

Fifth Pastoral Letters
of H.B. Msgr. MICHEL SABBAH
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.
PREPARATIONS FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR 2000
Feast of the Assumption 1997

*"In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God..
And the Word became flesh and He dwelt among us,
and we contemplated His glory,
the glory that is His as the only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth". (Jn I : I , 14)*

To diocesan priests,
to members of religious orders and congregations, and all our lay people,
Brothers and sisters,

1. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all".

On the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, I send you this pastoral Letter for the preparation of the Jubilee Year 2000. On the threshold of the new millennium, we look to Mary, our Mother, full of grace, chosen by God to be the mother of the Word made flesh, Jesus the Messiah Saviour. May she lead our preparation and accompany it, and help us to contemplate more deeply her Son, *"the perfect copy of the Father's nature, and the radiant light of His glory* (Heb 1 :3)

General Preparations

2. All the Churches of the world are preparing

Church of Jerusalem, with its four families: Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox (i.e. Armenian, Coptic and Syrian) and Protestant, is preparing for this great event. The municipalities of Bethlehem and Nazareth are taking public initiatives for the occasion. The governments of our various countries, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus, have also created committees to oversee preparations and to contribute to its success.

The Jubilee is primarily a religious event of the Church with a universal human significance. The faithful therefore have to live it in order to keep its true meaning: jubilee of the great Mystery of Incarnation and of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ

The Meaning of The Jubilee

3. *"When the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman "* (Ga 4:
4). With these words from the Scriptures, the Holy Father begins his Encyclical Letter for the Year 2000. The fullness of time means the moment of time, God thought fitting to fulfil in our land, and in the framework of our human history, his promise of salvation to the first Man (cf. Gn 3:15) and repeated to the Patriarchs and Prophets, the salvation perfectly

achieved in Jesus Christ, the Word of God Incarnate. Time reaches its fullness by the fact that God enters into the Mystery of the Incarnation and takes part in it.

"The Jubilee of the Year 2000", writes the Holy Father, "is intended to be a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving, for the gift of the Incarnation of God's Son and of the Redemption he has accomplished" (T.M. Adv. 32). "In the Year 2000, the truth: "Ecce natus est vobis Salvator mundi: "Behold, the Saviour of the world is born for you", must be proclaimed with renewed vigour" (T.M. Adv. 38).

For this reason, the Jubilee is compared to a new Advent extending over a three year period . The preparation focuses on the mystery of the Trinity which Jesus, as God and Man, has revealed to us. *"No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made Him known"* (Jn 1:18). The first year, 1997, is dedicated to meditating on the Mystery of the Son; the second year, 1998, is consecrated to the Mystery of the Holy Spirit; and the third year, 1999, to the Mystery of the Father. In this meditation, we renew our Christian faith, we work out our salvation and witness, by our lives, to the hope which dwells within us and to him *"who, before the world was made, chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his, presence"* (Ep 1:4).

The Jubilee and The Church of Jerusalem

4. As the Church of Jerusalem, we are concerned in a special way with this Jubilee because it is in our land that God, in his boundless goodness, desired the events of the Mystery to take place: the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, in Nazareth, of the Mystery of Incarnation, the Birth of Jesus Saviour in Bethlehem; the accomplishment of the Mystery of Redemption in Jerusalem. These are the cities Where we live our daily lives, religious and social . Many of us were born in these cities and now spend our lives working there. In these cities many of us have family and friends. In these cities we have our parishes where we live out our spiritual lives from birth to death.

Our daily life is intimately linked with the sacred and the Mystery of the salvation God wills for all humanity. The Jubilee reminds us, who live in this Holy Land, of two simple and clear realities: first, the Holy Places which preserve the memory of the divine mysteries are also places of our daily life; second, these places of prayer and daily life have also a universal dimension. Our Holy Places, as well as our parishes, are holy for us and for the rest of the world. We are here for ourselves, for our Church of Jerusalem and for the Churches throughout the world.

This is why the Holy Father desires the Church of Jerusalem to be, with Rome, the centre of this Jubilee: "The celebration of the great Jubilee will take place, at the same time, in the Holy Land, in Rome and in local churches all over the world" (T.M. Adv. 55).

Our Preparations for The Year 2000

5. The Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, in its meeting held 14-16 March 1995, appointed an episcopal commission to prepare for the Jubilee: Bishops Maximos Salloum, Saleem Sayegh and Kamal Bathish, who, as president, was named by the Holy Father a member of the Vatican Central

Committee to link Rome and Jerusalem.

This commission created other working committees of clergy and lay people to be responsible for various sectors of activities in the Church. The Commission for Pilgrimages has also become a commission for the Year 2000. A Christological Week was already held in May 1997. All of this has taken place in Jerusalem. It is now necessary to launch the same preparations throughout the Diocese in Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Cyprus. Each parish should enter into the Mystery and the grace of the Jubilee. It is true that the diocesan Synod of all the Catholic Churches of the Holy Land, still in the first stage of conversion and spiritual renewal, provides a basic preparation for the Jubilee. Nevertheless, each parish, each religious congregation and each lay person should be actively involved in this preparation.

Religious Congregations

6. In the framework of the Diocese, the Franciscan Fathers in the Custody of the Holy Land have already begun intensive preparations in order to live this event and to allow the Diocese to welcome the Churches of the world coming on pilgrimage to the Holy Places. Other religious congregations, according to their particular charism, have also begun their preparations for the same aims. The main preparation and contribution to the Jubilee consists of living this moment of grace, together in communion, and by an open co-ordinated sharing among the various sectors of the Diocese: parishes, Holy Places, monasteries and convents. Before any technical preparation, prayer remains the best means for God to increase the presence of the Spirit and his love among us. This is why the role of contemplative convents is always of primary importance. On this occasion, with the invitation to pray and deepen the spirit of communion among us, I would like to express to all the religious institutions in this diocese our esteem and gratitude for all they are doing for diocese in general and for the Jubilee in particular. Each of us is a member in the same Body of Christ and we accomplish our mission by unceasing communion with the Head of the Body, the Lord Jesus Christ, and with all the other members. The celebration of the Jubilee is a moment of communion and grace which purifies us all and strengthens our union with the Holy Father, head of the universal Church, and with the Bishop, head on the diocese.

Many events are celebrated this year in the diocese: the Synod (already mentioned), the 150th anniversary of the restoration of our diocesan see (1847-1997), upon the arrival, in 1847, of the first Latin Patriarch in modern times, Patriarch Joseph Valerga who gave a new face to the Diocese, a face which has remained until today; the anniversaries of religious congregations: the 150th anniversary of the Sisters of St Joseph (of the Apparition), the 150th anniversary of the Franciscan Printing Press, the centenary of the Benedictine Sisters on the Mount of Olives, the 50th anniversary of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Cyprus, the centenary of Charles De Foucauld's pilgrimage to the Holy Land (founder of the Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus ...). All this can only contribute to the spiritual renewal of the diocese, in its journey to meet the Spirit, in the grace of the Jubilee, the grace of individual spiritual renewal and of communion among all the local and universal sectors of this diocese.

Organizing Pilgrimages

7. On this occasion, the entire Church sets out on pilgrimage, on a journey where she seeks God, in our various shrines, in order to meditate there the mystery of the plan of

salvation, and to discover the true meaning of the Jubilee. Parish priests and school principals should organize pilgrimages to the Holy Sites, with prior preparation leading to true conversion. We have already noted that our Holy Places are also those familiar to us in our daily life, a life intimately linked to the sacred. Unfortunately, it seems that this familiarity with the Holy Places can distance us from the grace God offers us there. While pilgrims arrive from East and West, our own preoccupations and familiarity with the Holy Places can blind us to their value and holiness.

In catechesis, in all the apostolic movements, for young people or adults, we should insist on the importance of pilgrimage in order to better understand the reality of the Divine Mystery which entered our human history, in our land, in our villages and in our shrines.

It is true that some of our parishes are more fortunate than others. The parishes of Israel can freely visit the Holy Places. Yet because of the Israeli closure imposed on the Palestinian Territories (August 1997), they also are prevented from visiting the Holy Sites of Bethlehem and the other Palestinian Territories. From Cyprus, pilgrimages can easily be organized. The parishes of Palestine, however, are forbidden to visit the Holy Places except through military permits. The parishes of Jordan need a visa, hard to obtain. We hope that the closure does not become a "fait accompli", preventing the faithful to visit their Holy Places. We hope the authorities involved in this issue understand this and will allow the faithful to fulfil their religious obligations.

Welcoming the Churches

8. We have said that the various religious congregations in the diocese have begun their preparations to welcome the Churches to our Holy Places. The pilgrimages commission is trying to provide co-ordination, in co-operation with the commission of the Assembly of the Bishops and the Year 2000 Office. A brochure for pilgrims for the Year 2000 will be published; it includes all the necessary information. A meeting of the main diocesan pilgrimage leaders is planned. They will in particular study what the dioceses expect from the Church of Jerusalem and what the Church of Jerusalem expects from those dioceses coming on pilgrimage.

In preparation for such a great event, the shrines and other pilgrimage sites are due to become, more than ever, places of silence and prayer. We hope to achieve this, especially in the two Basilicas of the Nativity and the Holy Sepulchre. This has been dealt with several times during meetings between the Patriarchs and heads of the other Churches in Jerusalem and deserves further consideration. In ecumenical relations, this subject is of prime importance. It is also on this matter that the Jerusalem Church is often judged, even to the point of raising the question of how authentic her witness is.

Call to Parishes and Youth

9. The parishes have to prepare also for the welcoming the various pilgrim Churches, as a sign of ecclesial communion open to the world. The parish communities are the living stones with which pilgrims wish to get in touch: through this communion their spiritual journey in the Holy Land will reach its fullness.

As for the youth in the parishes, the general secretariats of the youth in the diocese should begin their action to this end. The young people themselves must take this opportunity in

order to renew in a special way their faith and hope, even if the future seems difficult and perhaps dark. *"God is light, - there is no darkness in Him at all"* (I Jn 1 :5). Similarly, all young Christians should be light, without any darkness in them at all. Life is to be built in every situation of hardship, every risk of death or chance for survival. Trials that last long might at times affect drastically our faith and throw doubts on the efficiency of prayer. Nevertheless, our faith in God remains unshakeable. One has to die in order to rise to a new life. Thanks to the Spirit of God who *"comes to the aid of our weakness"* (Rm 8:26), the face of our earth will one day be renewed.

Parish priests and other persons carrying pastoral responsibility should keep this hope, in this time of preparation for the grace of the Jubilee. All apostolic movements are earnestly asked to focus their meditation and activities on the Jubilee.

Pilgrimage of The Holy Father

10. We know how deeply the Holy Father loves the Church of Jerusalem and all her faithful and that he longs to come to the Holy Land for pilgrimage, to visit the Church of Jerusalem and the inhabitants of this land, and to bring them a message of love, peace, justice and reconciliation. We pray that this pilgrimage may take place as soon as possible, as the climax of the Year 2000 celebrations. We wish that with all our hearts. Once more today, we extend to the Holy Father the invitation of all the members of the Assembly of the Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land. We consider this pilgrimage of his as the visit of the Pastor of the universal Church to the Mother Church and her faithful, and an occasion for an ecumenical encounter as well as an opportunity to say words of faith, truth and relief to all the inhabitants of this land.

Common Efforts of The Jerusalem Churches

11. Since 1995, an inter-church committee representing the four families of the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Eastern (Orthodox Coptic, Syriac and Armenian), and Protestant churches, has been created in Jerusalem, in order to study in common the preparation for the Jubilee. The inauguration of the preparatory period for the event was announced in a common message sent to the faithful at Christmas 1995.

The Middle East Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches are in touch with this committee in order to share in every possible preparation.

The Church of Jerusalem, the Mother Church, has a special duty, on the occasion of this great Jubilee, to work for the communion of all the Churches. To pray for the communion among the various Churches here in Jerusalem is a way of preparing for the Jubilee. If the formal unity still seems distant, the unity of hearts and unanimous prayer is possible: *"May they all be one, as You, Father, are in me and I in You so that the world may believe it was You who sent me "* (Jn 17: 21). Jerusalem, Mother of all Churches, must be in communion with all the Churches of the world. In her should start the journey towards communion among the various families of Churches which are nowadays only associated, in the region, in the Middle East Council of Churches.

The Holy Father, in his Encyclical Letter, called in a special way for the unity of the Churches: "Among the sins which require a greater effort of penance and conversion, one should obviously mention those which undermined the unity that God desired for his people.

In this last part of the millennium, the Church must invoke the Holy Spirit, with more fervour, for the unity of Christians. This is a crucial problem as far as evangelical witnessing in the world is concerned" (T.M. Adv. 34).

With the Other Religious, Islam and Judaism

12. Our joy and conversion on the occasion of the great Jubilee are not intended to separate us from the human milieu of our life, societies and nations. On the contrary, every divine grace surpasses limits and draws people to each other, in the sincerity of hearts and goodwill. It fosters frank and objective dialogue, mutual knowledge and recognition. It is the occasion to look at every person through eyes renewed by the Holy Spirit, in order to cooperate in the creation of a new earth and a new heaven, by seeking earnestly and constantly peace and justice in our land.

The Jubilee and Peace in The Holy Land

13. Our land is called by God to rejoice, through the grace of the Jubilee and the celebration of the great mystery of salvation. It is the anniversary of the birth of the Prince of Peace, of the Messiah, Saviour of our land and of all humankind. It is in the contemplation of the Saviour, present in all the vicissitudes of history, that we look at our sufferings in this land of the revelation of God. Our situation here, around the Holy Places, and especially in the Palestinian Territories, remains quite hard. Difficulties and fear are part of our daily life: continuous controls, arrests, military peremptory sentences, closure of territories, increase of unemployment and difficulty in providing food supplies cause economic suffocation, frustration and despair due also to the present suspension of the peace process, the deadlock of the negotiations and the repetition and increase of violence and extremism. Jerusalem, centre of our prayers, is always subjected to "security" measures which prevent many of our faithful from entering the city.

In the face of these difficulties, we renew our prayer and hope. But we also remind the authorities of this world that peace can only be the fruit of respect for human dignity. As long as dignity is ignored and scoffed at, peace will be harder to achieve. We remind the great powers of this world and the leaders who are nowadays ruling this land that its holy character is very demanding it is different from all other lands.

We see also that the civil authorities are preparing to welcome pilgrims who will come from all the countries of the world. We thank them for their endeavour but we remind them that it is of prime importance to welcome, on the occasion of the Jubilee as at any other time, the daughters and sons of this land, and to remove the military barriers which have become a permanent obstacle to their faith and prayer.

To our lay people we say: do not lose heart! Even in hard times, the Spirit revives and achieves salvation. Fulfil your duties as believers and citizens. Involve yourselves completely with your societies and churches. Take all risk for building peace and keeping hope.

On the occasion of the Jubilee, the Church prays for peace, for all the governments of our countries and all their inhabitants. We pray for a lasting and final peace in our region. We pray for the stability of the Middle East, so that Muslims, Jews and Christians acknowledge each other as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same homeland. Thus, by our

sincere witnessing to the unicity of God, we may all become worthy of knowing the fullness of his mystery of love, celebrated in the great Year 2000 Jubilee.

We pray that our land become, with its peoples and religions, one family, reconciled in justice and truth, in order to witness to its holiness.

Conclusion

14. "The celebration of the Jubilee", writes the Pope, "should revive our hope" (T.M. Adv. 46). The hard times in which we live need this grace of the Jubilee. Our land needs to discover anew the meaning of the divine mystery which has been revealed in it.

In the Bible, a jubilee is a recovery of freedom for people and land. This liberation, in our days and in our land, can only be the fruit of a divine intervention. In spite of all difficulties, we renew our confidence in God: he will soon remember his land and have mercy on us.

The grace of this Jubilee means more communion in our church life, and more liberty, justice and peace in our civil life. We ask the Blessed all Pure Virgin Mary, our Mother and daughter of this land, to help us to deserve this grace by her powerful intercession. And may God almighty bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+ Michel Sabbah, Patriarch

Jerusalem, August 15, 1997