



Pastoral Letter

Thanksgiving

To my brother bishops, patriarchal vicars, priests, deacons, religious men, religious sisters, seminarians and all the beloved faithful in the Lord, in Jordan, Palestine, Israel and Cyprus.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.

I address this letter to you while I finish my mission as Latin Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem. I have prayed with you. Together we have worked in the vineyard of the Lord, “we have fought the good fight”; we have served our Church and loved all the churches. Together we have borne the suffering of the Holy City and our entire society, which continues to struggle with death and hatred, hoping one day to arrive in the light of the resurrection and experience a time of dignity, justice and peace.

Through hardship our Church has grown in those years. But the Lord has supported us by His grace and we can continue to fulfill our mission. Together we have prayed, and together, in the hardships, we have persevered. Today, I commit my mission to the hands of the Lord Who entrusted it to me, and to the hands of the Holy Father, Pope Francis.

First, I thank the Lord for all the graces He has granted me, through His infinite mercy, and also through the intercession of your prayers. Thank you for the welcome and acceptance I received among you during these past years, as a pastor, brother and servant. Thank you for your prayers, your love and cooperation. I thank and appreciate all your efforts, my dear priests of the Patriarchate, and all of you, priests of the diocese

belonging to different religious congregations who have served the parishes of every language and nationality. Here I want to make special mention of the Vicariate for the Hebrew speaking community.

I thank all the religious congregations, and primarily, the Custody of the Holy Land, for its many sacrifices and services. I thank all the efforts made in parishes, schools, and educational and social institutions.

I greet all the faithful apostolic movements and prayer groups. I ask God to keep you, to accept your prayers, and to fill you with His grace and His love. We all work for the glory of God. For you all, I have prayed and asked the Lord to grant your prayers. For you, I will continue to pray and to continue serving as the Lord asks me.

I also thank all those whom the Lord has put in my path, to serve them and for their support of me.

I thank all the Catholic Churches of the world and the Order of the Holy Sepulchre that help us fulfill our mission. Similarly, the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries and all the Churches of the Holy Land, the Conference of Latin Catholic Bishops in the Arab countries, the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East, and the Council of Churches of the Middle East. Together we have endeavored to do God's will for us, and to be sincere believers and true worshipers "in spirit and in truth."

I thank the Lord who gave us the joy of the canonization of two saints from our diocese, the Carmelite nun, Mary of Jesus Crucified, and the foundress of the Religious Sisters of the Rosary, Marie Alphonsine Ghattas. This event was for me the pinnacle of my ministry; two saints who will help us, by their intercession and the example of their virtues, in our journey to the Kingdom.

To my dear priests, religious men and women, and beloved faithful, I say goodbye, as I have reached the age of resignation. But my prayer will always accompany you, as you continue to bear the "weight and heat of the day" in all areas of the diocese. My advice can only be that of the Lord's command to His apostles on the eve of His passion and death: "love one another" and love everyone. Also, in this year of mercy, ponder the words of Christ: "Blessed are the merciful for they shall find mercy." Let us be merciful to one another!

Pope Francis wished to send his representative for a time in the person of the Apostolic Administrator, Reverend Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who was the previous Custos of the Holy Land. His mission, among others, aims to prepare for the appointment of a new

Patriarch. Father Pierbattista knows the difficult conditions and the needs of our land and of our diocese, having been Custos among us for the past 12 years.

These are difficult times that raise many questions. We'll try to respond with patience and reflection, united in our hope of a future of grace.

The Lord Jesus occasionally said to His disciples, "Come away", to renew and strengthen them through teaching and prayer. Today Christ says to us too: come away, far from stress and opinions, to pray and reflect on God's presence, to make our examination of conscience, to encourage each other and build a future based firmly on the rock of faith and love.

We also know that this is not the first time that God has addressed our diocese: come away, to pray and perform our examination of conscience. In 1947, after the death of Patriarch Barlassina, our land was engaged in a war. God sent us at that time an Apostolic Administrator, H.E. Monsignor Gustave Testa, then Apostolic Delegate, to pray and reflect with us until the day of the appointment of Patriarch Alberto Gori in 1949. Today, the call of God is repeated: come away! We all know the conflict that began in 1948 continues. Indeed, it has only worsened and become more dangerous for our peoples and for our churches in the Holy Land. This means that we have still to bear the responsibility of our peoples seeking justice and peace.

Meanwhile, God has confirmed us in His grace and sent us Patriarchs chosen from among us. Now, He invites us to pause, to pray, and to discern the way forward, as it remains full of challenges, and demands of us more prayer, effort and responsibility, and even our own conversion. It requires of us greater fidelity to grace, and a greater capacity to shoulder the multiple responsibilities of our patriarchal Church.

We thank the Lord for His will for us. We welcome His grace and with love we welcome him who He has sent.

The general conditions of our country and the entire region need review and a fresh start. It is the same in our Churches. We need a moment of reflection, as individuals and as a community. It is a time of grace that we welcome from the hand of God and the hand of Mother Church. We welcome Him in the person of the Apostolic Administrator, whom we accompany with our prayer to prepare our future as a land and as a patriarchal Church. With cooperation and love, that which seems impossible becomes possible; what seemed to be a surprise and one step back is, in God's eyes, a grace and a step forward that continues the new phase that began in the administration of our Patriarchate. For God nothing is impossible. For this, our action must be the

continuation of the action of God, in Christ's words: "My Father is at work, and I too am working" (Jn 5, 17). With God, we labor. The step forward depends on the continuity between our work and that of God. This demands of us a great purification.

Some ask: what is the term of office of the Apostolic Administrator? It depends on our cooperation with him and our love for each other. We can do what we want, if we do what must be done, and if we love as God wants us to love. With the grace of God, we are able to love; we are able to do His will and that of the universal Church, i.e. always to step forward. It depends on our faithfulness to God and our priesthood. I am confident that you will be able to experience the love of Christ and follow the example of Him "Who gave himself for us." I am confident that you will also be able to live poverty with the poor Christ in every area. Thus, we will witness God's power "at best in weakness" and humility.

I'm leaving you. I remain close to you in prayer. I entrust you to the love of the Virgin Mary, who accompanied her son Jesus and the apostles. She has always accompanied the Church and accompanies it today in this land and in all our parishes. I entrust you to the love of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who will support you with His grace and confirm you in His love. Be serene; live in the peace of Christ, and pray for me.

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

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†Fouad Twal,
Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem,