

8th Pastoral Letter of His Beatitude
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“the time of my departure has come...
I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”. (2 Tim 4:6.7)

March 1, 2008

INTRODUCTION

To my Brothers Bishops, to the Priests,
To the Men and Women Religious, to the Deacons,
and all the beloved Faithful

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 1:3)

I am writing this letter to you as I am approaching the end of my patriarchal ministry and as we approach Easter together. Lent is always an opportunity for renewal and return to God, and Easter invites us to die in Christ in order to live again in him. I wish you all a Lent of graces and of new life before God, for your own good and for the good of all whom you serve. I wish you an Easter that will make each of you “the new man”, redeemed and reconciled with God and with human beings.

I am writing you this last pastoral letter in order to give thanks to God and to express my gratitude towards all of you. In this letter, I would also like to outline the main characteristics in the life of the believer in this holy land, in the diocese and in all of society.

On March 19, 2008, I shall reach the age of 75, the age of retirement according to the Church’s tradition. I am placing my mission into the hands of the Holy Father, who entrusted me with it 20 years ago, with a feeling of gratitude for the trust I was given. I thank the Lord for all the graces that he granted me during the whole time of my ministry as patriarch and as priest. With Saint Paul, I can say that “the time of my departure has come... I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:6.7), even though my race is not yet entirely finished and the end remains in God’s time. By retiring, I am freed of the administrative responsibilities, but I shall continue my prayer and my journey in God’s mystery in this holy land. I shall continue to accompany the sufferings and the hopes of the men and women of this land, of all the believers, of all religions, who dwell in it.

I thank the Lord for every human person whom I have encountered during this time, those from this Holy Land and those who came from many Churches throughout the world. Because the Church of Jerusalem is the Mother Church, because she is small and faces many difficulties, and because she is always on the Cross, the number of messages of solidarity, as well as pilgrims from all the Churches, were countless, and first of all from the Church of Rome and the Holy Father, who in many circumstances expressed his love, his solidarity, and his steadfast positions, where this land, its Churches and its two peoples are concerned. The pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II in the year 2000 was the crowning of the Catholic Churches’ presence among us. We hope that the next pilgrimage of H.H. Pope Benedict XVI will renew hope in this land and will give the Churches, all the believers of all religions, as well as the political leaders in this land, a new vision of forgiveness, justice, reconciliation, and peace.

There were also many delegations and ecumenical pilgrimages from various countries, and at their head the World Council of Churches. They came to be informed as regards our news, to listen to us, and by means of their faith and love, to strengthen our faith.

Since 1998, with the approval of the Holy See, an annual meeting during the month of January brought together the Presidents of the world's Bishops Conferences or their representatives, who came to pray and to reflect in Jerusalem, together with the whole Church of Jerusalem, on all the aspects of our Church's life, its pastoral, political and social life. Today, I want to express my gratitude to all.

I

A Look at my Patriarchal Ministry

Gratitude

1. I thank all the men and women who gave themselves in the service of the diocese, first of all the Apostolic Delegates and Nuncios who represented the Holy Father, my Coadjutor Bishop, the Auxiliary Bishops and General Vicars in Jerusalem, Palestine, Jordan, Israel, for the Hebrew-speaking Community, and in Cyprus. I thank all the priests and the employees who gave me their direct help in the various curial offices. I thank the parish priests, each one of them for his fidelity and his devotedness towards his parish. Together, we endeavored to work in the Lord's vineyard which the Church entrusted to us.

I especially thank the group of priests from the Patriarchate and the various religious congregations who for 20 years remained faithful to the meetings of the theological commission, in accompanying the events of public life in this land by their prayer and their reflection, and who contributed towards defining the Church's position here, above all as regards the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which does not cease to mark the life of the diocese in Israel, Palestine and Jordan. With that commission, I could write my pastoral letters. I thank them and ask God to reward them.

I greet all the faithful in all parts of the diocese. I thank them for their prayer and their love during the time of my ministry. For all I implore the Lord's abundant graces. I greet the Hebrew-speaking community. I accompany it with my prayers and I wish it growth in the faith God wants for it, so that it might be a witness to Jesus in the Israeli society and that, with the whole Church of the Holy Land in the political conflict that is tearing it apart, it might be an agent of reconciliation based on forgiveness, justice, peace and equality among all.

At the Service of the universal Church

2. I thank all the men and women who, in the Church of Jerusalem and in its name, were able to fulfill the ministry owed to the universal church: the Biblical Institutes, the centers for continuing formation, as well as the seminaries which, alongside of our own patriarchal diocesan seminary, formed priests here for the universal and the local Church.

Welcoming the pilgrims from the Churches of the world is also an important ministry, which a large number of religious houses fulfill. This ministry needs to be developed so that the pilgrimage might be at one and the same time a way of sanctification for the pilgrim when he or she comes into contact with the divine mystery that the Holy Places conserve, and also a time when the pilgrim becomes aware of the human presence in this country, of every religion, and above all of the presence and life of the Christian community that surrounds the holy places with its living faith.

The Custody of the Holy Land

3. From among the religious orders and congregations present, that of the Custody of the Holy Land has been here the longest and is the most meritorious. By their prayer and their daily witness, the Franciscan religious have remained in this land since the 13th century. They served the Holy Places and welcomed the pilgrims throughout the centuries. In 1342, the Holy See formally entrusted them with this task. From the beginning, they have served the local population, created parishes and opened schools that exist to this day. We can only thank them and acknowledge the good they have done for men and women of every religion in this land in the shrines, in the parish churches, in the schools, and in their social work. In that area too, along with the immensely good things that exist, there is a need for renewal, for better insertion in the diocese, and for a dialogue that remains to be carried out with the diocese in order to be better “incarnated” in the Church of God which they serve.

The Men and Women Religious

4. I thank all the religious, men and women. Their presence in our diocese fulfills an important role. Some are directly involved in the parishes, in pastoral activity, in the schools or in social work. Others, by their vocation, are at the service of the universal Church, as was already said: in Jerusalem’s world famous Biblical Institutes, in the centers for ongoing formation, and in welcoming and accompanying pilgrims coming from all the Churches. However, with the universal vocation of all of these institutions, part of their spiritual and intellectual wealth has a local aspect and benefits all the dioceses of the Church of Jerusalem. The contemplative monasteries for men or women are a blessing for the dioceses and for the country. They are high places of prayer. They must become more and more places of formation to prayer, a prayer that deepens and strengthens the faith of the faithful and teaches them to serve their society better and to be more faithful to it.

The Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem

5. I thank the Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem, the Grand Master, the Governor General and all the Lieutenants whom I have known during these past twenty years, for their love and support of the Patriarchate, of its clergy and of all its works and its faithful. Pope Pius IX wanted to renew the Order when the Jerusalem Patriarchate was re-established, so that it might give spiritual and material support to the new diocese. In 1848, he entrusted its re-organization to the first Patriarch, Joseph Valerga. Since then, from generation to generation until this day, the Order has never ceased to fulfill its mission for the Patriarchate. I thank all the members and those responsible for the Order, and I implore God’s grace and blessing upon them.

Pastoral Life

6. The pastoral work in our diocese is marked above all by the Holy Places and the Gospel that was revealed and written here. Our catechesis is at one and the same time a continuation and a daily rediscovery of the gospel. We have the grace of living around the holy places and of being permanent pilgrims here. Helping people every day to rediscover the gospel that we have received and to fashion our life according to the teachings of Jesus, that is the evangelization carried out by the priests, the religious, men and women, in this land. It is true that in our land and our parishes, everyone believes. All the Christians know Jesus Christ. But not all know his gospel well enough or feel the need to meditate it and to penetrate their life with it. The parish priests and the religious, men and women, have the obligation to guide the Christians along this way so as to transform their daily life into a living gospel. During this past period, the diocese’s pastoral life was marked above all by the Synod of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land, which began in 1993 and ended in the year 2000 with

the visit of Pope John Paul II. It was an endeavor towards a new beginning in the Church that was animated above all by the faith, the vision and breath of Mgr. Rafiq Khoury, who was and is still responsible for the pastoral work and catechesis in the diocese. It was not an isolated endeavor but happened rather in collaboration with all the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land. It didn't bear all the fruit it could have borne, but something new did come about in our dioceses. A common pastoral plan was its fruit, and a Catholic Pastoral Committee including the various rites was created, made up of 72 persons, priests, men and women religious and lay faithful who represented all of our Latin, Melkite, Maronite, Syrian, Armenian and Chaldean dioceses in the three countries Palestine, Israel and Jordan. They have the task of studying the ways in which the common pastoral plan could be lived in our various dioceses.

We must also note two important facts that came to light with the synod. The first are the committed lay people who, together with the clergy, are able to take on responsibility in the Church; and the second is the new spirit of communion between the Churches together with the desire to continue working together as Church. That is why, in addition to the common Pastoral Plan and the pastoral committee made up of people from the different rites, a presbyteral council, from the various rites, was set up, and we have begun to have an annual spiritual retreat that includes all the rites for all the priests in our dioceses; every year, it takes place during the first week of July. Simultaneously with the Synod, the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries in the Holy Land was created. It strengthened the spirit of communion and collaboration among us.

Among the initiatives that also gave new life to the diocese, we must mention the catechetical commissions that were organized with greater efficiency in Jerusalem and Amman. In addition to the liturgical books that had already been published in the diocese, the liturgical commission printed an Arab translation of the daily missal and the breviary. As for Amman, Jordan, special mention must be made of the ReginaPacis Center, set up by Mgr. Selim Sayegh for people with special needs. Around this service, an important Muslim-Christian life dialogue developed in the various cities of Jordan. It is also a center for young people and for spiritual retreats as well as various sessions. Another project is in the process of developing in Jordan: a Catholic university of which the cornerstone will be laid soon, I hope. Of course there were many other pastoral initiatives taken by the parish priests and the bishops, which God supported and will support with his grace.

At the regional level, the CELRA (Conférence des Evêques Latins dans les Régions Arabes) [Conference of Latin Bishops in the Arab Regions], founded already in 1965 immediately after the Second Vatican Council, continued its work. A new collaboration began with the Council of Catholic Patriarchs in the Orient (CPCO), which in 1991 began to hold an annual meeting, and which has already written nine pastoral letters to the faithful on the main themes concerning Christian life in itself and the relations of Christians with religions and States.

Ecumenical Life

7. Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples. He foresaw the difficulty of the mission he was entrusting to them. That is why he prayed: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (Jn 17:11) A prayer that always accompanies us and that remains a commandment given to the Churches, to the bishops and to the faithful, "so that they may be one as we are one". A prayer that expresses his will. To be one as he and the Father are one, is an imperative and theological obligation. That is why, even if our jurisdictions prevent us from uniting, our love for one another can merit us the grace of communicating in truth and through it of becoming a sign and a source of unity for the peoples of the Holy Land.

In Jerusalem, we are 13 different and separate Churches. There were frequent, almost monthly meetings with the Patriarchs and the Bishops of the various Churches of Jerusalem, Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, and through these more fraternity and mutual help developed between our communities. In the year 2000, we could live a moment of unity by launching the beginning of the 3rd millennium together on Nativity Square; this was accompanied by an ecumenical pastoral letter signed by the 13 heads of the Churches of Jerusalem. Among the many documents signed by all of us, and in addition to the common messages sent to our faithful and to the world at Easter and Christmas, the two documents on the status of Jerusalem should also be mentioned; the first was in November 1993 and the second in September 2006.

The goal of our meetings and our common declarations was to act for the good of all the Christians of every rite, above all in the areas of peace and justice, in the difficult circumstances of the conflict that everyone is living. Here, I would like to express my gratitude and my friendship to all my brother Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches of Jerusalem for their friendship and their collaboration during the whole time we spent together since the beginning of my patriarchate.

At the level of the Christian Churches, in 1990 the Catholic Churches in the region became members of the Council of Churches in the Middle East, which never ceases to create a place of fraternity, of encounter and of collaboration among all the heads of Churches in the Middle East and through them, among the 15 million Arab Christians in the region. Together with the World Council of Churches, the whole Church of Jerusalem with its 13 communities, developed a particular link and a fruitful collaboration in the area of justice and peace in the Holy Land and in the region. It first succeeded in setting up the Accompaniment Program, with volunteers coming from all the Churches of the world to collaborate with the Israelis and the Palestinians in the conflict, and to accompany the Palestinians in places of confrontation and where their freedom was limited. Secondly, it helped to create a permanent bureau in Jerusalem for the development of ecumenical relations between the Christian communities.

The Holy Land's universal Vocation

8. The Holy Land is a land with a universal vocation. God wanted it thus, since he wanted to manifest himself here not only to one people, but to the whole of humankind. Still today, this land certainly belongs to all its inhabitants, but also to the whole of humankind. This is true at the political level for the two peoples who live in it, Israelis and Palestinians, and for all the believers, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Druzes. But this is also true of the pastoral activity of all our patriarchal diocese, which I served over the past years. The pastoral activity and the prayer of the parish priest, the religious, man and woman, and the lay person do not stop at the parish boundaries; rather, each person must always have in mind the whole diocese, the whole country with all its inhabitants, and the whole world, which the Lord wanted to save in our land.

II

The Christian Vocation in the Holy Land

The small Number

9. The Christians are few in number in this Holy Land and in the Church of Jerusalem. That is not only the result of historical or social circumstances. This reality is linked directly to the mystery of Jesus in this land. 2000 years ago, Jesus came here and with his apostles, his disciples and the small number of faithful who believed in him, he also remained few in number. Today, 2000 years later, Jesus remains in the same situation of "not being

recognized” in his land; and Jerusalem, the city of redemption and the source of peace for the world, remains a city that has not yet welcomed redemption and that has not yet found its peace. And in this situation, the Christians are a small number of witnesses to Jesus in his land.

To be small in this land is simply to live as Jesus lived here. That does not mean having a diminished life on the margins or a life made up of fear and perplexity. We know why we are small, and we know what place we should occupy in our society and in the world. We are part of the mystery of Jesus and we remain with him on Calvary, strong and supported by the hope and the joy of the Resurrection, which are to be lived and shared with all. Jesus told us that the mustard seed is small, but it grows and becomes a tree, and “the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Mt 13:31-32).

To be small, Jerusalem being the city of redemption and of peace for the world, not for itself – this is what determines the vocation of every Christian in this Holy Land: a vocation to be a witness, a vocation to a difficult life, today because of the political conflict, and tomorrow because the Christian’s life will remain a permanent battle in order to be good salt, useful leaven, a light in society and a redemption that is fulfilled day by day in the mystery of God. Every society counts on the number of its citizens, its soldiers, and on the quantity of its weapons. We Christians, with or without numbers, count first of all on the faith of each one of us. Jesus says: with faith you can move mountains. The State says: with technology, with a quantity of weapons and of men, it can submit the earth, open roads and level mountains, but it remains incapable of finding peace. As for us, we keep meditating on the word of Jesus: “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” (Mt 17:20-21) That is why, while respecting all the useful human means, we try to strengthen and increase our faith in Him in whom we have believed.

The small number of Christians must be compensated first of all by faith, and secondly by the formation that makes each Christian necessary in constructing or reconstructing his and her country; and finally by each Christian becoming aware of his and her responsibility in society and the need for him and her to share all the sacrifices required to construct or reconstruct. This Christian formation is a responsibility of the whole community, not only of those who are the leaders in the Church, for in a community of believers, each person is concerned about each person.

In addition to the formal institutions of formation in the Church – the various institutions for teaching, for religious education, the various apostolic movements for formation and the many lay organizations of a social nature – some faithful, clergy or lay people, have begun to pay particular attention to this formation, which makes the Christian capable of assuming his and her responsibilities in society, in spite of the small numbers. Here, the important work done in this area by the University of Bethlehem in general, and in the department for religious studies in particular, must be mentioned. Along with the university, we should mention various other centers: the Sabeel center, which analyzes and gives a Christian vision of the present political situation, the Al-Liqa’ center for interfaith dialogue, the Laity Committee, which invites lay people to become aware of their responsibility as Christians in public life, the group of young people known as Wusul, which has set itself the goal of establishing a link by electronic means among the Arab Christians scattered throughout the world, the Sunday lay catechetical group in Jordan, and the HCEF, Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation, of which the first goal at the time of its foundation was to gather together the emigrants and by their thought, their activity and their means to make them present in the land of the Lord, so that they might remain witnesses to Jesus in his land, in spite of the distances, and that they might contribute to the construction of their homelands.

Christians in Society

10. A Christian must accept himself as Christian. What does that mean? It means to accept the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, the Eternal, Incarnate Word of God, and to live one's daily life, whether it be easy or difficult, in the light of this mystery, which the society to which we are sent considers to be impossible.

To be a Christian means simply to know one's faith, one's holy books, one's tradition and the Church's teaching; it is to know in whom and in what one believes. It is to know and to live Christian morality; it is to pray, it is to live the life of the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, and to take care that those prayers and that sacramental life be not only formal acts and nothing but appearances, that they not even be moments of prayer that isolate the Christian from society, but rather to know that those prayers and the life of the sacraments are a source of energy that is always renewed, that "sends" the Christian into society to serve it together with those who are there, whatever their religion might be.

With all that, to be a Christian means to bring a vision of faith to all events. It is to see God's providence and God's solicitude for all and to remember the Word of Jesus: "Not a hair of your head will perish without the permission of your Father who is in heaven." (cf. Lk 21:18) In the light of this vision that unites God and human beings, the Christian defines his or her positions both as service and love and as a claim for rights. A vision that will give the Christian the wisdom and courage to act in the face of difficulties and of the various forms of oppression coming from human beings. The Christian will not become discouraged, but will persevere in resisting every form of oppression and violence, and in every activity in whatever area to which God has called him or her.

To be a Christian is to live the commandment of love in the midst of one's own community, but also with all human beings. To love is first of all to see the face of God in every human person, no matter what his or her religion or nationality might be, no matter how good or bad the feelings that person bears towards me or towards others. For he or she is the creation of the one and only God. That person is the child of God. He or she carries within him- or herself the glory of God. His and her dignity comes from the dignity of God. That is why love transforms every action with human beings into an action with God, the Creator of all. That is also why Jesus said: love everyone and do not exclude anyone, not even the enemy. For he did not tell us: love friendship and the friend. On the contrary, where this is concerned he said: "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Mt 5:46) He also did not say: love the evil in the enemy or the oppression that he is imposing on you. Rather, he said: love God in every human person, for that person is God's creature. It is God whom we love in the friend or the enemy. When we love, we are imitating God in his love for all his creatures. That love strengthens our fidelity to our love of the friend and gives us the strength to face the evil in the enemy and even the strength to end it. Such a love is stronger than violence or any other material means to which the victim has recourse, so that it can drive back the hostility and end the oppression that is exerted over him or her.

As a result of this, love also means to forgive. To forgive is to purify one's heart of bitterness, of hatred and of the fire of revenge; it does not necessarily mean to abandon one's rights, especially when these concern the rights of the community, such as freedom, land and sovereignty. These are matters over which the individual does not have the right to decide, for first of all, these rights are a gift of God which we must preserve, and secondly, we have these are rights of all community, and the believer does not betray his or her community when the latter demands its legitimate rights. On the contrary, the believer acts together with the community in order to support it in the defense of its rights or in the necessary effort to regain these.

Finally, love is sharing and communion. In our faith communities up until now, we have been acquainted with charity in the form of alms or even of generous donations. This form is good,

but we must go beyond it so that charity becomes sharing and communion. That means that each person in a community of believers is concerned with each person as with his or her own family. That is why the community endeavors to procure for each of its members a life that frees him or her from every need, a life that is dignified at the spiritual and the material level, following the example of the Christians of the first Church in Jerusalem as it is described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42-46; 4:32-34).

In order to remain, to grow and to act here in this Holy Land, as in all the countries of the Middle East, the Christians must accept themselves as such, that is to say, as believing Christians and not solely as a community that is different from the others or as a separate social group because it is a religious group that is different from the others. And naturally, the Christian's vocation does not consist in entering into battle with society or in becoming resigned in the face of the injustices or the various forms of oppression. On the other hand, the Christian is not allowed to place him- or herself at the margin of society saying: "The country no longer belongs to me, others look after it and bear responsibility for it." An authentic Christian knows that he or she is part of society and that he or she has to face the challenges and to bear responsibility for it together with all the members of society.

The Christian who takes part in public life is also not allowed to put his or her faith aside, to become empty of the spiritual energies that God has given him and her as a Christian, claiming to fulfill his or her obligations in the public, economic and social domain more freely. That became apparent during certain periods in the history of the Arab world, during which the Arab Christians made a very important contribution and during which some abandoned their Christian values or even their faith. Still today, that partial or total abandonment has not ceased to be visible among some, with the pretext of avoiding fanaticism and of not arousing religious sensitivities unnecessarily. It is certainly not asked of Christians that they transform their faith into fanatical and provocative attitudes. But the Christian is called to enrich society with the gifts and sources of spiritual energy that he or she has received. Society itself demands this of the Christian; otherwise, why does the Christian remain different, if his and her different faith brings nothing new to society?

A Land of the status quo

11. We are in a country of the status quo, which is to say: "Everything remains today and will remain tomorrow as it was in the past." That law was adopted before the Crimean War in an Ottoman firman of 1852. It was then ratified in two international congresses in 1855 and 1878 in order to govern the situations of conflict in certain Christian holy places. The status quo determined that each would own and use everything that they had owned and used on the day the international convention was signed. A useful instrument, but it has also at times remained a source of quarrels. The worst is that this law, which was applicable to places, was extended to the minds and persons and with time, it stamped them with a certain fixedness that makes every renewal difficult. Hence the tensions in relations between persons or communities because of a mental fixedness that was created in some as a consequence of the Status Quo law.

In our Holy Land, we sometimes have the impression that we are living with one part buried underground in the past and with only a part that emerges above the ground and lives in the present. This paralyzes the vision and activity of the Church and the community of believers and creates tensions. The roots are the past. And the roots, which remain underground, must give new flowers and fruits. A deed and a renewal are necessary at the level of mentalities, of dialogue and of relations between the various dioceses and Churches with their multiple institutions. All must believe and let themselves be guided by the vision of St. John in the Book of Revelation: "See, I am making all things new." (Rev 21:5)

Denominational Communities

12. In the Holy Land, the small Christian community is divided not only by the theological differences, but also between denominational communities. Originally, these were born around a particular liturgical tradition as the expression of their own way of receiving, meditating and celebrating the gospel message in a particular historical and cultural context. Fundamentally, this diversity of liturgical and spiritual traditions is a wealth for the Church, since they complete one another and thus allow for a richer expression of the inexhaustible mystery of God revealed in Christ. But as a result of complex historical circumstances, these liturgical communities were gradually transformed into denominational and at times even ethnic communities. The leaders of these communities were held to be responsible for the loyalty of their faithful towards the political authorities, and the Christians referred to the national context by way of their communities and not as individual citizens. From communities of faith or of liturgy, they became communities of service and of interests, and they played an important role not only in the religious identity but also the social and national identity of their members. Instead of opening people up to one another and supporting one another, these communities often closed in upon themselves in order to safeguard their own interests. In some places and for some people, lay people or members of the clergy, the community thus became an element of separation and a barrier between believers. Sometimes even competition or rivalry became installed. Each community wants to appear larger and stronger than the other, wants to have a more beautiful church, a larger school, etc. And the other Christian who is faithful in another community no longer has all of his or her place as a brother or sister and as a Christian in our prayer, our attention, or our activity; he or she becomes a stranger to us.

On the other hand, since we are few in number and we have to face many huge challenges, in today's reality, solidarity and collaboration are required from all of us. The lay Christians often feel this need more and they urge their religious leaders towards greater unity. It is together that we are great or small. No one can become great without the other or at the other's expense. In our relations with one another as different Churches or denominational communities, we should follow this principle: "On the one hand, fidelity to ourselves, to our own rite, to the Church in which God has given us the grace of baptism, and on the other, love for all the brothers and sisters who belong to a different rite and are outside of our denominational community, but who belong to the large family of God." The attitude of the Christian from every community and every denomination, is to love with a love as great as that of God. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:27-28)

The Synod of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land helped us to create a new spirit of solidarity and of collaboration among our Churches, but this effort must be continued. We must educate our Christians in such a way as to make them understand their vocation towards everyone, whether they be from their own community or from a different one. They must discover that the Church is first, that the denominational community comes after. They must understand that the Church of God keeps its doors open to welcome the prayer of all Christians and in order to send them all out once again to all of society, to every believer in the whole Church and to every human person in every religion.

The sects or the new Christian movements are part of our Christian life and of our political reality. From the Christian point of view, these groups sow confusion in the faith of our faithful, they exploit their material and spiritual poverty, and they increase our divisions yet more. From the political point of view, whether in Israel or in the Arab countries, they have a political vision that supports with supposedly biblical and religious arguments not only the political fact of the State of Israel, but also the injustice committed towards the Palestinian

people. This is another reminder to the Christians that they become more aware of the wealth and the demands of their faith, and to the pastors that they respond better to the religious thirst of their faithful, in particular by them being more present among their faithful and with the help of better biblical formation.

Christians in the Conflict

13. In our society, there is armed conflict due to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories and the Israeli demand for security and recognition. Like all the inhabitants of this land, Palestinians and Israelis, the Christians, both Palestinian and Israeli, are involved in this conflict. They cannot remain spectators for any reason whatsoever while the others pay the price for the freedom that must be regained and accept the sacrifices required by that. To remain a spectator means to place oneself on the margin, becoming strangers to the men and women of one's people, which is not the vocation of Christians. Like all the Palestinians, we are victims of the occupation. Like all the Palestinians, we have to pay the price in order to again find our political and economic freedom as well as in some ways, our religious freedom where access to the Holy Places and to Jerusalem itself is concerned. To find freedom again, to pay the price and to resist, all that is certainly an obligation, but we also believe in the commandment to love, and thus in a resistance that enters into the logic of Christian love. A non-violent resistance, but one that is capable of leading the two peoples to enjoy in equal ways their freedom, their sovereignty, and their security. In our land, the conflict seems interminable and not allowing for any solution. In this conflict, in addition to what we said above, the Christian vision is the following: here, it is our land and it belongs to two peoples. But it is first of all the land of God. The history that human beings make here with blood and hatred or with dialogue and collaboration is made knowingly or unknowingly under the watchful eyes of God, the master of history, who gave this land a particular sanctity. Here, everyone has to do with the mystery of God. Our holy places tell us that. Our Holy Places indeed are one of the major reasons for the conflict; here, believers of the three religions refer to God. We pray in our Holy Places. But at the same time, they remain places of conflict, of death and of hatred... And that is contrary to the nature and the vocation of the whole Holy Land. In a land belonging to God, only the ways of God will lead to a resolution of the conflict. Human violence, whether it be done by the one who is stronger or by the one who is weaker, is not the normal or effective way to reach peace. Peace in the land of God will be a gift of God. By their sincere adherence to faith in God and the coherence of their behavior with their faith in a Creator God who loves all his creatures, the believers from the two peoples and the three religions must prepare God's hour in this land, in which God will re-establish peace.

All must live together as brothers and sisters, children of the same land, and even more, children and creatures of God. But for that, all must consider one another to be equal, with the same rights and obligations. No one is superior to the other, no one is inferior and submitted to the other. Until now, that is not the vision; nevertheless, the strong ones in this land and also those who are resisting, who believe in force, must come to it. In addition, in order to resist, to obtain justice and to make peace, the victim must not let himself or herself be transformed into an oppressor or a terrorist.

Emigration

14. Today, the Christians are emigrating from the Holy Land and from all the countries of the Middle East. They are not alone in emigrating. The Muslims and the Jews are also emigrating, and the reason is the same for everyone: the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, which causes political, economic and social instability in all the countries of the region. In some countries, in Lebanon and Iraq, it has caused tragedies that have gone beyond

the sufferings and trials in the Holy Land. People emigrate in order to find tranquility and to ensure their future and that of their children. We for our part invite our faithful to accept their vocation of being Christians here in the Holy Land and not somewhere else in the world. Without giving them illusory ideas, we tell them that we do not promise them an easy life, but rather a difficult life, today as well as tomorrow. Some, though a limited number, have begun to become aware of this. They accept their vocation and accept to remain and to sacrifice the benefits they could find by emigrating. In any case, no matter how many emigrate and no matter how small our numbers are, some among us will always remain here to witness to Jesus in his land throughout all developments of history.

But we also have to draw attention to the following fact : the Christians here and in the Middle East are the first victims of world political plans that ignore or give the impression of ignoring the Christians because there are only a few of them and their small number has not yet been compensated by a source of material or spiritual energy that forces the great of this world to take them into account. When the Christians are mentioned in the world press, it is to say that they are squashed between two large majorities, the Jews and the Muslims, and that they are subject to Muslim persecution. And in saying this, the media express a feeling of pity and compassion towards us, and they forget the true oppression of which we are victims because of the policies implemented in this region. But for us, stopping the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – something possible and not something impossible, as people would like to make one believe – is what would allow us to live in peace and to remain in the country. That is also true of Lebanon and Iraq.

Christians and Muslims

15. Just as every Christian all over the world normally belongs to his or her people and country, the Christians in the Arab countries and in Palestine and Israel also belong to their country and their people. Where the Arab Christians in Israel are concerned, we have already defined the elements making up their identity: they are Arabs, they are Christians, and they are in the State of Israel. In view of these three elements, they have decided themselves what positions to take in their daily life.

Like every other citizen, the Christians are citizens in the same way. They have the same rights and the same obligations. The Constitutions of the countries in the Middle East recognize this. Relations with the civil and religious authorities are good. At the level of the people there is also a good secular coexistence, good neighborly relations and good collaboration in various areas: studies, culture, business, politics, etc... Two areas are closed: dogma and family; and when these are touched upon, the situation becomes explosive. The structures for mediation then come into action so as to return to calm. Interfaith dialogue does not deal with dogma. Its subject is social themes with the aim of fostering better coexistence and better collaboration. Naturally, there are incidents between individuals, and sometimes they take on a community dimension that opposes Muslims and Christians. In such cases, the governments are watchful and take the necessary measures, as do the traditional structures of mediation, in order to re-establish reconciliation. But it should also be said that relations between Muslims and Christians have not yet reached their perfect equilibrium. This is a matter of a long and slow path that must be perfected every day.

With the appearance of extremist religious movements, a need is being felt for common action among Muslims and Christians so as to be able to face together the religious extremist changes in character that can threaten all of society.

The religious political movements in Islam see the solution for all problems in the strict implementation of Islam as a religion and as a system of political and social life in all of society, both as regards Muslims and non-Muslims. In the face of this tendency, the Christian position is the following: first of all, to unite with the Muslims themselves, as was said above,

in order to face together an extremism that threatens both Muslims and Christians. Secondly, if one day these religious movements succeed in imposing themselves onto society, a margin of dialogue would remain also with them. And if the dialogue proves to be useless, there remains only one thing for the Christian to do: not to give him- or herself up to fear, but to demand his and her rights as a citizen and to proclaim his and her Christian faith as a believer. At the same time, the Christian must prepare him- and herself to witness to his and her faith, either by the reality of submitting to a daily life that is difficult or even by sacrificing his or her life. An era of martyrdom that would again begin for the Christians, like during the first centuries of the Church under the Roman Empire, would purify life in all of society. It would strengthen the believers in their faith and would again give a new face to all of society.

But we must also ask ourselves why these extremist religious movements are beginning and growing. First of all, among some people the need to live an authentic religious life can be noted. Secondly, these tendencies contain a series of reactions to various situations: a reaction to human situations of inequality, of poverty and of injustice within Arab and Muslim societies; a reaction to an invasion by “the West” into Arab and Muslim societies at the level of values and of morality through the means of social communication; a reaction to the interference by “the West” at the political level; and finally, a reaction to the imbalance in relations among peoples. All this in addition to the open conflicts in Israel, Palestine and Iraq. With all their complexity and their threat to the Muslim as well as the non-Muslim and to the world, these religious tendencies will end up by imposing themselves, if the policies within the Arab countries do not succeed in creating more just and secure societies, and if Islam does not succeed in renewing itself from within so as to respond to the religious need of the believers and to prevent the extremists from transforming religion into fanaticism and a source of violence, and if world politics do not end the various ways in which peoples are colonized.

Christians and Jews in the Holy Land

16. In spite of the current conflict, in spite of the daily death and hatred, there is also a more human reality of dialogue and of contacts between persons at various political and religious levels. Many initiatives happen at the local and international level with meetings of young people, Christian and Muslim Palestinians and Jewish Israelis within the school context. Many associations of dialogue between Jews and Christians also exist in the country. At the Patriarchate, there is a diocesan commission for Judaism, which opened doors for dialogue and contacts. The aim of the commission is to listen and to understand Judaism and the Jews through the witness of Jews from various sectors of Israeli society. The emphasis is also placed on coexistence and on the attitudes to have when faced with the country's basic reality, the conflict, the occupation and the insecurity. The theological realities in connection with the conflict are also studied so as to begin local dialogue between people of the place, Palestinian Christians and Jewish Israelis, in order to reflect and share as believers on the realities lived on the same land, Palestine or Israel. In the universal Catholic Church's dialogue with Judaism at the Council for Christian Unity, some Palestinian members of the local Church have also been called upon to take part.

Demands of Dialogue

17. The local interfaith dialogue that began with frequent contacts between Muslims, Jews and Christians, ended with the creation during these years of the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land, in which the three religions are represented at the highest level. A dialogue that drew the attention of political leaders and that created a new reality in the Holy Land: religious leaders from the three religions met for the first time in history and

reflected together on the peace that must be brought about. In this dialogue, the dimension of the believer and of his or her relationship with God is highlighted, and we want to reflect together as believers who are present before the same God. The common values are also highlighted: those that are simply human, diversity and the ability for reconciliation, and the religious values, going beyond oneself in mutual acceptance and respect because we are all equally God's creatures, in the practice of justice and building peace.

However, there is still a religious immaturity in our societies of a religious nature where the acceptance and respect of the other are concerned. Until now, not all the Christians, not all the Muslims, and not all the Jews have learned to live together and to make life together acceptable and tranquil. There are always elements of extremism or ignorance that carry with them the negative things of the past and that do not cease to be a source of distrust, of suspicion and of fear, and thus of aggressiveness against their fellow citizens who have a different religion.

There is already a dialogue between the leaders or the members of the elite. It is useful and consists in a long road that still has to be gone. But what we need at the same time is new education for the young generations. If we want to bring society to peace and to remove partial or total tensions from it, the educational system must change and that in all the places of education: the home, the school, the places of worship and the media. An explicit and clear call should make itself heard, a call to acknowledge the other and to collaborate with him and her. The new generations in all the religions must hear it said: the other who belongs to a different religion is not the enemy or the stranger. He or she is a brother, a sister, whom we must love and with whom we must collaborate and build society. Even the extremism that is nourished on the one hand, by past ignorance and on the other, by present injustices or fears, can find part of the awaited remedy in such a new system of education.

Towards the Future

To my Priests

18. I thank all of you, dear priests, for your love and your prayers. God will reward your zeal, which is great. May God accompany us with his grace in our seminary, which has faithfully continued its journey and its mission from its founding in 1848 until today. With God's help, we shall continue to have regular vocations, first of all from Jordan, in second place from Palestine, and finally from Israel. I thank the teams of priests who accepted the sacrifice of accompanying the seminarians and of living in the seminary with them.

To my priests I say, always keep the zeal that you have had until now. Today, it is possible to say of each one of you: "You know your sheep and your sheep know you." (cf. Jn 10) That is a big grace for you and for the whole diocese. However, conditions in society, among the parishioners and priests, are changing greatly, and a distance is beginning to exist between the parish priests and the parishioners. In order to remain at the same level of knowledge and of service, which is still lived until today, always have in mind the essence of the priest's mission: to know Jesus Christ and to make him known. The priest of the Patriarchate is called to be the pastor of a parish. The first task of the pastor of a parish is to be a catechist in the school, in the homily, in the visits to the families, in the various pastoral activities, and in every other circumstance.

In every parish, whether it be large or small, keep your freedom and your availability to know Jesus Christ and to make him known. Do not hesitate to accept or even to choose the most difficult place. Then God's grace will be more abundant. Maintain your freedom as regards places and persons. Let nothing, no person, nor money, nor friendships, nor building projects, nor even a pastoral project become a tie that puts an obstacle to your freedom and prevents you from going where you are sent. For the work that has been entrusted to you is not yours.

It is God's work: "My Father is still working, and I also am working", Jesus said (Jn 5:17), and we are part of that work of God in our diocese. Work and say with the Gospel: "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!" (Lk 17:10) You are God's instrument there where you are sent, and when you are asked to interrupt a work that is not finished, leave it where it is. God will know how to finish the work that was begun by him in you. In contrast, when you insist on remaining by your own will, you risk no longer being sent and no longer doing God's work, but simply your own activity. The great danger for the consecrated people who are sent into the Lord's vineyard is to transform God's work into personal work. That is when the difficulties, the rivalries or the disobedience begin, and that is when God's grace ceases.

The buildings of stone, the pastoral centers, the schools, the churches, the parish halls – we need all that. But that too must not become an obstacle and make us lose sight of the goal for which we are building. The condition for building is not only the necessary money, but the ability to continue to have moments of silence before God, moments of intercession for the faithful, and the necessary time for catechesis. You as well, pray and intercede for the people, like Moses at Mount Nebo that rises up in the midst of our parishes.

We have built a lot out of stones. However, the faithful, who distinguish well between the parish priest who prays and the one who does not pray, sometimes deceive the parish priest, making him believe that the buildings of stone are the criterion for his success.

The parish priest is there for the people and not the opposite. The people are not there to serve us. We are sent to serve them. Jesus said: "I am among you as one who serves." (Lk 22:27) Whence the necessity to welcome all the faithful at every level and from every class. All of them, no matter what their position in society, their possessions or their knowledge, no matter whether they are present or absent in the life of the parish, no matter what their spiritual or material needs might be, all of them, even if some are heavy or a disturbance, all of them are the object of our mission and of our love. And the poor among them – of all kinds of poverty, whether material or spiritual – has priority. We are sent to all of them in order to help them to see God.

There might be situations in which we can meet persons with whom every activity seems useless. Any change in mentality or in the person seems to be impossible. For God nothing is impossible. Nor for the believer. We must begin, and God's grace will complete the work, and the goodness of the people themselves, which was given them by God, can surprise us at times and go beyond our human expectations. Today we sow, and tomorrow another will harvest. If we do not sow today, there will never be a harvest. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (1 Cor 3:6)

For a short time, an awakening of regionalist feelings could be felt among the priests. I hope that spirit has truly disappeared now never to reappear. For nothing must divide the priests who work in the same vineyard of the Lord and who offer the same Eucharist every morning. I hope that some kinds of human behavior will not succeed in corrupting the mission entrusted by God, so that the Church might remain alive through its priests and might grow through their faith, their prayer and their catechesis. "Brothers, all of you be in agreement and let there be no divisions among you, but be united in the same mind and the same thinking." (1 Cor 1:10)

Accept your vocation seriously, renew daily the acceptance you expressed one day in the past. Renew daily your acceptance of the difficult choice that consists in giving your life every day and that, through boredom or trials, can become a daily death. The goal of the moments of silence before the Lord is precisely to renew and to support that acceptance of the difficult choice. Whence the importance of giving sufficient time in your life to the divine presence, so as to gather anew the courage and so as to be able to read God's will in all the events of your personal or public life. For God's Providence is vigilant, and everything that

God allows to happen in our life is a word that he is speaking to us. Finally, we must be conscious of the fact that the life or death of several people, men or women, depends on our acceptance or refusal of our vocation or of the way we live it. Jesus said: "I came that they may have life." (Jn 10:10) And the priests are sent to be givers of life.

The Future

19. The future of the priests depends on the fear and reverence they keep towards the sacred things with which they deal every day. The future of the Christians depends on what their parish priests give them.

We, the Patriarchate, have worked now for almost one and a half centuries. Through the Lord's grace, the fruit is certainly plentiful. But an effort must still be made in order to give more abundant life. Families must be formed to live following the example of the first Church of Jerusalem (Acts 2:43-47), united through prayer, the teaching of the Apostles, the Eucharist, and the sharing of goods. Means must also be found to live the commandment of love in all its aspects, in private and in public life: love that is forgiveness, love that is acceptance of the other who is different, from every religion and every nationality; and as for the sharing of goods, as was already said, we must be able to go beyond the stage of alms and to attain to ways of sharing that are based both on the demands of faith and on the necessary economic foundations.

The faithful must be "sent" to society without them lacking in their faith, as has at times been done until today, but rather, we "send" the faithful with strength and enlightened by faith. We at times educated people with a spiritual formation that kept the faithful exclusively within the church or in the parish context. We did not try to send him or her into society. The prayer in church (the Eucharist, the Mass, the rosary, the way of the cross, the processions and every other devotion) must become a sending out from the place of worship, a sending towards all of society, where people are seeking God, so as to become leaven, salt and light there.

In our society, there is a conflict and there are two peoples and three religions, and all our countries are suffering from political instability. Every believer and every man and woman of good will, and their parish priests and the men and women religious must first of all act constantly so as to end this, and they must make this an object of their prayer and their teaching.

The dialogue between religions brings people closer together. But care must be taken so that this is not transformed into an accommodating attitude or even into abdication or fear of stating one's identity or of facing reality, whether it be easy or difficult. The believer's true fidelity consists in loving all of his or her society, the two peoples and the believers from all the religions as well as the unbelievers if they make themselves known. Our catechesis has to give a clear and explicit opening in this sense. The other is not the enemy. He or she is not the stranger. He or she is God's creature, the son and daughter of God. Before God, no one is an enemy, no one is a stranger. When we speak to Muslims and Jews, it is normal that we ask them to have the same vision. But even if we do not encounter the desired reciprocity, we remain believers in Jesus Christ, and we behave as such: we see in each person a son and a daughter of God, the object of God's love and of our love.

CONCLUSION

I am coming to the end of my mission as Patriarch of Jerusalem for the Latins and shall soon pass it on to my successor, Mgr. Fouad Twal. I ask God to grant him every grace and blessing so that he might continue to carry the mission of this venerable Patriarchate. Once again I thank the Lord and all whom he has placed on my path in order to serve them or to receive a grace through them. I shall continue to live in Jerusalem. As has been the case until now, the

demands of my daily life will still be in the context of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Personally, I came to the Patriarchate without any money; I end my mandate without any money. I do not have any bank accounts. I owe no one anything. Nor does anyone owe me anything. The Patriarchate as institution always had a deficit in its accounts. But God blessed the deficit, the poverty, and he will continue to accompany the Patriarchate in its material needs that are necessary to carry out its spiritual mission. For all this, I thank the Lord, and I ask everyone to accompany me with their prayers. I entrust myself to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And for everyone I ask the blessing of Almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the one and only God. Amen.

+ Michel Sabbah, Patriarch

Jerusalem, March 1, 2008