



THE MIDDLE EAST SYNOD

Concluding Statement

“An Appeal to Safeguard the Faith”

This is the Vatican translation of the Message to the People of God that the synod fathers of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops approved Friday. The two-week synod ended in Rome on 24 October 2010.

* * *

“Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32)

To our brother priests, deacons, monks, nuns, consecrated persons, our dear lay faithful and all people of good will.

Introduction

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

The Synod of Bishops for the Middle East was for us a new Pentecost. “Pentecost is the original event but also a permanent dynamism, and the Synod of Bishops is a privileged moment in which the grace of Pentecost may be renewed in the Church’s journey” (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at the Opening Liturgy, 10 October 2010).

We have come to Rome, We the Patriarchs and Bishops of the Catholic Churches in the Middle East with all our spiritual, liturgical, cultural and canonical patrimonies, carrying in our hearts the concerns of our people.

For the very first time, we have come together in a Synod, gathered around His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, with both cardinals and archbishops, who are heads of the various offices in the Roman Curia, presidents of episcopal conferences around the world, who are concerned with the issues of the Middle East, representatives from the Orthodox Churches and ecclesial communities and Jewish and Muslim guests.

We express our gratitude to His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI for his care and for his teachings, which guide the journey of the Church in general and that of our Eastern Churches in particular, especially in the areas of justice and peace. We thank the episcopal conferences for their solidarity, their presence in our midst during their pilgrimages to the holy sites and their visits to our communities. We thank them for guiding our Churches in the various aspects of our life. We thank the different ecclesial organisations for their effective assistance.

Guided by the Holy Scriptures and the living Tradition, we have reflected together on the present and the future of Christians and all peoples of the Middle East. We have meditated on the issues of this region of the world which God willed, in the mystery of his love, to be the birthplace of his universal plan of salvation. From there, Abraham's vocation was initiated. There, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. There, Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of life and the kingdom. There, he died to redeem humanity and free us from sin. There, he rose from the dead to give new life to all. There, the Church was formed and went forth to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the world.

The primary aim of the Synod is pastoral. Thus, we have carried in our hearts the life, the pains and the hopes of our people as well as the challenges they need to confront each day "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rm 5:5). Dear sisters and brothers, we therefore address this message to you. We wish it to be an appeal to safeguard the faith, based on the Word of God, to collaboration in unity and to communion in the witness of love in every aspect of life.

I. The Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness throughout History

The Journey of Faith in the Middle East

2. In the Middle East, the first Christian community was born. From there, the apostles after Pentecost went evangelising the whole world. There, the early Christian community lived amid tensions and persecutions, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), and no one of them was in need. There, the first martyrs, with their blood, fortified the foundations of the nascent Church. After them, the hermits filled the deserts with the perfume of their holiness and their faith. There, the Fathers of the Eastern Church lived and continued to nourish the Church in both the East and West through their teachings. In the early centuries and later, missionaries from our Churches departed for the Far East and the West, bringing with them the light of Christ. We are the heirs of that heritage. We need to continue to transmit their message to future generations.

In the past, Our Churches provided saints, priests and consecrated persons; they still do in the present. Our Churches have also sponsored many institutions which contributed - and still do - to the well being of our societies and countries, sacrificing self for the sake of the human person, who is created to the image of God and is the bearer of his likeness. Some of our Churches continue to send out missionaries who carry the Word of God to many places in the world. The pastoral, apostolic and missionary needs mandate us to put together a pastoral master-plan to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life in order to ensure the Church of tomorrow.

We are now at a turning point in our history: The God who has given us the faith in our Eastern lands 2000 years ago, calls us today to persevere with courage, strength and steadfastness in bearing the message of Christ and witnessing to his Gospel, the Gospel of love and peace.

Challenges and Aspirations

3.1. Today, we face many challenges. The first comes from within ourselves and our Churches. We are asked by Christ to accept our faith and to apply it to all situations in our lives. What he asks from our Churches is to strengthen the communion within every Church *sui iuris* and that of the Catholic Churches of various traditions, and to exert every effort in prayer and charitable acts in order to attain the full unity of all Christians so as to fulfil the prayer of Christ: "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).

3.2. The second challenge comes from the outside, namely, political conditions, security in our countries and religious pluralism.

We have evaluated the social situation and the public security in all our countries in the Middle East. We have taken account of the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the whole region, especially on the Palestinians who are suffering the consequences of the Israeli occupation: the lack of freedom of movement, the wall of separation and the military checkpoints, the political prisoners, the demolition of homes, the disturbance of socio-economic life and the thousands of refugees. We have reflected on the suffering and insecurity in which Israelis live. We have meditated on the situation of the holy city of Jerusalem. We are anxious about the unilateral initiatives that threaten its composition and risk to change its demographic balance. With all this in mind, we see that a just and lasting peace is the only salvation for everyone and for the good of the region and its peoples.

3.3. We have reflected in our meetings and in our prayers the keen sufferings of the Iraqi people. We have recalled the Christians assassinated in Iraq, the continued suffering of the Church in Iraq and her sons who have been displaced and dispersed throughout the world, bringing with them the concerns for their land and their fatherland. The synod fathers have expressed their solidarity with the people and the Churches in Iraq and have expressed their desire that the emigrants, forced to leave their country, might find in the welcoming countries the necessary support to be able to return to their homeland and live in security.

3.4. We have extensively treated relations between Christians and Muslims. All of us share a common citizenship in our countries. Here we want to affirm, according to our Christian vision, a fundamental principle which ought to govern our relations, namely, God wants us to be Christians in and for our Middle Eastern societies. This is God's plan for us. This is our mission and vocation - to live as Christians and Muslims together. Our actions in this area will be guided by the commandment of love and by the power of the Spirit within us.

The second principle which governs our relations is the fact that we are an integral part of our societies. Our mission, based on our faith and our duty to our home countries, obliges us to contribute to the construction of our countries as fellow-citizens, Muslims, Jews and Christians alike.

II. Communion and Witness Within the Catholic Churches of the Middle East

To the Faithful of Our Churches

4.1. Jesus says to us: "You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world" (Mt 5:13.14). Your mission in our societies, beloved faithful, through faith, hope and love, is to be like "salt" which gives savour and meaning to life; to be like "light" by proclaiming the truth which scatters the darkness; and to be like the "leaven" which transforms hearts and minds. The first Christians of Jerusalem were few in number, yet they were able to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth because of the grace of "the Lord who acted with them and confirmed their Word by signs" (Mk 16:20).

4.2. We want to greet you, Christians of the Middle East, and we thank you for all you have achieved in your families and societies, in your Churches and nations. We commend you for your perseverance in times of adversity, suffering and anguish.

4.3. Dear priests, our co-workers in the mission of catechesis, liturgy and pastoral work, we renew our friendship and our trust in you. Continue to transmit to your faithful with zeal and perseverance the Gospel of life and Church's tradition through your preaching, catechesis, spiritual direction and

the good example of your lives. Build up the faith of the People of God to make of it a civilisation of love. Provide the sacraments to the People of God so that this People might aspire to be renewed. Gather them together in the union of love by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dear consecrated men and women in the world, we express to you our gratitude and with you we thank God for the gift of the evangelical counsels – of consecrated chastity, of poverty and obedience – through which you have made the gift of yourselves as you follow Christ, the special love to whom you long to witness. It is thanks to your diverse apostolic initiatives that you are the true treasure and wealth of our Churches and a spiritual oasis in our parishes, dioceses and missions.

We unite ourselves spiritually to hermits, to monks and nuns who have dedicated their lives to prayer in contemplative monasteries, sanctifying the hours of day and night, carrying the Church's concerns and needs to God in their prayers. You offer the world a sign of hope through the witness of your life.

4.4. We express to you, faithful lay people, our esteem and our friendship. We appreciate everything you do for your families and societies, your Churches and home countries. Remain steadfast amidst trials and difficulties. We are filled with gratitude to the Lord for the charisms and talents which he has showered you and which equip you to participate, through the power of your baptism and chrismations, in the Church's mission and her apostolic work to permeate the temporal world with the spirit and values of the Gospel. We invite you to give the witness of an authentic Christian life, of a conscientious religious practice and of good morals. Have the courage objectively to proclaim the truth.

Those of you who suffer in body, in soul and spirit, the oppressed, those forced from your homes, the persecuted, prisoners and detainees, we carry you all in our prayers. Unite your suffering to that of Christ the Redeemer and seek in his cross patience and strength. By the merit of your sufferings, you gain God's merciful love.

We greet each of our Christian families and we look upon your vocation and mission with esteem as a living cell of society and a natural school of virtue and ethical and human values, the "domestic Church" which transmits the practices of prayer and of faith from one generation to the next. We thank parents and grandparents for the education of their children and grandchildren, who, like Jesus grow "in wisdom, in stature and grace in the sight of God and men" (Lk 2:52). We commit ourselves to the defence of the family through our pastoral programmes on its behalf, through marriage preparation courses and centres, open to all but mainly to couples in difficulty, where they can be welcomed and obtain counselling, and by defending the fundamental rights of the family.

We now wish to speak to the women of our Churches in a special way. We express to you our appreciation for what you are in the various states of life: girls, mothers, educators, consecrated women and those who engaged in public life. We revere you, because you harbour human life within you from its very beginnings, giving it care and tenderness. God has given you a special sensitivity for everything that pertains to education, humanitarian work and the apostolic life. We give thanks to God for your activities and we hope that you will be able to exercise greater responsibility in public life.

Young women and men, we look to you with the same love which Christ had for the young man in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10:21). You are the potential and renewing force for the future of our Churches, our communities and our countries. Plan your life under the loving gaze of Christ. Be responsible citizens and sincere believers. The Church joins you in your desire to find work commensurate

with your talents, work which will help to stimulate your creativity, providing for your future and making possible the formation of a family of believers. Overcome the temptation of materialism and consumerism. Be strong in your Christian values.

We greet the heads of Catholic institutions of education. Pursue excellence and the Christian spirit in your teaching and education. Aim at the consolidation of a culture of harmonious living and concern for the poor and disabled. In spite of the challenges which confront your institutions, we invite you to maintain them, so as to further the Church's educative mission and to promote the development and common good of our societies.

We address with great esteem those who work in the social sector. In your institutions you are at the service of charity. We encourage and support you in this mission of development, guided by the rich social teaching of the Church. Through your work, you strengthen the bonds of fellowship between people and serve the poor, the marginalised, the sick, refugees and prisoners without discrimination. You are guided by the words of the Lord Jesus: "Everything you do to one of these little ones, you do it to me!" (Mt 25:40).

We look with hope to prayer groups and apostolic movements. They are schools where our faith can mature and we can be given the strength to live that faith in family and society. We appreciate their activities in parishes and dioceses and their support for pastors, in accordance with the Church's directives. We thank God for these groups and movements which are active cells in the parish and seed-beds for vocations to both the priesthood and the consecrated life.

We appreciate the role of the means of social communication, both printed and audio-visual. We thank you journalists for your collaboration with the Church in broadcasting her teachings and activities and, over the course of these days, for having given global news coverage to the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod.

We are pleased with the contribution of the media, both international and Catholic. With regard to the Middle East, Télé Lumière-Noursat merits a special mention. We hope it will be able to continue its service of providing information and forming the faith, of working on behalf of Christian unity, of consolidating the Christian presence in the Middle East, of strengthening interreligious dialogue and the communion of all peoples of Middle Eastern origin, presently in every part of the globe.

To Our Faithful in the Diaspora

5. Emigration has become a generalised phenomenon by Christians, Muslims and Jews alike. All emigrate for reasons arising from political and economic instability. However, Christians also emigrate from a sense of insecurity, in varying degrees, in many Middle Eastern countries. May Christians have trust in the future and continue to live in their dear countries.

We send our greetings to you, members of our Churches in the various countries of the Diaspora. We ask you to keep alive in your hearts and concerns the memory of your countries and your Churches. You can contribute to their development and their growth by your prayers, your thoughts, your visits and by various other means, despite the fact that you are far from the Middle East.

Look at your goods and your properties in your home country; do not abandon and sell them too quickly. Keep them as your patrimony and as a piece of the homeland to which you remain attached, a homeland which you love and support. The land is part of a person's identity and his mission. It is a vital aspect of the lives of those who remain there and for those who one day will return there. The land is a public good, a good of the community and a common patrimony. It should not be

reduced to a question of individual interests on the part of those who own it and who alone decide, according to their desires, to keep or abandon it.

We accompany you with our prayers, you the children of our Churches and of our countries, forced to emigrate. Bear with you your faith, your culture and your patrimony, so as to enrich your new countries which provide you with peace, freedom and work. Look towards the future with confidence and joy. Hold fast to your spiritual values, to your cultural traditions and to your national patrimony, in order to offer to the countries which welcome you the best of yourselves and the best of that which you have. We thank the Churches of the countries of the Diaspora which have received our faithful and unceasingly collaborate with us to ensure the necessary pastoral services for them.

To the Migrants in Our Countries and Our Churches

6. We send our greetings to all immigrants of varying nationalities, who have come to our countries seeking employment.

We welcome you, beloved faithful, and we see your faith as a source of enrichment and a support for the faithful of our Churches. We joyously provide you with every spiritual assistance you might need.

We ask our Churches to pay special attention to these brothers and sisters and their difficulties, whatever may be their religion, especially when their rights and dignity are subject to abuse. They come to us not simply to seek the means for living but offer the services which our countries need. Their dignity comes from God. Like every human person, they have rights which must be respected. No one should violate those rights. That is why we call upon the various governments which receive them to respect and defend their rights.

Communion and Witness Together with the Orthodox and Protestant Communities in the Middle East

7. We send our greetings to the Orthodox and Protestant Communities in our countries. Together we work for the good of all Christians, that they may remain, grow and prosper. We share the same journey. Our challenges are the same and our future is the same. We wish to bear witness together as disciples of Christ. Only through our unity can we accomplish the mission that God has entrusted to us, despite the differences among our Churches. The prayer of Christ is our support; the commandment of love unites us, even if the road towards full communion is still distant for us.

We have walked together in the Middle East Council of Churches and we wish, with God's grace, to continue on this path and to promote its activity, having as an ultimate goal a common testimony to our faith, the service of our faithful and of all our countries. We acknowledge and encourage all initiatives for ecumenical dialogue in each of our countries.

We express our gratitude to the World Council of Churches and to the different ecumenical organisations which work for the unity of the Churches and for their support.

IV. Cooperation and Dialogue with Our Fellow-Citizens, the Jews

8. The same Scriptures unite us; the Old Testament, the Word of God is for both you and us. We believe all that God revealed there, since he called Abraham, our common father in the faith, Father of Jews, of Christians and of Muslims. We believe in the promises of God and his covenant given to Abraham and to you. We believe that the Word of God is eternal.

The Second Vatican Council published the document *Nostra aetate* which treats interreligious dialogue with Judaism, Islam and the other religions. Other documents have subsequently clarified and developed the relationship with Judaism. On-going dialogue is taking place between the Church and the representatives of Judaism. We hope that this dialogue can bring us to work together to press those in authority to put an end to the political conflict which results in separating us and disrupting everyday life in our countries.

It is time for us to commit ourselves together to a sincere, just and permanent peace. Both Christians and Jews are called to this task by the Word of God. In his Word, we are invited to listen to the voice of God “who speaks of peace”: “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his holy ones” (Ps 85:9). Recourse to theological and biblical positions which use the Word of God to wrongly justify injustices is not acceptable. On the contrary, recourse to religion must lead every person to see the face of God in others and to treat them according to their God-given prerogatives and God’s commandments, namely, according to God’s bountiful goodness, mercy, justice and love for us.

V. Cooperation and Dialogue with Our Fellow-Citizens, the Muslims

9. We are united by the faith in one God and by the commandment that says: do good and avoid evil. The words of the Second Vatican Council on the relations with other religions offer the basis for the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Muslims: “The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men” (*Nostra aetate* 3).

We say to our Muslim fellow-citizens: we are brothers and sisters; God wishes us to be together, united by one faith in God and by the dual commandment of love of God and neighbour. Together we will construct our civil societies on the basis of citizenship, religious freedom and freedom of conscience. Together we will work for the promotion of justice, peace, the rights of persons and the values of life and of the family. The construction of our countries is our common responsibility. We wish to offer to the East and to the West a model of coexistence between different religions and of positive collaboration between different civilisations for the good of our countries and that of all humanity.

Since the appearance of Islam in the seventh century and to the present, we have lived together and we have collaborated in the creation of our common civilisation. As in the past and still existent today, some imbalances are present in our relations. Through dialogue we must avoid all imbalances and misunderstandings. Pope Benedict XVI tells us that our dialogue must not be a passing reality. It is rather a vital necessity on which our future depends (Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with Representatives from the Muslim Communities, Cologne, 20 August 2005). Our duty then is to educate believers concerning interreligious dialogue, the acceptance of pluralism and mutual esteem.

VI. Our Participation in Public Life: An Appeal to the Governments and to the Political Leadership in Our Countries

10. We appreciate the efforts which have been expended for the common good and the service to our societies. You are in our prayers and we ask God to guide your steps. We address you regarding the importance of equality among all citizens. Christians are original and authentic citizens who are loyal to their fatherland and assume their duties towards their country. It is natural that they should enjoy all the rights of citizenship, freedom of conscience, freedom of worship and freedom in education, teaching and the use of the mass media.

We appeal to you to redouble your efforts to establish a just and lasting peace throughout the region and to stop the arms race, which will lead to security and economic prosperity and stop the hemorrhage of emigration which empties our countries of its vital forces. Peace is a precious gift entrusted by God to human family, whose members are to be “peacemakers who will be called children of God” (Mt 5:9).

VII. Appeal to the International Community

11. The citizens of the countries of the Middle East call upon the international community, particularly the United Nations conscientiously to work to find a peaceful, just and definitive solution in the region, through the application of the Security Council’s resolutions and taking the necessary legal steps to put an end to the occupation of the different Arab territories.

The Palestinian people will thus have an independent and sovereign homeland where they can live with dignity and security. The State of Israel will be able to enjoy peace and security within their internationally recognized borders. The Holy City of Jerusalem will be able to acquire its proper status, which respects its particular character, its holiness and the religious patrimony of the three religions: Jewish, Christian and Muslim. We hope that the two-State-solution might become a reality and not a dream only.

Iraq will be able to put an end to the consequences of its deadly war and re-establish a secure way of life which will protect all its citizens with all their social structures, both religious and national.

Lebanon will be able to enjoy sovereignty over its entire territory, strengthen its national unity and carry on in its vocation to be the model of coexistence between Christians and Muslims, of dialogue between different cultures and religions, and of the promotion of basic public freedoms.

We condemn violence and terrorism from wherever it may proceed as well as all religious extremism. We condemn all forms of racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Christianism and Islamophobia and we call upon the religions to assume their responsibility to promote dialogue between cultures and civilisations in our region and in the entire world.

Conclusion: Continue to Bear Witness to the Divine Path That Has Been Shown to Us in the Person of Jesus

12. Brothers and sisters, in closing, we say with the St. John the Apostle: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”(1 Jn 1:1-3).

This Divine Life which has appeared to the apostles over 2000 years ago in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ and to which the Church has witnessed throughout the course of her history will always remain the life of our Churches in the Middle East and the object of our witness, sustained by the promise of the Lord: “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the time” (Mt 28:20). Together we proceed on our journey with hope, “and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rm 5:5).

We confess that, until now, we have not done what is possible to better live communion in our communities. We have not done enough to better live communion among our communities. We have not done everything possible to confirm you in your faith and to give you the spiritual nourishment you need in your difficulties. The Lord invites us to a conversion as individuals and communities.

Today we return to you full of hope, strength and resolution, bearing with us the message of the Synod and its recommendations in order to study them together and to put them into practice in our Churches, each one according to the Church’s states of life. We hope also that this new effort might be ecumenical.

We make a humble and sincere appeal to you, that together we might embark on the road of conversion, allowing ourselves to be renewed through the grace of the Holy Spirit and again draw close to God.

To the Most Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of Peace, under whose protection we have accomplished our Synodal task, we entrust our journey towards new, Christian horizons in the faith of Christ and through the power of his word: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

With thanks to Zenit.org for this translation.