

Letter of His Beatitude
Gregorios III
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East
Of Alexandria and of Jerusalem
For the Feast of Pascha 2013
(31 March 2013)

The Gospel proclaims the Good News of the Resurrection

“Preach the Gospel”

Christ risen from the dead calls his disciples after the Resurrection, to preach the Gospel to the whole world. “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” (Mark 16: 15)

Christianity begins after the Resurrection with the kerygma or proclamation, meaning the Gospel, which is Christ, for he himself is the subject of the proclamation or Gospel.

Similarly, Christianity begins on the day of the Nativity of Jesus Christ, also with an announcement or Gospel. That is the meaning of the annunciation made by the angel to the shepherds on Christmas night, “I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10-11)

Christmas begins with Christ the Gospel, joyful Good News. After the Resurrection Christianity begins with the proclamation of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, promising his disciples, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Matthew 28: 20)

Christmas brings the glad tidings but their proclamation begins after the Resurrection.

Now it is up to us to carry the message. In the hearts of all baptized persons the Lord’s voice rings out as it did to Isaiah, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6: 8)

So, after the angel’s announcement, “I bring you good tidings,” (Luke 2: 10) comes the command, “Go... and preach the Gospel.” (Mark 16: 15) Christianity is really the Gospel. Christianity is Good News. The word Gospel means “good news” in English as in Greek.

This is the purpose of this Paschal Letter of the Resurrection for this year which, despite all the challenges that our world is experiencing, shines with a threefold light. First is the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, given us by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, who signed it in our patriarchate’s Church of Saint Paul in Harissa, Lebanon on 14 September, 2012; it has to do with most expressive and encouraging dual theme of Communion and Witness. Second was the celebration in Rome in October, 2012 of the Synod on the New Evangelization, which we took part in, with our Patriarchal Vicar in Damascus, Archbishop Joseph Absi and two lay-persons from Damascus, Riad Sargi and Giselle Mishati. Third is the celebration of the Year of Faith (2012-13).

Our country land of the Gospel

We have great need of deepening the central importance of the Gospel in the life of Eastern Christians as children of that Holy Land that is the land of the Gospel; the land in which Gospel-Jesus was born, lived, taught, wrought miracles of faith, hope and love; the land where he walked, doing good by healing every illness and weakness!

He loved people, everyone, to the point of accepting suffering, crucifixion and death for them, that they might have life, and have it more abundantly, (cf. John 10: 10) and that they might participate in his Resurrection and become bearers of his message of love.

Yes, our Arab Christian East is the land of the Gospel, where the Gospel was first preached, in Jerusalem, Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria and Iraq and on to the Far East.

From the East, the Gospel spread to the whole world. Ex Oriente lux! From the East came Christ, the Light of the world. From the East, the Gospel went out. "Their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world (oikoumene)." (Romans 10: 18 and Psalm 18: 4 LXX)

We are writing this letter on the Gospel for the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the teachings, values and holy message of the Gospel to be our torch, conversion, light, guide and support, especially in this difficult period: we turn to it, read, meditate and walk in the inspiration of its light and find in it consolation, strength, hope and joy in the Resurrection, which we wish for everyone, in all our Arab countries, especially those suffering most: Syria, Lebanon, the Holy Land, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan; resurrection for all Christians celebrating the holy, glorious Feast of Pascha, and for all our fellow-citizens of all denominations, for all are called to be bearers of the Gospel message, the proclamation of resurrection and life, instead of violence, death, killing, destruction, terrorism, enmity, aversion, bigotry... for we have all been created for life, not death, and we hope for resurrection and eternal life. We are the sons and daughters of the Resurrection.

This letter

In this letter, I should like to highlight the importance of the Gospel, the New Evangelisation in the life of Christianity and further, in the life of every believer and even of every person. The Church has always been down the centuries "Mother and Teacher."¹ One of her marks is that of being apostolic, bringing Christ's message and proclaiming it down the centuries to every generation. She still fulfils today Saint Paul's summons to every heart, "Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel." (1 Corinthians 9: 16) I have every confidence that I shall light the fire of this Good News, so that the Gospel becomes the torch in the heart, mind and hand of every faithful person in our Melkite Greek Catholic Church.

The Gospel, a Word of Life, a vital message!

Reading the chapters and verses and events recounted in the Holy Gospel, we experience a prodigious strength and continual, dynamic power. The Gospel is not a book, so the Qur'anic expression "people of the Book" is not quite correct. That is because the Gospel is preaching by Jesus Christ and the apostles only recorded some recollections of that preaching in the Gospel, in its quadruple form, which is the proclamation of the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Thus it is vital to preserve the power and dynamism of the Gospel. Indeed, it cannot be confined to the limited definitions of a word, expression, doctrine or vision. On the contrary, it surpasses all those boundaries, attributes, definitions, human vocabularies, explanations and analyses.

The ever-new Gospel

The Gospel is always open, never closed! It is always new, thrilling, renewed, developing, flexible, open, communicative and capable of accepting every way of thinking, view and perspective: this is because newness is in the stuff of Christianity.

¹ See The Catechism of the Catholic Church http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a3.htm

The Second Vatican Council, one of the most significant events in the recent history of the Catholic Church, which opened on 11 October 1962, just fifty years ago, took as its main topic renewal and modernity in the Church. All its documents are a call to Christians to understand the Master's teachings in the Holy Gospel as modern teachings, suitable for the needs of believers today, in their society, given the problems and challenges to which they are exposed, the questions they ask or those asked of them by society, the world, modernity and development.

So the Gospel must never grow stale and nor should Christianity! You, who believe in Jesus Christ, don't have the right to grow stale! Instead, you must bear witness to the ever-new Christ.

The Gospel a discovery

Anyone who reads the Gospel carefully and deeply, with an inner spiritual attentiveness, is surprised by joy and gladness, because there is always some new discovery to be made. That is what Jesus expressed through the parable given to his disciples and hearers, about the man who found treasure and hid it afresh in a field and sold everything he had to buy the field. (Matthew 13: 44) He gave another similar parable about a merchant who discovered a pearl of great price, so he sold all he had and bought it. (Matthew 13: 45-46)

The Gospel an excellent grace (charisma²)

The Gospel is an excellent, ever-renewed grace or charisma, which is only found by those on whom special spiritual grace has been outpoured.

Those who listened to Jesus discovered this charisma and grace in his person, preaching, words, and relationship with people, behaviour towards their conditions, needs, requests, outlook and mind-set. This is what the Gospel expressed in describing the attitude of Jesus' people. Peter replies enthusiastically to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." (John 6: 68) Saint Peter speaks to Jesus on Mount Tabor, saying, "Master, it is good for us to be here." (Mark 9: 5)

The apostles are quite astonished when Jesus calms the storm rising against them on the Lake of Tiberias, "What manner of man is this, for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him." (Luke 8: 25) Jesus surprises his listeners, "Never man spake like this man." (John 7: 46)

This was the attitude of the congregation who heard Jesus preach a Sabbath sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, "And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. ... And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth." (Luke 4: 20, 22)

The Gospel a proclamation

It is a well-known fact that Jesus was not a writer. The apostles did not write down on the spot what they heard of the Master's teachings. Similarly, they did not choose to leave a written record of their Master's teachings. Commentaries on Holy Writ state that the apostles preached. They were absorbed in service to the spoken Word. That is why they instituted the diaconate, to dedicate themselves to preaching, as can be seen in the Acts of the Apostles. The sermons of Peter, Stephen and others were not gathered into a complete volume, but represent rather jottings of what they preached and taught.

So the apostles were mostly concerned with preaching the Gospel. They moved around different places in Palestine and Asia Minor (today, Turkey) and taught and preached to the people they met and met with them.

² Romans 5: 16-17

Only later did the apostles make a note of what they had earlier taught; proclamation preceded writing: then came the letters of Saint Paul, written by him or his collaborators. Later still the Gospel was written in four forms: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The Gospel a summary of Jesus' teaching

Readers of the Holy Gospel in its four forms can see that what is written is taken from a larger collection. They are recollections of parables, miracles and teachings of the Divine Master. Here are some verses that support that view, taken from the Gospel according to Luke, which I read through all in one sitting, enjoying the fine stories recounted in it. I found a number of verses that confirm what I have just said about the four evangelists.

So: what did Jesus teach and what were the questions he put to doctors in the temple in Jerusalem at the age of twelve? (Luke 2: 46) We read a little further on, "And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all." (Luke 4: 15) Again, "...All bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth." (Luke 4: 22) And again, he "taught them on the Sabbath days. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power." (Luke 4: 31b-32) What were his words? Where is the written account of this teaching?

Still in the synagogue at Capernaum, again, "What a word is this! for with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they come out." (Luke 4: 36) Again we read, "And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God." (Luke 8: 1); "And the people, when they knew it, followed him: and he received them, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God." (Luke 9: 11) There are many other testimonies of the kind. What were his words? Where is the written account of this teaching?

Jesus himself emphasised the importance of teaching during his life: "'I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent.' And he preached in the synagogues of Galilee." (Luke 4: 43-44) Jesus taught especially in synagogues on the Sabbath (Luke 13: 10). In chapter five, we read, "... The people pressed upon him to hear the word of God." (Luke 5: 1) and we read just afterwards, "he entered into one of the ships, which was Simon's, and ... sat down, and taught the people out of the ship." (Luke 5: 3-4) Again, "great multitudes came together to hear, and to be healed by him of their infirmities." (Luke 5: 15) And when Jesus taught on the plain, "a great multitude of people out of all Judaea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon ... came to hear him." (Luke 6: 17)

This sermon on the plain or mountain (Luke 6//Matthew 5) is but one example and model of many teachings. Perhaps it is a summary of the teachings uttered in diverse places at various times. Again we read, "And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God." (Luke 8: 1) Again, "And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem." (Luke 13: 22) And there are many other such verses.

We have a very distinctive testimony from the Evangelist John, the Beloved Disciple of Jesus. We read a description of the teachings and mighty works of Jesus: "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." (John 21: 35) And again, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." (John 21: 25)

The Gospel a conversation with humankind

This is the singular characteristic of the Gospel! It is the word of God in dialogue with humankind, talking to them, directing them, preaching to them and guiding them towards goodness, virtue, faith, mercy, hope, forgiveness, leniency, tolerance, justice and compassion: that is the Gospel! It is the "light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," (John 1: 9) It is the bread of life, food for the hungry and water for those athirst for spiritual satisfaction. It is the singular new vision of life, of humankind, the natural order, flowers, lilies, birds, men, sinners, the just, the devout, women, children, kings, emperors, leaders, values, righteousness, law, forms of piety, rites and so on. We find especially in the Gospel a real vision of the human person (man, woman, child) and their value, dignity, centrality and freedom.

The Gospel is the encyclopaedia of God's love for man, an encyclopaedia of values, behaviour, sublime teachings and healthy judgments. It is an encyclopaedia of words of life, for everybody, for all generations and every time and place. You can always find light, conversion, advice, wisdom, a question, a view, experience and everything your soul longs for in the Gospel: words for this life and life eternal.

Jesus a wandering Preacher

Jesus is the Gospel! He is also the first to preach his own Gospel. Jesus' public life is a journey of proclamation, a road of giving news of Jesus. He spent three years in this way, preaching and teaching. His first appearance was as a youth of twelve in the Temple, standing among the doctors, priests and scribes, teaching, listening to them and asking them questions. It could also be said that he is making himself independent of his father and mother.

He expresses that by answering their question when they found him again in Jerusalem and said to him, "Thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing," when he replies, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2: 49-50)

Evangelist Luke has preserved for us Jesus' first sermon, his first lesson in exegesis of Holy Scripture, which can be summed up as proclamation (*kerygma*). So we read in Luke, "And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.'" (Luke 4: 17, Isaiah 61: 1) He adds, making a commentary on the prophet Isaiah and further on the whole Old Testament and the whole matter of divine inspiration, saying, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4: 21)

Similarly, when Jesus wanted to explain to the two disciples of John the Baptist who asked him, "Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?" (Luke 7: 19), he replied to them after having done miracles, "Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached." (Luke 7: 22)

Thus Jesus sums up his teachings, mission and miracles for the proclamation of the Gospel. He asks those whom he heals to proclaim the Gospel in their turn. (Mark 5: 19 and parallels)

Through these verses and selected details in the Holy Gospel, it is clearly evident that Jesus spread a living proclamation and word of life along the roads and in the towns and villages of Palestine and on the shores of Lake Tiberias, in Jewish synagogues, in homes, on the hills, in boats, in Jerusalem, Nazareth, Jericho, Capernaum, Safad, Nain, on the Mount of Olives, in the Temple of Solomon, in Nablus or Sychar, on the Golan, by the Jordan... Jesus is a wandering apostle, a fascinating preacher, a likeable, kind man who combined preaching and teaching, healing miracles, so many evidences of his love, compassion,

tenderness and pity. He is really a living Proclamation, a Gospel, bringing the best of tidings to mankind – the love of Creator to creature, since God is Love and all his works are love, and all creations of God are love, and created Nature is the Paradise of God's love for mankind.

Today people enthusiastically follow television channels featuring the sermons of certain well-known, extraordinarily talented or charismatic preachers. Yet Jesus is the greatest preacher, most eloquent and charismatic speaker and orator. The crowds are the best evidence for this great, divine Master's attributes. There are a great many verses which show people's admiration of Jesus's teaching and miracles, attitudes, advice, judgments and views, as we mentioned above. We shall confine ourselves to a choice selection – such as the cry of a woman listening among a great crowd to the teachings of Jesus, who shouted a popular compliment to him (in Arabic *zalghouta*) above the hubbub saying, "Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the paps which thou hast sucked." (Luke 11: 27) Jesus spontaneously and very wisely replied, "Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it." (Luke 11: 28)

Paul the fifth Evangelist

Paul is in love with the Gospel! He can be termed the fifth evangelist. It is enough to recall his famous saying, "Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9: 16) Bearing this in mind, I re-read the letters of Saint Paul in order to prepare this letter on the Gospel and realised that the word "Gospel" can be found more than once in every letter. I noted some fifty places where the word Gospel is mentioned, without counting synonyms for the Gospel, such as economy of salvation, mystery of Christ, preaching or kerygma.

Through this reading, I discovered the meaning of Saint Paul's relationship with the Gospel in its depth, power, and meaning for Paul's life and gigantic apostolic work. Though he gives himself splendid attributes, impressive titles that demonstrate his role in bearing the tidings of the Gospel to every place, he does so only to "bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." (2 Corinthians 10: 5)

Paul is in a direct relationship with the Gospel. His whole life is bound up with preaching the Gospel of Jesus, Jesus, the Good News. He adheres so much to the Gospel that he repeats an expression that enables us to understand that he has his own Gospel. So he prays for the faithful in Rome "to stablish you according to my gospel..." (Romans 16: 25)

Again, he says, "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost." (2 Corinthians 4: 3) And he says, "[God] called you by our gospel." (2 Thessalonians 2: 14) Speaking to his disciple Timothy, he writes, "Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel." (2 Timothy 2: 8)

Paul ambassador for the Gospel

Saint Paul expresses the centrality of the Gospel in his life and preaching through these extraordinary titles, "an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God." (Romans 1: 1) He is "a minister" of the Gospel. (Ephesians 3: 7) He is its "ambassador in bonds." (Ephesians 6: 20) and has had the glorious Gospel "committed to [his] trust." (1 Timothy 1: 11) He is "appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher [of the Gospel.]" (2 Timothy 1: 11)

These titles that Saint Paul gives himself in relation to Jesus and the Gospel mean that he is committed to the Gospel to take it and preach it; he is ready to do everything to carry out the service to which he was dedicated when he met Jesus risen from the dead on the road to Damascus. His first words to Jesus were of complete self-abandonment and complete readiness to do everything Jesus wanted of him. "Who art thou, Lord?...Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" (Acts 9: 5, 6)

Paul lover of the Gospel

Paul is “not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.” (Romans 1: 16) and he serves “God with [his] spirit in the gospel of his Son.” (Romans 1: 9)

Nothing can separate him from Jesus’ Gospel or prevent him from fulfilling his mission and service to the Gospel and Jesus the Good News.

Here follow the finest expressions of Paul’s mad love for the Gospel and his enthusiasm for bringing the tidings. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’” (Romans 8: 35-36, cf. Psalm 43: 22 LXX)

How beautiful it is to see Paul burning for the proclamation of the Gospel, as we read in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, chapters 11 and 12. “Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” (2 Corinthians 11: 29) He describes the labours and everything that he joyfully endured for love of the Gospel in every place: “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: 23-28)

He concludes the description of everything that he suffered for preaching the Gospel: “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.” (2 Corinthians 12: 9-10) These verses remind me of an extraordinary saying of the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of blessed memory, “I am no longer afraid because I have laid my weapons down.”

“Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel” (I Corinthians 9: 16)

Saint Paul wants to preach with boundless generosity. “It were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.” (1 Corinthians 9: 15-23)

Obedience to the Gospel

In everything Paul obeys the Gospel. He requires obedience to the Gospel. (Romans 10: 16) and warns “obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Thessalonians 1: 8) He seeks to work for the Gospel of

God, "that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Ghost." (Romans 15: 16)

He reprimands the people of the Church of Galatia, because they have not returned to the Gospel. "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." (Galatians 1: 6-12)

From this verse, we may conclude that Saint Paul discovered the Gospel's teaching before it was written down, thanks to the revelation he received during his stay in Arabia, or the Hauran, most likely in the district of Mismiyeh, a village close to Khabab, my mother's town, where I am currently having a hospital built in memory of Saint Paul's stay. That is the region that can rightly be called the cradle of Christianity. Saint Paul mentions it in the Epistle to the Galatians, in the same chapter where he writes that he spent three years in Arabia. (Galatians 1: 17-18)

Saint Paul emphasises the importance of relying on the Gospel, because the Gospel is always right. He speaks of the "truth of the Gospel." (Galatians 2: 5)

To the people of the Church of Colossae he writes, "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth." (Colossians 1: 3-6)

Of his relationship with the faithful to whom he preaches the Gospel, he says, "We are come as far as to you also in preaching the gospel of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10: 14) Further, he says, "I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace." (Philippians 1: 7)

He speaks again to the faithful of the Church of Colossae: "You... now hath [Christ] reconciled in the body of his flesh through death...if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven..." (Colossians 1: 21 and 23)

Baptized folk bearers of Gospel tidings

Baptized persons who believe in Gospel-Jesus become custodians of the Gospel. They receive it and bestow it. They are responsible for the Gospel and its values and preservation, its proclamation and spreading, enabling it to be loved by others in the parish and neighbourhood and even among those of another religion, community or denomination. The Gospel becomes their identity, vocation, mission, and the meaning and goal of their life. With the Apostle Paul, they will say, "Woe to me, if I preach not the Gospel." (1 Corinthians 9: 16)

Speaking of proclaiming or preaching may sound unpleasant to many people's ears, especially in our Arab world with its Muslim majority, as well as in secular Europe and America. It jars with Christians and Muslims: with Christians because they know only too well Muslim attitudes to evangelisation. It jars with

Muslims, because they reject preaching by non-Muslims. They think that preaching should be done only by Muslims and Islam and is allowed only for Muslims and Islam and forbidden for Christians and any other non-Muslim believer.

I quite realise the seriousness of talking of this topic in our countries, in our Arab homelands, though they were the cradle of Christianity, before they became the cradle to Islam; and before both they were the cradle to Judaism.

I know very well that this theme is still difficult in secular Europe where problems arise on the topics of clothing (the veil), food, drink, marriage and family and in general about Shari'a or Islamic jurisprudence and legislation about the personal statute, freedom of worship and conscience, building churches and mosques, the height of minarets, and halal and haram (permitted and forbidden.)

We all quite realise the gravity of these problems, their significance, the difficulty of resolving them and sensitivity about them and the best way of dealing with them.

Perhaps great difficulty lies in the fact that every believer is persuaded that his faith is the true one; that his religion is best and he is the son of the chosen people, the best and most generous nation, the infallible Church...

We all know very well the popular, familiar expressions contained in the catechetical books of religious education that are taught in synagogues, churches and mosques and other places of worship, in Muslim, Christian and Jewish institutions, besides those commentaries to be found in other religious books and expressed at congresses and other public platforms...

There is also a difficulty to do with being able simultaneously to ensure doctrinal purity and my obligation to preserve its purity and clarity, while still respecting the doctrine of others who belong to another religion and living in peace with those who are not of my faith.

Furthermore, how can we build a believing civil society to be a model of the better city (or *polis*) that Christian theologians and Muslim *ulemas* speak of, to enable the same homeland to have room for all citizens, despite their different doctrines, living together peaceably, in mutual respect, acceptance of others, consideration, friendship and love?

The best religion! The chosen people!

I should like to be still clearer and more direct on this topic. In the history of Judaism, in the Torah or Bible, we can find the phrases "the chosen people," (Deuteronomy 14: 2) "the people of God," (Judges 20: 2) and "the promised land." (cf. Genesis 15: 18 and 28: 13) In Christianity we find the same expressions with another interpretation directed towards Christians as the new chosen people. So we read in the First Epistle of Saint Peter, "But ye [Christians] are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people." (1 Peter 2: 9) And we all know the famous saying, "Without the Church, there is no salvation,"³ and the Qur'anic verse, "You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind." (Surat 'Āli 'Imrān 3: 10) And again, "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam." (Surat 'Āli 'Imrān 3: 19) "This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you, Islam as your religion." (Surat Al-Mâ'idah 5: 3)

I don't know what Buddhists say of themselves and what other nations and countries say, but the proverb is well-known: everyone thinks he is best.

³ Cf. *A Treatise on re-baptism* 10 (anon. c. 256) <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0515.htm>

I used to get very upset reading or hearing such expressions, but now I've begun to understand the logic of each group and the members of each faith. Each of us is obliged to respect our own religion, extol it and distance it from errors, deficiencies or defects, priding ourselves on it and defending it in front of others. It is quite unreasonable for someone to denigrate his own religion and belief or doubt it and its value. Saint Paul tells us, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." (Romans 14: 23)

I am quite sure that everyone of us must raise ourselves above all these sensitivities by respecting each other's feelings, belief, religion, and everyone working for our own identity, traditions, nation, tribe, country, homeland and society, so that each citizen can live in his homeland, country and society in perfect freedom – freedom of worship, freedom of religion, of thought, art, vision and politics.

So we can gather together the values of our holy faith, in practice in our life, society, politics, economy, as citizens equal in rights, duties and privileges, working to be worthy of the attributes given to each group, religion, political, economic or social party, in fellowship with one another, in a mutual relationship, reciprocal service, belonging to our country, Church, people, tribe, working in the joint welfare services for everyone's prosperity, development, security and peace.

Let the expressions quoted above, which are the subject of acute sensitivity, be rather a motive for superiority in morality, charitable works, citizenship, the highest virtues: as the French proverb says, "Noblesse oblige!"

In this context, and in the light of this open, conservative, respectful, mentality, we can live our Christianity, our Islam, our Judaism, our political parties, our social visions...And so we shall really be the best nation, a place of salvation, a chosen people, a holy nation and royal priesthood. We shall live in security, stability, faith, hope and love...

We Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Confucians and atheists far from any religion should work to that end... By adopting this attitude that we can mutually enrich one another, defend our point of view, our honour, land, heritage, customs and traditions...That is really a gospel, good news for us all!

Furthermore, education should be conducted in the light of these values. They should be made into a charter for life for Christians and Muslims especially, by joining our efforts, especially those of Muslim and Christian clergy to develop them and bring up young generations along that line by incorporating them into school textbooks, and put into practice and preached in churches and mosques, in congresses, conferences and programmes aimed at young people. That is the real guarantee for living together and reducing the danger of emigration, riots, discrimination and rivalries. That will obtain success for Christians and Muslims: for Muslims *per se* and Christians *per se* in Arab and Muslim countries, far from mutual accusations of apostasy.

The Atmosphere for living out the Gospel

Such an atmosphere can be propitious and prepare the way for real Muslim-Christian dialogue of social and national life and theology. It also makes us ready for living the holy Gospel in our society according to the directives and guidance drawn up by the Fathers of the Synod in Rome in October 2010 and presented by His Holiness Benedict XVI in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation given in September 2012 during his visit to Lebanon, whence he delivered it to the whole Middle East, speaking to all Christians, Muslims and Jews.

Such an atmosphere is also requisite for living our faith as Christians and Arab citizens in our Arab homelands with their Muslim majority.

This is the warranty for living our Christian faith in our homelands and not emigrating, but remaining as an active part, as history shows, for we work, serve and enable our homelands, where we have experienced both sweet and bitter, to move forward...

The Gospel a call to living together

The basis for all these relations that are the foundation for our living together and respect for one another, despite all sorts of divergences and differences in Arab countries and throughout the world, is the doctrine that we all confess without any reserve or exclusion or monopoly that we are all servants of God, created in God's image and likeness. According to the Qur'an, "the closest to God among us is the most devout." (Sūrat I-ḥujurāt 49: 13)

We believe that God loves everyone because he is Love and full of compassion and merciful and makes his sun shine on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5: 45) and wants all men to be saved and arrive at knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2: 4) and who loves the righteous and pities the sinners and who calls all to salvation through the promise of good things to come and has life with him, because "surely we belong to God and to him we shall return," (Surat al-Baqara 2: 156) and as Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Saint John, "In my Father's house are many mansions." (John 14: 2)

In the same Gospel, we read that the High Priest Caiaphas had prophesied that, "[Jesus ought to die] not for that nation [i.e. Jewish or any other] only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad," (John 11: 52) because he is our peace who hath made the twain one and broken down the wall of partition [between one person and another, whoever he may be – or enmity], so as to make of two one, by bringing peace. (cf. Ephesians 2: 14-15) That is the Gospel! The Good New Evangelisation for all people, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish – or Buddhist or Confucian or non-believer or atheist, in fact and in intention!

That is the new proclamation that we should proclaim in the depth of our souls and that we should bring and give to others, to all our brothers, not to convert them, since "God selects for his mercy whom he wills" (Surat ali 'Imran 3: 74), "that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (John 10: 10)

The Gospel a call to conversation with humankind

In speaking of this very important topic in our Eastern society, I should like to quote passages of my Christmas Letter for 2007 entitled "The Word became Flesh" in which I recall the importance of God's word in Muslim-Christian dialogue and in wider dialogue:

Dialogue between Christians and Muslims

There is the Word that we have in common, it is clear: let us maintain a dialogue of our beautiful faith, for the word that was given to me by God in my Christian faith is truly mine, but not only for me; it is for my society, for my fellow-men and I must bring it to them as a light of love and as a call to love, a sign of hope for the other person, that he may grow in his religion and beliefs and deepen them, not so that I may despise him or he may despise his own religion.

It is of very great importance for people to love their religion and the Word of God for mankind, and know it in ever greater depth, preserving and defending it. But one must be open to the other person, to his convictions and faith. If not, we fall into relativism, which is the greatest enemy of faith.

There is no monopoly on the Word of God. It is just as much the other person's as it is mine. Our Muslim world is afraid of our preaching, but does not cease preaching Islam. That is an

unreasonable position. We require our Muslim fellow-citizens to acknowledge our freedom to bring the good news to others, with love and respect for their faith, but we do not require anyone else to embrace our faith. It is enough if people can find out about it and come to esteem and love it. Conversion is the work of God. Do not attempt to convert a friend, or loved one. God converts whom he will.

We thank God for the many, beautiful relationships between Christians and Muslims that occur especially in everyday living. However, I would like us to share together in the Word of God, since that is what unites us, draws us together and gives us strength, reinforcing our faith. Let us not be afraid to love the Word of God in our brothers and sisters. Let us not be afraid of verses from the Qur'an and let them not be afraid of verses from the Gospel or from the Torah. These are the Word of God for us all, every one according to his own calling. I would like to tell our Muslim brethren not to fear our faith. Let us all rather be afraid of using words of vengeance, criticism, pride and haughtiness. The Word of God does not despise anyone. It is not proud, boastful or puffed up. It does not engage in bad behaviour or enjoy retaliation. It does not rejoice in evil, but in good. It rejoices in love and believes all things. (cf. I Corinthians 13)

Let us love the Word of God, for the Word of God is for us all. Let us share these words, proclaiming them in song and loving them. Let these words of God be for our friendship, living together and mutual relationship. Instead of using empty, lying flatteries, let us nourish ourselves with earth's most beautiful words and feed each other with these same heavenly words that God addresses to the children of men, for God is bountiful and bestows his life-giving words on us all. Let us not be afraid of the words of God, but rather let us fear the words of men. Let us so act that our human words be changed into words divine.

Our zeal for the Word of God should be a means of sanctification for us and for deepening our faith. We must not allow our zeal for the Word to become a weapon to exploit others, judging, persecuting and compelling them to embrace our faith, any more than we can allow the Word of God to become the cause of conflicts, disputes and confrontations between our faithful and those holding different religious convictions. Nor should it become an instrument of terrorism and a pretext for one group to claim superiority over another.

I say to my Muslim brethren: don't be afraid of our faith, but rather be afraid if we neglect our faith and indulge in unpleasant habits. To my fellow-Christians I say: don't be afraid of the words of those Muslims who keep and preserve the Word of God.

The Church bearer of Good Tidings

These Gospel teachings, this sublime proclamation, spread throughout Palestine, needs apostles to carry them to the world, beginning from Palestine.

Thus, in the last chapters of the Gospel after the resurrection, Jesus himself told his disciples to bear this beautiful proclamation. So we read in Matthew, "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 always, even unto the end of the world." (Matthew 28: 19-20)

In Mark, we read, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16: 15) And in Luke we read, "And ye are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24: 48)

The disciples went out into all the world to carry out the commandment of their Master, Saviour and God. They founded churches everywhere: they are the geographical place, in human time, of the holy

proclamation. Every member of the church enters through baptism, and thereby becomes an apostle and bearer of the Gospel.

The Church with all its members is bearer of the proclamation of the Gospel: the pastors, parishes and community of believers, through pastoral work, good deeds, eparchies, male and female religious orders, various institutions, schools, universities, orphanages, hospitals, old people's homes, welfare institutions; through the presence of the Church's children in society – a social, political, economic, artistic, academic presence – in the press, in the workplace...

The proclamation of the Gospel is carried out daily through the Church, as Jesus said at Nazareth, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4: 21) Today is the whole story of the Church down the centuries, in which the Church has ceaselessly carried on proclaiming the Gospel, since the Church was founded to be the daily Gospel, the Gospel for every century.

Among the most important means and channels for spreading the proclamation of the Gospel are: the Church's teaching, the Divine Liturgy, the daily office, catechism, the sacraments that accompany the life of the faithful from the cradle to the grave and on to eternal life.

The Gospel's preeminent place

The Holy Gospel itself, as a book, has a privileged place expressive of its importance in Church history, services, teachings and liturgy. The Holy Gospel is the object of the greatest respect among Christian faithful.

There is no Church celebration, service, sacrament or community meeting without a reading from the Gospel and often from the Acts of the Apostles, Epistles of Saint Paul and books of the Old Testament.

The Gospel book is placed continually on the holy table in the Byzantine Greek tradition. This shows the link between the Divine Liturgy and the church service with the Gospel. The Gospel is carried in procession during the Divine Liturgy and in other solemn services and saints' days.

The Gospel must always be carried with great veneration, solemnly, surrounded by candles, incense and the faithful turn towards it during its reading from the altar steps and during the procession through the faithful. Then the faithful kiss it or kiss the priest's vestments as he lifts it, or kiss their hands towards it and stoop beneath it during the reading and they often follow it during the procession.⁴

Furthermore, the Gospel is the most beautiful present – the New and Old Testaments, or both together. It is beautiful to see the Gospel occupy a special place in homes. It is even more pleasant to see the faithful read the Gospel as a family in homes, at the start of pastoral meetings, confraternities and at the start of every meeting or celebration.

The New Evangelisation in the Melkite Church

The greatest and most important veneration of the Gospel is when the Church's children bring the Church's values into the world and their society.

The New Evangelisation was the topic of the XIII session of the General Synod that Pope Benedict XVI called in October (7-28) 2012, in which I took part, giving a speech on the subject of the New Evangelisation in our Melkite Greek Catholic Church, taking as my basis our own ancestral heritage, which

⁴ The custom of allowing the Gospel to be carried by the bishop's driver or altar-server before its reading must be abolished.

is capable today of bringing renewal to our Church, and enabling it to carry the proclamation of the renewed Gospel, in the face of the challenges hindering our way of faith.

Main stages of the proposed programme

1. Encourage pilgrimage to the holy places in Palestine and to monastic places of pilgrimage to the Mother of God and the saints that are scattered through our country. Similarly, visit churches in various Christian communities, in order to become familiar with new spiritual experiences.
2. Spiritual retreats, especially in monasteries and convents, for male and female lay-persons and young persons. Attend services held in monasteries and convents and hear talks about their history and mission.
3. Use means of communication to proclaim the Gospel, especially with young people who all use these media most, in order to train them to bring the Gospel to their friends.
4. Take the opportunity from liturgical celebrations, the Divine Liturgy and other liturgical services, to deepen spiritual life, especially on major feasts, the fasting periods that precede the feasts, of which there are four in the ancient tradition of our Church: the Advent Fast and the Lenten Fast, the Apostles' Fast and the Dormition Fast.
5. Animate liturgical services and help the faithful, especially the young, to take part in them in a personal way, especially the Divine Liturgy, Vespers, the services during Great Lent and the All-night Vigils, to have an atmosphere of prayer and meditation.
6. Careful celebration of the sacraments of the Christian life, especially Baptism, holy Chrismation or Myron, Communion and Marriage. The faithful have to be helped to take part actively, especially through using plastified booklets containing explanations of the services' rich symbolism.
7. Priests must prepare their sermons well. Seminarians have to be well prepared in the art of preaching, spiritual counselling and personal accompaniment.
8. Tell the faithful about saints' lives, Church history, how Gospel values have been lived out in difficult conditions requiring heroism and even martyrdom.
9. Show the role of icons in our Eastern tradition, as icons are theology in colours and symbols. All aspects of icons help disclose the mystery of Christ. It is important to introduce into our parishes spiritual vigils in front of holy icons, accompanied by theological and spiritual explanations, with intervals of silence and personal prayer. The West has preceded us in organising meditations and night-time silent prayer vigils in front of icons.
10. Create a Christian social and communal atmosphere through parish activities, family and other group meetings in the parish. For example, feasts, anniversaries, the opportunity for celebrating the sacraments, meetings of confraternities to exchange personal experiences. We all know how much we need this social atmosphere of faith, especially in the difficult conditions that our country is going through. We have to take advantage of the love of young people for such activities. Indeed, they are best at organising and animating them.

Jesus' Gospel: my Gospel

I have spent some time in this Paschal Letter expatiating on the Holy Gospel. We have been trying to discover its meaning through adjectives and approximate descriptions that are insufficient, despite their loftiness, to describe the holy, great, sublime, universal, global and cosmic Gospel. It all seems inadequate and yields but a pale reflection of the Gospel as that is not just Jesus' preaching and teaching, but it is rather Jesus himself.

Here is a list of its attributes:

- The Gospel, a living Word
- The Gospel, a living proclamation
- The Gospel, ever-new
- The Gospel, a discovery
- The Gospel, an exceeding grace
- The Gospel, a summary of Jesus' teachings
- The Gospel, a conversation with humanity
- The Gospel, the Word of life

But it all remains but a pretty picture to our gaze if we remain onlookers. Now in the present part of this letter, I should like to implant in the heart of every Christian, especially those of our Melkite Greek Catholic Church, and in the heart of every believer and citizen of our Arab world, the Gospel's flame, so that each person can discover that the Gospel is not outside or beyond, but inside oneself. Everyone is called to make the Jesus' Gospel his or her own, so that human life on this earth, in one's homeland and society can be transformed into Gospel, a lively proclamation of life.

I wrote part of this letter during my stay at the Vatican and more precisely on Thursday, 11 October, when I took part in the papal Holy Mass in Saint Peter's Square that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The reading during Mass was from the Gospel according to Luke, which recounted Jesus' sermon at Nazareth, which is now our parish church in Nazareth. After having read the biblical passage, Jesus began his sermon by saying, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke 4: 21) By that he meant that the Bible is his book: he is its subject and content and he will fulfil everything written in it, because he inspired it through his Spirit.

Right after the liturgy, I wrote as follows: Fellow Christian, can you say as you listen to this Gospel, "This is my Gospel. This is written to me." Are you able to discover through the Gospel your mission and vocation? Can you say the Gospel is your identity and your book, meaning that you are in agreement with the Gospel and that it expresses your thoughts, aspirations and hopes in your life? That it will always be your rule, reference point, director, guide and umpire in the face of problems, challenges, temptations, struggles, changeable currents of thought unleashed on us like violent waves, through the media, bulletins, books, films and so on. Then you may say with pride, joy, courage, firmness and conviction, "Jesus' Gospel is my Gospel."

It means that you have reached a vital, very important conviction: you have discovered your identity. You will do everything in your power to deepen this awareness, follow it up and bring it and offer it to others. Then your life will change completely and you will discover in depth the meaning of your life, the goal of your existence, the relationship of your life to this world, your mission in this world and your relationship to the next world which awaits you. This conviction will give you great serenity, inner repose, impetuous courage in work, success in society, real happiness springing from within and not imported from without.

You carry the Gospel in your heart and thought. Or rather, the Gospel carries you, comforts you in your responsibility for bringing the Gospel into the world. So the person evangelised becomes an evangelist, the envoy an apostle, the disciple the teacher... Seeing the priest or deacon carrying the Gospel in procession, you are not just an onlooker, but carry the Gospel yourself.

So you will not just be satisfied with hearing the Gospel attentively, zealously and fervently, but will yourself read the Gospel to others, by living out its values in your life, because the holiness of Christian living shows the Gospel's beauty. The saints are the best evangelists and heralds of the Gospel.

The Gospel Spring of life

Our world needs good news, that is, needs the Gospel, bringing Good News. It needs the Church as the framework in which we learn Good News, the Gospel, where the Gospel's values are lived out, which are real good news for today's world.

Our world, for me and my Melkite Greek Catholic Church, is especially the Arab world, the world where the sons and daughters of our Church are spread out. They are responsible for this Arab world with its Muslim majority. That is what has driven me and still drives me to repeat my conviction that we are the Church of the Arabs, Church of Islam, responsible for bringing the Gospel witness to this Arab world, which is my world, society, home, country and family. This is the world, as I said above, where we live out our Christianity, our Gospel and the Church's teachings.

We cannot live out the Gospel and the Church's teachings without belonging to this world, without loving and serving it and feeling and being convinced that it is our world.

I should like here to draw attention to two things that seem to me linked to a strong bond of destiny: what is called the Arab Spring and the Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness*. Furthermore, I am convinced that Divine Providence provided for a Special Synod for the Middle East to be held in October 2010, (in which all Catholic Patriarchs and bishops took part, besides observers and guests from other Churches, Muslims and Jews) before the beginning of the Arab Spring. The Holy Father, Benedict XVI delivered the Apostolic Exhortation in September 2012, as we said above.

I shall content myself with giving some passages from the Pope's speech at the presidential palace in Baabda, Lebanon on 15 September, 2011, during the meeting that I consider as a general Muslim and Christian spiritual and political summit.

"The particular character of the Middle East consists in the centuries-old mix of diverse elements... A pluralistic society can only exist on the basis of mutual respect, the desire to know the other, and continuous dialogue. Such dialogue is only possible when the parties are conscious of the existence of values which are common to all great cultures because they are rooted in the nature of the human person. By upholding their existence, the different religions make a decisive contribution. It cannot be forgotten that religious freedom is the basic right on which many other rights depend. The freedom to profess and practise one's religion without danger to life and liberty must be possible to everyone. The loss or attenuation of this freedom deprives the person of his or her sacred right to a spiritually integrated life. What nowadays passes for tolerance does not eliminate cases of discrimination, and at times it even reinforces them... Religious freedom has a social and political dimension which is indispensable for peace! It promotes a harmonious life for individuals and

communities by a shared commitment to noble causes and by the pursuit of truth, which does not impose itself by violence but rather 'by the force of its own truth⁵,' the Truth which is in God.⁶"

The Holy Father's words are an echo of the teachings of the Gospel, which is the basis of a real spring of salvation. In various previous letters, I set out those values, which I think of as an Arab human rights charter, as it sums up authentic demands or requirements, rather than the imported ones known as the Arab spring.

“Fear not, little flock” (Luke 12: 32)

A strong saying from this Gospel, repeated some 365 times⁷ in the Bible, the number of days in the year, is addressed to you: “Fear not, little flock.” Jesus gives us thus from day to day a dose of the Gospel, our daily bread, for us not to be afraid.

The little flock was the main theme of my speech in the Synod (given on 11 October⁸). I emphasised the fact that Jesus gave the little flock a big role for the sake of the big flock, so that the meaning of the presence, role and mission of this little flock in the Arab world, where Jesus, the Gospel and Christianity were born, is being with and for the big flock, and bringing it the most beautiful proclamation that the earth has ever heard, and that the angels heralded on Christmas night. “I bring you good tidings of great joy! ... Unto you is born this day a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10-11) Jesus is born for you! The Gospel is born!

Fear not, little flock! Live with courage, strength, joy, enthusiasm, optimism, vision, light in the darkness of these days. Be bearers of Jesus-Gospel's call to you, “Be light, be salt, be leaven.”

“Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’” (Jeremiah 1: 7)

When Israel was at the lowest point in her history, God called for help, not from the great and honoured ones of Israel, but from a young man by the name of Jeremiah. Jeremiah felt overwhelmed: “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” (Jeremiah 1: 6) But God was not to be deterred. “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth;’ for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you shall speak.” (Jeremiah 1: 7)⁹

Call to young people

I should like to address a special appeal to the young people of our Melkite Greek Catholic Church, to show the importance of bearing the Gospel proclamation, in the light of what His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI said when he spoke to young people during his visit to Lebanon on 15 September, 2012.

“Dear friends, you are living today in this part of the world which witnessed the birth of Jesus and the growth of Christianity. It is a great honour! It is also a summons to fidelity, to love of this region and, above all, to your calling to be witnesses and messengers of the joy of Christ...”

⁵ *Dignitatis humanae*, 1

⁶ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120915_autorita_en.html

⁷ See, for example: <http://365fearnots.com/>

⁸ <http://www.pgc-lb.org/eng/gregorios/view/Synod-Rome-2012>

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI to YOUCAT <http://www.youcat.org/lesen/structure-of-youcat/pope-benedict-xvi-and-youcat.html>

“You have a special place in my heart and in the whole Church, because the Church is always young! The Church trusts you. She counts on you! Be young in the Church! Be young with the Church! The Church needs your enthusiasm and your creativity!¹⁰”

I find an echo in this appeal of the Holy Father in the slogan that I am fond of repeating to young people, “A Church without young people is a Church without a future, and young people without a Church are young people without a future.”

There is a special legacy from the Pope for young people, given before his abdication, in his message for the twenty-eighth World Youth Day to be celebrated this summer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He tells them, “To make Christ known is the most precious gift that you can give to others.” He adds, quoting Paul VI’s appeal to young people at the end of the Second Vatican Council (8 December, 1965), “It is you who are to receive the torch from the hands of your elders.”

Benedict XVI then writes, “We cannot be true believers if we do not evangelize...You need to know your faith with that same precision with which an IT specialist knows the inner workings of a computer...To evangelize means to bring the Good News of salvation to others and to let them know that this Good News is a person: Jesus Christ...Christ needs you too...It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this ‘digital continent.’¹¹”

The joy of evangelizing

“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. *Ps* 126:6). “May it mean for us - as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelizers all through the Church’s history - an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench. May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. 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 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.¹²” (The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Lineamenta 25)

Peace be with you

“Peace be with you.” That was the greeting of Christ, risen from the dead, addressed to his disciples who were in prey to doubt, hiding, when he entered the upper room while the doors were shut. That is the situation of Christian citizens in these difficult times, especially in Syria, but also in Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. Their suffering has been harsh and bitter for two years now in Syria. They are afraid for their lives, families, work and children’s education. They are puzzled about their future.

¹⁰ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120915_giovani_en.html

¹¹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20121018_youth_en.html

¹² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html

The risen Christ comforts them, as he comforted his disciples. Furthermore he gives us a mission, outlining an historic role for us, telling us, “Go...Proclaim the Gospel.”

Peace be with you! This greeting was the leitmotiv of the visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Lebanon. After that visit, the last of his short pontificate, he never stopped talking about our Arab East, especially Syria, peace in the region and the historic, unique and distinguished role of Christians, their duty of being present and witnessing to Gospel values, as light, salt and leaven.

We wrote the last part of this letter after His Holiness' declaration on 11 February this year, announcing his decision to renounce his Petrine ministry of Bishop of Rome and successor of Saint Peter as Pope of the Catholic Church. I should like to thank His Holiness Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI for the legacy he left us Christians of the Middle East by convoking the special Synod in October 2010 and accepting our invitation to Lebanon in September 2012. We could say that through Lebanon, he visited our countries which are the cradle of Christianity and our churches, by giving us the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* on our communion and witness. For young people, he also gave us the resume of the Catholic Catechism, YOUCAT¹³.

We thank His Holiness from the bottom of our hearts for his concern for the Christian Middle East, his solidarity with the situation of our Arab countries, especially Syria. As a sign of gratitude, we shall cite here in the Appendix the most important passages about Syria.

Here are some extracts from the interview he gave to journalists in the plane heading for Lebanon:

“First of all I must say that it is not only Christians who are leaving, but also Muslims. Naturally, there is a great danger of Christians leaving these lands and their presence there being lost, and we must do all we can to help them to stay. The essential way to help would be to put an end to war and violence which is causing this exodus. Therefore the first priority is to do all we can to halt the violence and to open up a real possibility of staying together for the future. What can we do against war? Of course we can always spread the message of peace, we can make it clear that violence never solves problems and we can build up the forces of peace. The work of journalists is important here, as they can help a great deal to show that violence destroys rather than builds, that it is of no use to anyone. Then Christian gestures may help, days of prayer for the Middle East, for Christians and Muslims, to demonstrate the possibilities for dialogue and for solutions. I also believe that there must be an end to the importation of arms: without which, war could not continue. Instead of importing weapons, which is a grave sin, we should import ideas of peace and creativity, we should find ways of accepting each person in his otherness, we should therefore make visible before the world the respect that religions have for one another, respect for man as God's creation and love of neighbour as fundamental to all religions. In this way, using all possible means, including material assistance, we must help to bring an end to war and violence so that all can help rebuild the country.¹⁴”

Good wishes

Through this long letter about the Gospel, I address my most cordial good wishes to my brother bishops throughout the world to the Superiors General of our male and female congregations of consecrated life, to priests, monks and nuns and all the lay faithful.

¹³ <http://www.youcat.org/home.html>

¹⁴ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120914_incontro-giornalisti_en.html

We beseech the Saviour, risen from the dead, that as his way of the cross ended in the Resurrection, so may the Arab world's painful, bloody, tragic Via Crucis end also in resurrection, especially in Syria and the countries affected by the crisis, such as Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq, besides other Arab countries that are suffering or causing suffering in other countries.

We repeat our appeal to the Holy Apostolic See of Rome and to countries worldwide for them to work to stop the outpouring of Syrian blood. There has been enough suffering! There have been enough tragedies, pain, violence, terrorism, arms trafficking, fundamentalism and business at the expense of human life, dignity, daily bread and security! Therefore the world needs evangelisation, the Gospel of the Resurrection and life.

From the depth of our suffering, we sing the Resurrection hymn,

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and to those in the tombs he has given life.

+ Gregorios III

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

Appendix

Appeals of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI for peace and dialogue in Syria (Extracts)

After the Regina Cæli, Saint Peter's Square, Sunday 15 May 2011

My thoughts also turn to Syria where there is an urgent need to re-establish coexistence marked by harmony and unity. I ask God to spare this country of great religions and civilization any further bloodshed and I invite the Authorities and all the citizens to spare no effort in the search for the common good and in the acceptance of legitimate aspirations to a future of peace and stability.

After the Angelus, Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo Sunday, 7 August 2011

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am following with deep concern the dramatic and escalating episodes of violence in Syria, which have taken a heavy toll of victims and caused great suffering. I invite the Catholic faithful to pray that the effort for reconciliation may prevail over division and resentment.

In addition, I renew to the Syrian authorities and people a pressing appeal that peaceful coexistence may be re-established as soon as possible and an adequate response be made to the legitimate aspirations of the citizens, with respect for their dignity, to promote stability throughout the region.

My thoughts also turn to Libya, where the force of arms has not resolved the situation. I urge international organizations and all who have political and military responsibilities to relaunch with conviction, through effective negotiation and constructive dialogue, the search for a plan for peace for the country.

Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January 2012

I am deeply concerned for the people of those countries where hostilities and acts of violence continue, particularly Syria, where I pray for a rapid end to the bloodshed and the beginning of a fruitful dialogue between the political forces, encouraged by the presence of independent observers.

Appeal at the Angelus, Saint Peter's Square Sunday 12 February 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am following with deep apprehension the dramatic and escalating episodes of violence in Syria. In the past few days they have taken a heavy toll of victims. I remember in prayer the victims among whom are several children, the injured and all those who are suffering the consequences of an ever more worrying conflict. In addition, I renew a pressing appeal to put an end to violence and bloodshed. Lastly, I invite everyone — and first of all the political Authorities in Syria — to give priority to the way of dialogue, of reconciliation and of the commitment to peace. It is urgently necessary to respond to the legitimate aspirations of the different members of the nation, as well as to the hopes of the international community, concerned for the common good of the society as a whole and for the region.

Urbi et Orbi Message Easter Sunday, 8 April 2012

May the risen Christ grant hope to the Middle East and enable all the ethnic, cultural and religious groups in that region to work together to advance the common good and respect for human rights. Particularly in Syria, may there be an end to bloodshed and an immediate commitment to the path of respect, dialogue and reconciliation, as called for by the international community. May the many refugees from that country who are in need of humanitarian assistance find the acceptance and solidarity capable of relieving their dreadful sufferings! May the paschal victory encourage the Iraqi people to spare no effort in pursuing the path of stability and development! In the Holy Land, may Israelis and Palestinians courageously take up anew the peace process!

After the Angelus Castel Gandolfo Sunday 29 July 2012

I am continuing to follow with apprehension the tragic and increasing episodes of violence in Syria with the distressing sequence of deaths and people injured, even among the civilians, and an enormous number of internal evacuees and of refugees in the neighbouring countries. For this reason I ask that the necessary humanitarian aid and solidary help be guaranteed. As I renew my closeness to the suffering population and my remembrance in prayer, I also renew a pressing appeal for the end of every form of violence and bloodshed. I ask God for wisdom of heart, especially for those who have greater responsibilities, so that no effort be spared in the quest for peace, also on the part of the international community, through dialogue and reconciliation, with a view to an appropriate political solution to the conflict.

Interview with journalists during the flight to Lebanon, *Papal Flight Friday 14 September 2012*

Father Lombardi: Holy Father, in Syria today, as in Iraq a while ago, many Christians have felt obliged, reluctantly, to leave their homeland. What does the Catholic Church intend to do or say in order to help in this situation and to stem the flow of Christians from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries?

Holy Father: First of all I must say that it is not only Christians who are leaving, but also Muslims. Naturally, there is a great danger of Christians leaving these lands and their presence there being lost, and we must do all we can to help them to stay. The essential way to help would be to put an end to war and violence which is causing this exodus. Therefore the first priority is to do all we can to halt the violence and to open up a real possibility of staying together for the future. What can we do against war? Of course we can always spread the message of peace, we can make it clear that violence never solves problems and we can build up the forces of peace. The work of journalists is important here, as they can help a great deal to show that violence destroys rather than builds, that it is of no use to anyone. Then Christian gestures may help, days of prayer for the Middle East, for Christians and Muslims, to demonstrate the possibilities for dialogue and for solutions. I also believe that there must be an end to the importation of arms: without which, war could not continue. Instead of importing weapons, which is a grave sin, we should import ideas of peace and creativity, we should find ways of accepting each person in his otherness, we should therefore make visible before the world the respect that religions have for one another, respect for man as God's creation and love of neighbour as fundamental to all religions. In this way, using all possible means, including material assistance, we must help to bring an end to war and violence so that all can help rebuild the country.

Father Lombardi: Holy Father, you bring with you an Apostolic Exhortation addressed to all the Christians of the Middle East. Today this is a suffering population. Besides prayer and sentiments of solidarity, do you see concrete steps that the Churches and the Catholics of the West, especially in Europe and America, can take in order to support their brethren in the Middle East?

Holy Father: I would say that we need to influence public opinion and politicians to make a real commitment, using all their resources, all their opportunities, with real creativity, in favour of peace and against violence. No one should hope to gain from violence, all must contribute positively. In this sense, we have a real duty to warn, to educate and to purify. Moreover, our charitable organizations should offer material help and do everything they can. We have organizations like the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, specifically for the Holy Land, but other similar organizations could also provide material, political and human assistance in these lands. I would like to say once again that visible signs of solidarity, days of public prayer, and other such gestures can catch the attention of public opinion and produce concrete results. We are convinced that prayer is effective. If it is carried out with great confidence and faith, it will leave its mark.

Angelus, Beirut City Centre Waterfront Sunday 16 September 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Let us turn now to Mary, Mother of God, our Lady of Lebanon. Let us ask her to intercede with her divine Son for you and, more particularly, for the people of Syria and the neighbouring countries, imploring the gift of peace. You know all too well the tragedy of the conflicts and the violence which generates so much suffering. Sadly, the din of weapons continues to make itself heard, along with the cry of the widow and the orphan. Violence and hatred invade people's lives, and the first victims are women and children. Why so much horror? Why so many dead? I appeal to the international community! I appeal to the Arab countries that, as brothers, they might propose workable solutions respecting the dignity, the rights and the religion of every human person! Those who wish to build peace must cease to see in the other an evil to be eliminated. It is not easy to see in the other a person to be respected and loved, and yet this is necessary if peace is to be built, if fraternity is desired (cf. 1 John 2: 10-11; 1 Peter 3: 8-12). May God grant to your country, to Syria and to the Middle East the gift of peaceful hearts, the silencing of weapons and the cessation of all violence! May men understand that they are all brothers! Mary, our Mother, understands our concern and our needs. Together with the Patriarchs and Bishops present, I place the Middle East under her maternal protection (cf. *Propositio* 44). May we, with God's help, be converted so as to work ardently to establish the peace that is necessary for harmonious coexistence among brothers, whatever their origins and religious convictions.

We now pray: *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae... etc.*

Meeting with Young People, Square across from the Maronite Patriarchate of Bkerkeh Saturday 15 September 2012

I understand, too, that present among us there are some young people from Syria. I want to say how much I admire your courage. Tell your families and friends back home that the Pope has not forgotten you. Tell those around you that the Pope is saddened by your sufferings and your griefs. He does not forget Syria in his prayers and concerns, he does not forget those in the Middle East who are suffering. It is time for Muslims and Christians to come together so as to put an end to violence and war.

Urbi et Orbi Christmas Message 25 December 2012

Truth has sprung up, bringing kindness, justice and peace.

Yes, may peace spring up for the people of Syria, deeply wounded and divided by a conflict which does not spare even the defenceless and reaps innocent victims. Once again I appeal for an end to the

bloodshed, easier access for the relief of refugees and the displaced, and dialogue in the pursuit of a political solution to the conflict.

Address to H. E. Mr Hussam Edin Aala, new Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Holy See, Clementine Hall 9 June 2011

Syria has traditionally been an example of tolerance, conviviality and harmonious relations between Christians and Muslims and today their ecumenical and interreligious relations are good. I warmly hope that this friendly coexistence of all cultural and religious members of the nation will continue to develop for the greatest good of all, thereby reinforcing a unity founded on justice and solidarity.

In this perspective, events have occurred in recent months in which some countries surrounding the Mediterranean — including Syria — demonstrated the desire for a better future in the areas of economy, justice, freedom and participation in public life. These events also show the urgent need for real reforms in the country's political, economic and social life. It is nevertheless highly desirable that these developments do not take place through intolerance, discrimination or conflict, and even less through violence, but rather through absolute respect for truth, for coexistence, for the legitimate rights of individuals and groups, as well as for reconciliation. Such principles must guide leaders while taking account the aspirations of civil society as well as of the international authorities.

Mr Ambassador, I would like to emphasize here the positive role Christians have in your country; as citizens, they are engaged in the building of a society where all may find their place. I cannot fail to mention the Catholic Church's service in the social and educational sectors, which is appreciated by everyone. May I be permitted to offer a very special greeting to the faithful of the Catholic communities, with their bishops, and to encourage them to nourish the bonds of brotherhood with everyone. Daily relations with their Muslim compatriots shed light on the importance of interreligious dialogue and on the possibility of working together — in many ways — for the common good. May the impetus given by the recent Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops yield abundant fruit in your country, for the benefit of the entire population, and an authentic reconciliation among peoples!

Address to members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, Sala Regia 7 January 2013

I think first and foremost of Syria, torn apart by endless slaughter and the scene of dreadful suffering among its civilian population. I renew my appeal for a ceasefire and the inauguration as quickly as possible of a constructive dialogue aimed at putting an end to a conflict which will know no victors but only vanquished if it continues, leaving behind it nothing but a field of ruins. Your Excellencies, allow me to ask you to continue to make your Governments aware of this, so that essential aid will urgently be made available to face this grave humanitarian situation.

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