have the proposals of the First Eparchial Synod of Damascus of July, 2003. I have also adopted some propositions presented by certain bishops and profited from letters and papers presented by priests and lay-persons at various meetings I attended by way of preparation for the Synod. Practically, this Quinquennial Plan is an attempt to reply to **Propositio 43 Follow-up to the Synod** for the Middle East, which runs as follows:

“The Churches which have taken part in the Synod are called upon to ensure that it is properly followed up by working together with the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East and the official structures of the relevant Churches, with a greater involvement of priests and lay and religious experts.”

So this Quinquennial Plan is a collection of projects, proposals and ideas that can, I hope, form an interesting joint project for each eparchy, according to its possibilities and a document of guidance for our pastoral work and ecclesial service in different sectors of our pastoral service. We can draw inspiration, ideas and guidance from it according to the possibilities contained under one or other headings, and it can be a landmark in the life of our Church in the years to come. In any case, this Quinquennial Plan does not exempt us from returning continually to the Synod's Resolutions and to the Nuntius and further to the Apostolic Exhortation given by the Pope.

I hope, at any rate, that this Quinquennial Plan will be well received by my brother bishops and the superiors general of the male and female religious congregations, and also by all the faithful. Of course, for this to happen, it will be most useful and even necessary, to put forward this Quinquennial Plan, or some aspects of it, to parish priests and discuss it with those responsible for different parish activities, monks and nuns, by means appropriate to each parish or congregation. So there will be interaction between eparchies and religious congregations to enable us to have a joint plan in the Church, to be realised according to the needs of each eparchy. Thank you in advance for the welcome you will give to this Five-year Plan.

With my good wishes for its success, according to the Saviour's will and for the service of the Church and our society and the prosperity of our country, I place this plan under the protection of Our Lady, Mother of God, who was the subject of the final Propositio 44 of the Synod, “Holy Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth, who shows us how to listen to the Word of God, the Blessed Daughter of our land,”- under her protection I place this step along the new way of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church

towards new Christian horizons in faith in Jesus Christ and the power of his word, which says, "Behold, I make all things new." (Revelation 21: 5)

With my blessing and affection,
Gregorios III
Patriarch

Translation from French: V. Chamberlain