



*“ Paratum cor meum ”*

*“Lord, Increase our Faith”*

(Luke 17:5)

Pastoral Letter  
**of His Beatitude Fouad Twal**  
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem

for the closing  
of the Year of Faith 2013

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## Introduction

To the bishops, priests, consecrated men and women and lay faithful of our Diocese of the Holy Land.

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

The Year of Faith opened in the Holy Land on the feast day of Our Lady of Palestine on Sunday, October 28, 2012, with the celebration of a Solemn Mass at the sanctuary of Deir Rafat, located between Jerusalem and Jaffa. Later, another Mass was celebrated in Amman, at the church of “Our Lady of Peace.” We conclude this time of grace in Nazareth on November 17, 2013 and in the parishes of the Holy Land on the following Sunday.

Among the important events during this Year of Faith was the election of a new Supreme Pontiff. Since his election, Pope Francis continues to fascinate us and the world, by his humility. He enriches us through his daily teachings and wise decisions to reform and revitalize the Church from within. Indeed, the winds of change have blown. We hope that they will reach us all, so that we may attain “*the extent of the full stature of Christ.*” (Eph 4:13) Thus, every one of us will realize our vocation and fulfill our call to perfection and holiness.

At the beginning of the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI’s apostolic letter *Porta Fidei* (Door of Faith) was published. The encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (Light of Faith), which Pope Benedict started to write, was completed by Pope Francis. *Lumen Fidei* is the work of two popes and represents a great light in these

difficult times, when we need to accept and sublimate the harsh conditions that entangle our existence.

The Year of Faith signifies our desire to increase our faith. We prayed and have repeatedly asked the Lord, “*Increase our faith!*” (Lk 17:5) Our desire is for supernatural lucidity under all circumstances.

In this Pastoral Letter, I would like to respond, together with you, to the following three questions:

- 1) What is faith?
- 2) Why do I believe?
- 3) How do we transmit the faith to others, especially to future generations?

## Chapter One

# What is Faith?

### **Faith is a theological virtue**

1. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines faith as: *“the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe in all that He has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because He is the Truth. By faith, man freely commits his entire self to God. For this reason the believer seeks to know and do God’s will.”*<sup>1</sup>

Faith is not simply an intellectual adherence to the truths about God, but complete confidence in Him, like that of a child to his parents who love and care for him. Faith means a total commitment to God, who has manifested himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who is close to each of us, infinitely loving all humanity.

### **Faith is a blazing light**

2. We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ lights up our path. He said: *“I came into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me might not remain in darkness.”* (Jn 12:46) This light can illuminate every aspect of our lives, our present and our future. It can guide our footsteps in the complex reality in which we live. Thanks to our faith, we are able to see more intensely, more deeply, more sublimely, and more widely than human

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1) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1814.

mind alone. In a sense, we see a little of what God Himself sees! Thus, faith is a form of wisdom that leads us to make the right decisions at the appropriate time. But without this light, *“everything becomes confused, it is impossible to distinguish good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which take us in endless circles, going nowhere.”*(*Lumen Fidei*, 3) And so we find it difficult to understand everything that happens to us in this world and in the Church, unable to comprehend what God wants from us. Faith is a gift from God that holds great power within it. It becomes a strength and a force within us, and through which we bring to fruition His holy will, in spite of our human frailty.

### **Faith is a precious treasure!**

3. It is the precious treasure hidden in a field (*cf Mt 13.44*). We have discovered it through the grace of God. To gain it, we should be ready to sell everything. The field containing this treasure is no other than ourselves. We Christians can consider ourselves rich, for we possess this treasure in this Holy Land where we were born, we have grown up, we learned our faith and come to know Jesus Christ who has blessed and sanctified this Land. He called us to be his witnesses, bearers of his mission and of his message in the land where he lived, worked and taught, where he died and was resurrected for our salvation. It is also in this land that he sent his Holy Spirit to accompany us. That is why he said: *“Do not be afraid, little flock.”*(*Lk 12:32*) Thus, we are not afraid that we are few and weak because our strength is in Him who has called us from darkness into light and has made us children of light. (*cf. 1 Pt 2:9*)



## **God is faithful**

4. He who believes is secure. (*Lumen Fidei*, 10 & 23). He walks in safety and peace because God is with him and because God has promised him salvation, life and light. At the same time, those who believe in God are called to be faithful and upright because God is faithful to us. Saint Augustine said: “*Man is faithful when he believes in God and his promises; God is faithful when he grants to man what he has promised.*” (*Lumen Fidei*, 10)

God is faithful to the end and never breaks his promises. What strengthens our faith in him is that he is all-powerful, all-knowing and that he loves us. From then on, nothing frightens us, neither the present nor the future, nor the tribulations that rock our country, because we believe and we are confident that we are safe in the faith and life that God wills for us all. In order that faith dwells within us, and that we may grow in faith, we must remain vigilant to read and meditate on the Word of God. We will hear his voice if we listen because his Word lives. He speaks to us through the Holy Scripture. Biblical readings are complimented by devotional practices that place us in the presence of God: Sunday Mass, prayer at home, the Sacrament of Penance and Eucharist. All these practices create a new life within us. They turn us into missionaries who bring to humanity the good news of God.

## **Faith of Abraham**

5. The encyclical *Lumen Fidei* mentioned two great believers: Abraham, our father in faith, and the Holy Virgin, Mother of the Lord and our mother. Abraham did not see God, but he heard His voice and believed His promises, though they sometimes exceeded his human understanding. God promised

him a son in his old age by his wife Sarah, who was barren. He believed and he was fulfilled. God promised him numerous descendants as the stars in the sky and the sand of the sea.

He believed in the divine promise, even when God asked him to sacrifice his only son Isaac, through whom he would have gained numerous descendants! Abraham believed that God, who had given him a son in spite of his wife's sterility, was capable of bringing him back to life and to make momentarily incomprehensible divine promise come true. The faith of Abraham is a model of perfect and absolute faith, which submits and entrusts itself and "*walks with God*" without fear or hesitation in the certainty that God is faithful: "*He will remain faithful for he cannot deny himself.*" (cf. 2 Tm 2:11-13)

## **Faith of the Virgin Mary**

6. Mary lived the events of her life in the light of faith. She believed the word of the heavenly Messenger that she would conceive without the participation of a man but by the Holy Spirit, and that she would give birth to the Son of the Most High. (cf Lk 1:31-32) She believed that her cousin Elizabeth would also give birth to a son in her old age! The Virgin Mary went in haste to Ain Karem to visit and help her. Mary believed in God when asked to flee to Egypt to be away from the danger imposed by Herod. She believed in her son Jesus and in his mystery, even before she partially understood it.

During the wedding feast at Cana, she believed that Jesus would realize her desire that he was capable of transforming water into wine, and from there, to bless every faithful marriage. She believed that her son, who died on the cross, had fulfilled the plan of salvation and that he offered himself as a

sacrifice for the salvation of the world. She shared her son's suffering in silence and fortitude. God rewarded her faith and consoled her through the resurrection of the Saviour! Her faith had given her tranquillity and great joy in all that she lived through, even the most crucial events, that Elizabeth praised her: "*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.*" (Lk 1:45) The Virgin lived her faith heroically as a humble servant of the Lord, with absolute confidence in His will, even when she did not totally understand. Her life was an absolute 'Yes' to God and lived the obedience of faith. The faithful God, who saw the humility of his handmaid, chose and sanctified her to be the mother of his Incarnate Word. (cf Lk 1:46 -49)

## **Faith and charity**

7. In his Apostolic Letter *Porta Dei*, Pope Benedict XVI writes about the relationship between faith and charity. He cites the letter to the Galatians where Saint Paul underlines that true faith is the one "*that works through love.*" (Gal 5:6) This effective charity, this true love, fills the heart of the believer and leads him, with the grace of God, to bear witness to the faith in order to proclaim it as widely as possible to all the peoples of the earth. In this way, faith grows within humanity and is able to prosper. Pope Benedict XVI concludes his thoughts by quoting a letter from Saint James, the first bishop of our Holy City, that faith is completed by works, those of faith and love. (cf. James 2:14-26) No Christian can separate love of God and love of neighbor. Whoever loves God, by definition loves his his neighbor. St. John wrote: "*If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.*" (1 Jn 4:20-21) Faith thrives in charity. Love without

faith is reduced to ephemeral sentimentality. Faith and charity complement one another: we believe in Him whom we love, and we love Him in whom we believe.<sup>2</sup>

There is no love without faith, neither is there any faith without love. Faith without love, becomes impossible, a useless effort in a vacuum. Without love, faith is empty and all its deeds are worthless. God is Love. Where there is no love, God does not manifest his presence and our spiritual effort is doomed to failure. The strength and stability of our Christian faith are essentially rooted in our love for God. And the growth of our faith depends on the peaceful “explosion” of our faculties in our attempt to live in divine love. It is this spiritual force that causes the springs of eternal life to surge within us.

## **Faith and tribulations**

**8.** In the Holy Land, we live in a humanly, economically and politically difficult situation, which has a negative impact on all the inhabitants of Christ’s homeland: on Christians as on others. Sometimes it is the Christians who are most put to the test, causing them to ask many questions and harbour many fears about the future of their existence and their fate. Will there be an end to the Christian presence in the land of Christ and the early Church? Will their existence become simply a past memory? Or will their churches become sanctuaries of silence and cold stones?

In our society in general, the complaints escalate! Our region is suffering deeply. There is no visible solution on the horizon. Our Christian communities appear to be disappointed, like the two disciples from Emmaus, expressing their anxiety

2) Cf Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, Apostolic Letter, Rome 2012, n. 6, 7 and 14.

and their confusion as if they had not experienced the Good News of the Lord's Resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

We need the answer of faith to these questions and complaints. We need the comfort of our unwavering faith in Divine Providence, this Providence *“who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow.”*(2 Cor 1:4-5) We know that Jesus, who calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, will calm all storms that sweep over us. Let us be patient and alert, while waiting for the return of the Lord who will walk on waters to calm the waves! We live through faith, hope and love that *“has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*(Rm 5.5)

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3 Fr. Rafiq Khoury, *Six Volumes for a New Age* (in Arabic), Latin Patriarchate Printing Press, 2008, p. 132.

## Chapter Two

# Why do I believe?

### Christians by birth

9. Usually believers do not question themselves about their faith because it is taken for granted. “I am Christian because I was born a Christian!” The same reassuring phenomenon applies to Jews, Muslims, Druze and others. But this attitude is not enough because, at least for us Christians, faith can never be exclusively or primarily a hereditary matter; rather it is a divine gift that is accepted in complete freedom in response to God’s love for us.

It begins in the heart of God who gives us his grace, or rather gives himself to us, beginning with the patriarchs and the prophets and thereafter through his Incarnate Word. (*cf. Heb 1:1*) This Word is the radiance of God’s glory and the very imprint of his being. (*cf. Heb 1:1-3*).

His Holiness Pope Francis writes in *Lumen Fidei*: “Faith is born of an encounter with the living God, who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfillment and that a vision of the future opens up before us.”(n.4) That is why we believe: because God has loved us and has spoken to us. And we have accepted his love and responded to love with love.

Some might ask: what proof is there of God's existence? The first comes from our experience and the voice of conscience that cries within us, as Saint Paul said: "*You received the Spirit of adoption. The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*"(Rm 8:15-16) We believe through the power of this Spirit; we believe through the force of what we live. Among the other proofs, one finds the faith of the Church through history, above all the martyrs and other saints. Their faith is a model and a support for ours.

Every one of us through personal experience has touched, at certain moments, the strong presence of the Lord, his mercy, his justice, his love, his Providence and his peace. It is He who guides us in this life, from our birth, our baptism until our final breath. Often He chooses for us a vocation and a path that we were not expecting. Every one of us is a ship. God is the captain! We sometimes think that we experience coincidences. But with God, and for believers there is no coincidence, but a God who loves humanity and takes care of it. We are not the victims of coincidences nor of a blind and cruel fate, but rather we are the children of Divine Providence. "*We know that all things work for the good of those who love God.*"(Rm 8:28)

## **Proofs of reason**

**10.** Creatures bear witness to the Creator. Because they live and move, a Creator exists; as there is order in beings, there is a Supreme Being who creates order. We can proclaim with the psalmist: "*The heavens proclaim the glory of God; the firmament proclaims the work of his hands.*"(Ps 19:1) Saint Paul develops this idea in his letter to the Romans: beauty, order, harmony of the universe all lead to the certainty of the existence of God. (cf. Rm 1:18s)

## **Believe in Jesus Christ**

### **The eternal Word**

**11.1.** For those who do not know the divinity of Christ, He continues to be a unique man who astonished the people of his time and still provokes wonder today. But for us, He is more than an extraordinary person; he is the Word of God with whom he is one, so that *“whoever has seen him has seen the Father.”* (John 14:9)

I believe in him, God and Lord. At the end of this Year of Faith, each one of us continually calls him *“My Lord and my God,”* (Jn 20:28) as did Saint Thomas, who doubted at first. Christ is the Word of God incarnate, made like us in every way except for sin. (cf. Heb. 4:15) St. John wrote about him in the prologue: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came through him, and without him nothing came to be.”* (Jn 1:1-3) And the Evangelist added: *“No one has ever seen God, the only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.”* (John 1:18) We always need to know him better, increase our love for him with the desire to further deepen our understanding that he loved us and gave himself up for us.

### **The Master**

**11.2.** I believe that Jesus has brought sublime teachings that no one else has been able to or ever will surpass. The crowds marveled at his teaching and said: *“Who is the man? He speaks with authority! We have never heard similar wisdom!”* These teachings are miracles and the summit of these miracles is the “Sermon on the Mount.” When Ghandi read it, he was deeply impressed. He had been shocked by the “Christians” who were colonizing his country. He had understood that their behaviour strongly contradicted the teachings of the Master. So he said:



*“Give me your Christ and take your Christians far away from me!”* We too ask ourselves the questions: Are we Christians as Christ wishes us to be, so that people who see us accept the Lord Jesus and come to him? Or do we alienate from Christ those who know us, causing them to reject, or even hate us?

Although Christ lived on earth twenty centuries ago, He is still with us today. He is contemporary with humanity, always and everywhere. He is with us and guides us if only we open the eyes of our hearts and listen to his words. He is with us and guides us if we pay attention to the events through which he sends his messages. Every event is a call, a grace, a light shining forth from him. What sometimes frightens us should calm us, knowing that every event is a sign of his presence among us.

When we meditate on Christ’s earthly life, from his childhood to his death, when we think about his doctrines and miracles in our land that he sanctified, we proclaim *“My Lord and my God!”* By the grace of our faith, we make him return to our towns and to our villages, and we see him as his contemporaries saw him. Let us recognize in him our friend and our strength.

### **The perfect human model**

**11.3.** We love Jesus for his tenderness, for his humility and for being approachable. He was, and is so close to humanity! He respected and loved sinners, fishermen, publicans, despised “little” people. He cured the sick and those possessed. He is always bountiful in his mercy to save sinners without ever approving of sin. We ask ourselves: do we love humanity as he has loved it? Saved by Christ, we may, through his grace, become just little saviours like him.

We believe in him because he said: *“Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.”* (Mt 11:29) We believe in him

because he lived according to what he declared about Himself: “*I did not come to be served but to serve.*”(Mt 20:28) He has always given and has never taken. Saint Paul proposed: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”(cf. Phil 2:5) We have plenty on which to meditate! This is an entire program for life!

## **I believe in the Holy Scripture**

**12.** I believe in the Bible because it tells me what God has done for man, since time immemorial until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who “*has lived among us.*”(Jn 1:1,14) All the Scriptures, a total of 46 books of the Old Testament and 27 of the New, show that the history of salvation has pointed, through a number of events, towards the coming of Jesus Christ.

### **A story woven of transgression and sin**

**12.1.** This divine and human story is summarized in the creation, the fall of man and the forgiveness of the Creator who has continued his love and covenant with mankind in spite of infidelity and sin. We recognise our sins in the weaknesses and unfaithfulness of our forefathers. We ask the Lord to grant us the faith, penitence and humility of the righteous, as well as their constant conversion to the Lord. Thus, reading the Bible enlightens us to better understand our humanity, our world, the present and the future. Without this light of the Revelation, the universe remains inexplicable and human history incomprehensible. (see *Lumen Fidei*, n.3)

### **The answer comes from the Bible!**

**12.2.** The Sacred Scripture is a light for us in the face of numerous challenges. We all have existential questions: Who is

God? Does he take care of the world and of humanity? Does he know me personally, or am I just a number for him? Does he have a plan for my life? Why is there so much evil in the world? Why death? What is there after death? Does a divine justice operate in the world? Why must there be a hereafter? In the Bible we find all the answers to these questions, to the enigmas and problems that seem insoluble.

If we read the Scriptures and meditate on them daily, they will enrich us and enable us to progressively acquire “*joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” (*Gal 5:22-23*)

Saint Basil wrote: “*The Word of God “heals” man of all his spiritual, psychic, moral and physical ills. There is a connection between the soul and the health of the body. A well-ordered life, full of joy, of internal peace, is reflected in a person’s health, balance and temperament.*” Saint Francis of Assisi said of the Bible: “*It is a school as well as a place of divine healing; we are healed, becoming spiritual healers as we open to the saving Word of God.*”

## **I believe in a One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church**

**13.** The life of the believer is an ecclesial existence; a life lived in the Church.” (*Lumen Fidei n.22*) because the entire Church, as Saint Paul says, “is one body, and all who believe are one in Christ.” (*cf. Rm 12.3*)

### **The miracle of the propagation of the Church**

**13.1.** A little child is born in a cave is something to marvel at. As an adult, he works miracles! But he is condemned to death on the cross! His disciples are persecuted! However,

the Church which believed in him expands and spreads out, initially across the pagan Roman Empire itself which had put to death the Nazarene, its founder! Despite tribulations and persecutions, the Church has continued. The barque of Saint Peter has stayed afloat in spite of winds and tides! Many had predicted the end of Christianity since the early centuries of its existence. The prophets of doom raised their voices, particularly during the Renaissance, at the start of the industrial revolution and in the midst of today`s technological advancement. The Church remains unshakeable: Jesus always calms the storms. (cf Mt 7:29)

### **The miracle of the holiness of the Church**

**13.2.** Within the Church we find both sin and grace, many sinners but also countless saints throughout the centuries. They are the good fruits of the good tree. They are the friends of God, in the “*house of God*”(1 Tim 3:15), built “*in the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*”(Heb 11:10)

The saints are our heroes, our role models after Christ, our brothers and sisters in faith who intercede for us through the only Mediator, Jesus, God and man. We find them of all ages, from earliest childhood to venerable old age. They come from all strata of society: men and women, virgins, consecrated individuals and married people. The saints provide us with models of faith and points of reference, after Christ, in our life and in our choices.

We recently welcomed the relics of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus and of Saint John Bosco. Every year we celebrate in our land the Blessed Sr. Mary of Christ Crucified of Ibilin in Galilee and the Blessed Sr. Marie Alphonsine of Jerusalem. We are certain that there are saints living among us, as Christ did. Their example encourages us to live our lives like them.

## Chapter Three

# Faith Received and Faith Given

### Every Christian is a missionary

14. A few days before his visit to Brazil for World Youth Days, Pope Francis wrote on Twitter: “*In this Year of Faith, let us remember that faith is not something we possess but something we must share. Every Christian is a missionary*”. This message accentuates the fact that faith must be welcomed as a gift not to be kept to oneself. It is essential to pass it on and to share it with others. We cannot ignore Jesus’s commandment: “*Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature,*” (Mk 16:15) and “*as the Father has sent me, so I send you.*” (Jn 20:21)

In truth, the gifts of God must not be locked away in a chest, they must be shared with everybody. We must, however, ask a question: What are we passing on? What are we sharing with others? We tell them what we have received and what we believe. In other words, we believe in one God the Creator, fountain of goodness, all-powerful, just, merciful and loving of man. We believe in Jesus Christ, in his everlasting Word. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, fountain of strength and love, the image of Jesus who reminds us of everything that He has taught us. (cf. Jn 14:26)

We believe in the teachings of the Divine Master, which has come to us through the witness of the apostles, in the Gospel and in the apostolic letters and summed up in the Creed that we recite every Sunday.

We believe in the triune God. We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, in the remission of sins and in the life everlasting. These articles of faith are not simply acquired information, but principles of life. They are beacons of light in the midst of challenges that we have to face. They are both a source of energy and a source of love within us. They teach us how to live our daily life, within our families, parishes, towns, cities and counties. We believe in all that and we proclaim it to future generations, so that the depository of faith endures in time and in the hearts of men.

## **The family, the parish, the school transmit the Faith**

### **The family**

**15.1** Every believer who has received the gift of faith is responsible for passing it on. We start at home. Parents are responsible before God and have a duty to pass on this treasure of faith to their children. First, they must nurture faith received through the Gospel and the Eucharist. With the strength that comes from the Word of God, they can become true witness for their children. Then, the family can rely on the Church and on the school. Foremost on the Church, because faith is not an individual matter, but concerns the people of God, maternally guided by the Church, sent by Jesus Christ. Faith is indivisible; it belongs to each one of us and is for all the Church.

Consequently, the individual believes in the Church and with the Church, in the parish and with the parish, an image of the universal Church where everyone is supported by others and where all support each individual person. As Saint Paul said, we form one body. But by belonging to the Church and to the parish, the family is not exempt from its responsibilities.

On the contrary, it is just as responsible as the parish. Parents, from their baptism onwards, enjoy the gift of royal priesthood. So they are members of the priestly and missionary community that must spread the faith starting in their own home.

### **The parish**

**15.2** The parish as a Christian community spreads the faith in different ways: catechism, liturgy and by example. The community of believers is the place where faith is transmitted. The parish, with all its members and its movements at this time, is responsible for spreading the faith, not only to the faithful but also to those who are away or have gone astray. When we speak of the parish, we refer particularly to the parish priest who must exhort his parishioners to lead a truly Christian life, whether at the individual, family or social level, because a believer must behave in the same way at home and outside of it. The believer must share the concerns of his people. Nothing must be alien to him. As a member of society, he is a citizen who must assume his responsibilities for the public good: the economy, politics and education.

Similarly, the priest must take an interest in all aspects of society and be aware of the different challenges in order to support his parishioners. The parish is not a ghetto, but a reality that is inseparable from the world and from society. It is the horizon against which the believer grows, lives out his commitment and bears witness to his faith.

The homily of a Sunday Mass is a message that the priest conveys to the faithful. It is his weekly exhortation, intended to call forth a Christian testimony that extends from the parish to society and encompasses all that is human: joys and sorrows, anxieties and hopes, good things and bad. The homily needs to broaden itself. It has to open to the reality of family life, local, national and universal life and to be able to convey efficiently

the depository of faith, bring to light the good that is in the world, this same world that Jesus wanted to sanctify through his Incarnation.

### **The school**

**15.3** After the family and the parish, the school helps too. In our schools, the directors, religious and teachers are conscious that they are running not only a school. They have the responsibility of communicating the Gospel through their teaching, and educating their students to develop a friendly relationship with God. This explains the importance of religious education. We cannot claim to have a clear conscience and to think that we have done everything possible in this regard. We have achieved much success in academic and scientific results, but with religious education, we still have a long road to travel and to improve.

The Year of Faith has been the opportunity for self-examination for our schools, to understand how they carry out their role of supporting and educating their students in the faith. There is a risk of fulfilling our duty by satisfying the demand for simple academic instruction, that is, the aspiration to a diploma. We, on the other hand, want that within our schools, students complement their learning of science and the humanities with a deepening of faith and love towards all men.

The programs and methods of teaching religion and human education need to be revised. Every school must guarantee fully qualified teachers in order to educate men and women capable of facing the challenges that await them, but also to trust in the Lord and to be committed to the Church. The Year of Faith is coming to an end, but faith is an unending journey for every individual, for every teacher, for every school. We hope that the Year of Faith has been the occasion for a new



impetus and a new opportunity to reflect on the mission of schools and education.

## **An appeal to men and women religious**

**16.** You are called upon to strengthen your brothers and sisters in the faith. Consequently, we consider your presence in the Church of Jerusalem, precious, whether you are from this diocese, or whether you are missionaries from another country. Together, you all carry the same message of faith to the Christians of the Holy Land. Each congregation has its own charism. The common but fundamental mission of all of you is to strengthen and activate Christians in their faith through your united presence, solidarity and sharing.

We feel the effects and benefits of your prayers together with the good you do for the faithful. At the same time, we cannot forget that the two peoples of this land, be they Christians or not, have for a century been living an existential and political conflict over land and property ownership. For them and for us, this is also a question of faith in the justice of God and in his love for mankind.

At the end of the Year of Faith, we request every congregation to ask itself this question: Fully aware of this conflictual situation, what can we offer and do to help others?

## **Sacrifice and suffering**

**17.** The blood of the martyrs poured out is the seedbed of new Christians. The Church is strengthened in countries where people suffer for their faith. Every year, thousands of Christians

die because of their faith. In contrast, in places where the Church was persecuted in the past, there is now a renewal of faith and a blossoming of new vocations to religious life.

Today a certain note of intolerance is apparent in the Arab world. All feel it. The Muslim, Shiite or Sunni, and the Druze suffer too. The reasons for this suffering are possibly different: for some, it is political conflicts, for Christians it is primarily our faith. They suffer in an already tormented political situation. What is to be done?

We cannot fail to affirm that the Christian is a citizen, with the same rights and duties as other members of society. Through his work and his sacrifices, he contributes to the development of his own country. If a Christian is harassed by fundamentalist groups solely for being Christian, he must remember the words of Jesus Christ: *“the hour is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God.”* (Jn 16:2) or yet again *“when they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say.”* (Mt 10:19)

The Christian is often forced to fight just for a normal and quiet life. Nevertheless, he must be ready to make many sacrifices, even the ultimate sacrifice of giving up his own life, as what happens in Iraq, Syria and Egypt. Recently, we witnessed the case of a Syrian priest, Father François Murad, who had become a religious after a brief spell as a monk. To escape his persecutors, he took refuge in the Franciscan monastery of Ghassanieh (Syria), but his executioners chased him into the monastery, killing him in the courtyard.

Aware of the danger, he had given his life for the salvation of his battered people. He knew what fate awaited him. He had

already prepared himself for this sad eventuality. A letter he sent to his Bishop a few days before his martyrdom confirms this. *“Every day, one of us dies. We don’t know when our time will come. Nevertheless, I am ready to die. I ask the Church to remember me and to pray for me while I gladly give my life for the intentions of the Christians of this dear nation, for the Church, for peace in the world and in particular, for our beloved Syria.”*

## **The temptation of isolation**

**18.** In the present difficult circumstances, we have a tendency to distance ourselves or to become simple spectators of events and situations around us. That is not a Christian attitude here.

We must rather have an active presence in society, while zealously preserving our own identity. We should avoid isolation or staying in the sidelines of society. We should avoid the ghetto mentality and the temptation of “confessionalism,” where different faiths become entrenched and isolated from one another.

Our life in the Holy Land is not a coincidence nor a misfortune, but a privilege, a vocation, a call to live as Christians and believers in God within the specific context of this land. Indeed, we are vigorously called to live not for ourselves, but as witnesses of the Divine Master whose message of salvation and Good News we announce to everyone.

“If the Christian communities of the East have retreated into themselves in the past, and thereby lost the sense of their mission of bearing witness, whether for historical reasons

beyond their control or simply in order to survive, these communities are called upon today to free themselves of past constraints to live the sense of the mission, which opens onto the world that surrounds them, to bear witness of having found a precious treasure, capable of bringing joy to the hearts of all men.”<sup>4</sup>

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4) Fr. Rafiq Khoury, *Six volumes for a New Age* (in Arabic), Latin Patriarchate Printing Press, 2008, p. 132

## Conclusion

During this Year of Faith which is drawing to a close, we have been invited to renew and reinforce our confident relationship with the Lord. We have also been called upon to answer some questions:

- Do we live as we believe?
- Do we live as Jesus taught us to?
- Are we aware of what Saint Paul said: “*Do have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus*”? (Phil 2:5)
- With the challenges we face in our countries and in the Arab world, how well do we prepare ourselves for the life of faith?
- As pastors, priests, families, parishes, schools and religious congregations, have we asked ourselves: how important is faith for us and for our lives?

The Year of Faith has been an almost extraordinary time of special commitment, but the life of faith is not confined within a pastoral year. It is a continuous effort of renewal as believers, in private as in public life.

This journey of faith finds itself in a particular context: wars, revolutions, popular uprisings in the Middle East, the Occupation of Palestine, and a search for stability in Jordan. The question of coexistence between the different religions arises in every Arab country: how the Muslim can accept the Christian and the latter accept the first. This is a challenge for all of us to go beyond the emergence of revolutions in the Arab world, without being crushed or trampled, even taking the opportunity

to deal with the situation with greater force, with a view to a better future.

All have suffered in this storm: Sunnis, Shiites, Druze, and also Christians. But the Christians, an easy target for some extremist groups, have suffered particularly for their faith, bearing the courageous witness of martyrdom, through a clear affirmation of truth and fidelity to faith and charity. They offered their lives in order that God might open the hearts and minds of their assassins, while “*their hope is full of immortality.*” (*Wisdom 3:4*)

Today, many people ask the question: Will the Christians stay in the Holy Land? Many predict our demise from this place. On the contrary, we will stay and we will be stronger than ever. We will be strong with the power of God and the promise of Jesus that we are “the salt of the earth.” (*cf. Mt 5:13*) The secret of salt is that a very little of it gives food taste. We will be strong because our presence here is a vocation from God and we have chosen to stay. In this way, all the events of our lives and all the challenges will be transformed into grace. It will also bring grace to others.

We shall continue to act, but also to pray. Together with the Apostles we say:

“*Lord, increase our faith.*”

(*Luke 17:5*)

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# Year of Faith

2012 – 2013

