



POST-SYNODAL
APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION
ECCLESIA IN MEDIO ORIENTE
OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PATRIARCHS, BISHOPS,
CLERGY
CONSECRATED PERSONS
AND THE LAY FAITHFUL
ON THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
COMMUNION AND WITNESS

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INTRODUCTION

1. **T**HE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST, which from the dawn of Christian faith has made her pilgrim way in those holy lands, today courageously continues her witness, the fruit of a life of communion with God and neighbour. *Communion and Witness!* This was the conviction which occasioned the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which gathered around the Successor of Peter from 10 to 24 October 2010 to discuss the theme, “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness. *Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and one soul*” (Acts 4:32).

2. At the beginning of this third millennium, I wish to entrust this conviction, which draws its strength from Jesus Christ, to the pastoral concern of all the Pastors of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and in a more particular way to my esteemed brothers the Patriarchs, Archbishops and Bishops who together, in union with the Bishop of Rome, oversee the Catholic Church in the Middle East. The natives of these lands include faithful of the venerable Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris*: the patriarchal Church

of Alexandria of the Copts; the three patriarchal Churches of Antioch: Greek Melkite, Syrian and Maronite; the patriarchal Church of Babylon of the Chaldeans and that of Cilicia of the Armenians. Also living in the area are Bishops, priests and lay faithful belonging to the Latin Church. Likewise present are Indian priests and faithful from the Major Archbishopsrics of Ernakulam-Angamaly of the Syro-Malabars, and from Trivandrum of the Syro-Malankaras, as well as priests and faithful of the Eastern Churches and the Latin Church in Asia and Eastern Europe, and many members of the faithful from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Together they bear witness to the unity of the faith amid the diversity of their traditions. I wish also to entrust this conviction to all the priests, the men and women religious, and the lay faithful of the Middle East, confident that it will confirm the ministry or apostolate which each carries out in his or her respective Church, in accordance with the charism bestowed by the Spirit for the upbuilding of all.

3. In the context of the Christian faith, “communion is the very life of God which is communicated in the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ”.¹ It is a gift of God which brings our freedom into play and calls for our response. It is precisely because it is divine in origin that communion has a

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Opening Mass of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East* (11 October 2010): AAS 102 (2010), 805.

universal extension. While it clearly engages Christians by virtue of their shared apostolic faith, it remains no less open to our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, and to all those ordered in various ways to the People of God. The Catholic Church in the Middle East is aware that she will not be able fully to manifest this communion at the ecumenical and interreligious level unless she has first revived it in herself, within each of her Churches and among all her members: Patriarchs, Bishops, priests, religious, consecrated persons and lay persons. Growth by individuals in the life of faith and spiritual renewal within the Catholic Church will lead to the fullness of the life of grace and *theosis* (divinization).² In this way, the Church's witness will become all the more convincing.

4. The example of the first community in Jerusalem can serve as a model for renewing the present Christian community and making it a place of communion for witness. The Acts of the Apostles give us a simple yet touching early description of this community born on the day of Pentecost: a company of believers who were of one heart and soul. From the beginning there was a fundamental connection between faith in Jesus and ecclesial communion, as becomes clear from the two interchangeable expressions: one heart and soul. Communion is not the result of our own human efforts. It comes about, above all else, by the

² Cf. *Propositio* 4.

power of the Holy Spirit, who creates in us the faith which works through love (cf. *Gal* 5:6).

5. According to Acts, the unity of believers was seen in the fact that “they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” (2:42). The unity of believers was thus nourished by the teaching of the Apostles (the proclamation of God’s word), to which they responded with unanimous faith, by fraternal communion (the service of charity), by the breaking of the bread (the Eucharist and the sacraments), and by prayer, both personal and communal. It was on these four pillars that communion and witness were based within the first community of believers. May the Church which has lived uninterruptedly in the Middle East from apostolic times to our own day find in the example of that community the resources needed to keep fresh the memory and the apostolic vitality of her origins!

6. All who took part in the Synod assembly had an experience of the unity which exists within the Catholic Church in a broad spectrum of geographical, religious, cultural and sociopolitical contexts. The common faith is practised and made admirably evident in the diversity of its theological, spiritual, liturgical and canonical expressions. Like my Predecessors in the See of Peter, I wish here to state once more my desire to ensure that “the rites of the Eastern Churches, as the patrimony of the whole Church of Christ in which shines

forth the tradition coming down from the Apostles through the Fathers, and which, in its variety, affirms the divine unity of the Catholic faith, are observed and promoted conscientiously.”³ I likewise assure my Latin brothers and sisters of my affection and my concern for their needs and necessities, in accordance with the commandment of charity which presides over all, and the norms of law.

³ *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Canon 39; cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 1; JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban* (10 May 1997): *AAS* 89 (1997), 346-347, which deals with the unity between the common apostolic Tradition and the ecclesial traditions which developed from it in the Orient.

PART ONE

*“We give thanks to God always for you all,
constantly mentioning you in our prayers” (1 Th 1:2)*

7. With these words of thanksgiving from Saint Paul, I greet the Christians living in the Middle East and assure them of my fervent and continued prayers. The Catholic Church, and with her the entire Christian community, keeps them in mind and acknowledges with gratitude their noble and ancient contribution to the building up of the Body of Christ. She thanks them for their fidelity and assures them of her affection.

The context

8. It is moving for me to recall my journeys to the Middle East. As a land especially chosen by God, it was the home of Patriarchs and Prophets. It was the glorious setting for the Incarnation of the Messiah; it saw the raising of the Saviour's cross and witnessed the resurrection of the Redeemer and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Traversed by the Apostles, saints and a number of the Fathers of the Church, it was the crucible of the earliest dogmatic formulations. Yet this blessed land and its peoples have tragically

experienced human upheavals. How many deaths have there been, how many lives ravaged by human blindness, how many occasions of fear and humiliation! It would seem that there is no end to the crime of Cain (cf. *Gen* 4:6-10 and *1 Jn* 3:8-15) among the sons of Adam and Eve created in God's image (cf. *Gen* 1:27). Adam's transgression, reinforced by the sin of Cain, continues to produce thorns and thistles (cf. *Gen* 3:18) even today. How sad it is to see this blessed land suffer in its children who relentlessly tear one another to pieces and die! Christians know that only Jesus, who passed through sufferings and death in order to rise again, is capable of bringing salvation and peace to all who dwell in your part of the world (cf. *Acts* 2:23-24, 32-33). Him alone, Christ, the Son of God, do we proclaim! Let us repent, then, and be converted, "that sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (*Acts* 3:19-20a).

9. For the sacred Scriptures, peace is not simply a pact or a treaty which ensures a tranquil life, nor can its definition be reduced to the mere absence of war. According to its Hebrew etymology, peace means being complete and intact, restored to wholeness. It is the state of those who live in harmony with God and with themselves, with others and with nature. Before appearing outwardly, peace is interior. It is blessing. It is the yearning for a reality. Peace is something so desirable that it has become a greeting in the Middle East

(cf. *Jn* 20:19; *1 Pet* 5:14). Peace is justice (cf. *Is* 32:17); Saint James in his Letter adds that “the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:18). The struggle of the Prophets and the reflections of the Wisdom authors were inspired by the hope of eschatological peace. It is towards this authentic peace in God that Christ leads us. He alone is its gate (*Jn* 10:9). This is the sole gate that Christians wish to enter.

10. Only by beginning with conversion to God, and by showing forgiveness to those close at hand and in the wider community, will the just respond to Christ’s invitation to become “children of God” (cf. *Mt* 5:9). Only the meek will delight in boundless peace (cf. *Ps* 37:11). In offering us a life of communion with God, Jesus creates true fraternity, not the fraternity marred by sin.⁴ “For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility” (*Eph* 2:14). Christians know that the earthly politics of peace will only be effective if justice in God and justice among men and women are its authentic basis, and if this same justice battles against the sin which is at the origin of division. For this reason, the Church wishes to overcome every difference of race, sex and social condition (cf. *Gal* 3:28 and *Col* 3:11) in the knowledge that all are one in Christ, who is all in all. This too is why the Church supports and encourages every peace

⁴ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at Christmas Midnight Mass* (24 December 2010): *AAS* 103 (2011), 17-21.

initiative throughout the world and particularly in the Middle East. She works unstintingly and in a variety of ways to help people to live in peace, while also supporting the international juridical framework which consolidates peace. The Holy See's positions on the different conflicts which tragically afflict the region and on the status of Jerusalem and the holy places are well known.⁵ Yet the Church does not lose sight of the fact that, before all else, peace remains a fruit of the Spirit (cf. *Gal* 5:22), one which must constantly be implored from God (cf. *Mt* 7:7-8).

The Christian and ecumenical life

11. It is in this restrictive, unstable and lately violence-prone context that God has permitted his Church to grow. She lives there in a remarkable variety of forms. Along with the Catholic Church, a great number of venerable Churches and Ecclesial Communities of more recent date are present in the Middle East. This mosaic demands a significant and continued effort to build unity in respect for the riches of each, and thus to reaffirm the credibility of the proclamation of the Gospel and Christian witness.⁶ Unity is a gift of God which is born of the Spirit and which must be cultivated with patient perseverance (cf. *1 Pet* 3:8-9). We know that it is tempting, when-

⁵ Cf. *Propositio* 9.

⁶ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

ever our divisions make themselves felt, to appeal to purely human criteria, forgetting the sage counsel of Saint Paul (cf. *1 Cor* 6:7-8). He entreats us: “Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (*Eph* 4:3). Faith is the centre and the fruit of true ecumenism.⁷ Faith itself must first be deepened. Unity is born of constant prayer and the conversion which enables each of us to live in accordance with the truth and in charity (cf. *Eph* 4:15-16). The Second Vatican Council encouraged this “spiritual ecumenism” which is the soul of true ecumenism.⁸ The situation in the Middle East is itself a pressing summons to holiness of life. The various martyrologies are proof that saints and martyrs of every ecclesial community have been – and certainly remain today – living witnesses of this untrammelled unity in the glorified Christ, a foretaste of our “being gathered together” as a people finally reconciled in him.⁹ For this reason, within the Catholic Church herself we need to consolidate the communion which bears witness to the love of Christ.

12. On the basis of the indications set forth in the *Ecumenical Directory*,¹⁰ the Catholic faithful can

⁷ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (27 January 2012): *AAS* 104 (2012), 109.

⁸ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8.

⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* (25 May 1995), 83-84: *AAS* 87 (1995), 971-972.

¹⁰ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (25 March 1993): *AAS* 85 (1993), 1039-1119.

promote spiritual ecumenism in parishes, monasteries and convents, in schools and universities, and in seminaries. Pastors should ensure that the faithful come to see themselves as witnesses of communion in all areas of their lives. Communion in this sense is certainly not confusion. Authentic witness calls for acknowledgment and respect for others, a willingness to dialogue in truth, patience as an expression of love, the simplicity and humility proper to those who realize that they are sinners in the sight of God and their neighbour, a capacity for forgiveness, reconciliation and purification of memory, at both the personal and communal levels.

13. I encourage the efforts of theologians who work tirelessly for unity, and I express my appreciation for the activities of local ecumenical commissions at different levels and of the various communities which pray and work for the goal of unity by promoting friendship and fraternity. In fidelity to the Church's origins and her living traditions, it is also important that all speak with one voice in addressing the great moral questions dealing with the truth about man, the family, sexuality, bioethics, freedom, justice and peace.

14. An "ecumenism of service", moreover, already exists in the fields of charity and education between Christians of the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities. The Middle East Council of Churches, to which the Churches of the various Christian traditions in the region belong, of-

fers a promising setting for a dialogue which can develop in love and reciprocal respect.

15. The Second Vatican Council points out that, to be effective, the path of ecumenism should be marked “by prayer above all, by example, by scrupulous fidelity to the ancient traditions of the East, by better knowledge of one another, by working together and by an understanding attitude towards persons and things”.¹¹ It would be most fitting for all to draw closer to Christ himself. Jesus draws into unity those who believe in and love him; he gives them the Spirit of his Father as well as Mary, his Mother (*Jn* 14:26;16:7 and 19:27). These two gifts, different in level, can be a powerful source of help, one that merits greater attention on the part of all.

16. Our common love for Christ, “who committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips” (*1 Pet* 2:22) and the “close bonds”¹² which exist between the Catholic Church and the Churches of the East not in full communion with her, are an urgent summons to dialogue and unity. In a number of cases, Catholics are linked to the Churches of the East not in full communion by reason of common religious origins. For a renewed ecumenical pastoral outreach in view of common witness, it is helpful to have a clear understanding

¹¹ Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 24.

¹² SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15.

of the Council's openness to a certain *communicatio in sacris* for the sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist and the Anointing of the Sick;¹³ this is not only possible but even to be commended in some situations, in accordance with specific norms and with the approval of the ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁴ Marriages between Catholics and Orthodox are numerous and call for particular ecumenical attention.¹⁵ I encourage Bishops and Eparchs to apply, to the extent possible and wherever they exist, pastoral agreements on the gradual implementation of a joint ecumenical pastoral effort.

17. Ecumenical unity does not mean uniformity of traditions and celebrations. To begin with, I am sure that with God's help agreement can be found for a common translation of the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, in the local languages of the region, wherever necessary.¹⁶ By praying together in the same words, Christians will acknowledge their common roots in the one apostolic faith which is the basis of our pursuit of full communion. En-

¹³ Cf. ID., Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 26-27.

¹⁴ Cf. ID., Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 15; PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (25 March 1993): *AAS* 85 (1993), 1086-1088.

¹⁵ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (25 March 1993), 145: *AAS* 85 (1993), 1092.

¹⁶ Cf. *Propositio* 28, in which certain of the initiatives proposed are within the competence of local pastoral authorities, while others, which engage the Catholic Church as a whole, will be studied jointly with the See of Peter.

gaging together in a deeper study of the Eastern and Latin Fathers, and of our respective spiritual traditions, could prove greatly helpful to this end, in the correct application of the canonical norms regulating this material.

18. I invite the Catholics of the Middle East to cultivate relationships with the faithful of the different Ecclesial Communities present in the region. Various joint initiatives are possible. Common Bible study and a wider diffusion of the Bible could, for example, initiate this process. Particularly fruitful forms of cooperation in the area of charitable activities and the promotion of the values of human life, justice and peace could also be developed or expanded. All this will contribute to greater mutual knowledge and the creation of a climate of esteem; these are indispensable conditions for promoting fraternity.

Interreligious dialogue

19. The Church's universal nature and vocation require that she engage in dialogue with the members of other religions. In the Middle East this dialogue is based on the spiritual and historical bonds uniting Christians to Jews and Muslims. It is a dialogue which is not primarily dictated by pragmatic political or social considerations, but by underlying theological concerns which have to do with faith. They are grounded in the sacred Scriptures and are clearly defined in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and in

the Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*.¹⁷ Jews, Christians and Muslims alike believe in one God, the Creator of all men and women. May Jews, Christians and Muslims rediscover one of God's desires, that of the unity and harmony of the human family. May Jews, Christians and Muslims find in *other believers* brothers and sisters to be respected and loved, and in this way, beginning in their own lands, give the beautiful witness of serenity and concord between the children of Abraham. Rather than being exploited in endless conflicts which are unjustifiable for authentic believers, the acknowledgment of one God – if lived with a pure heart – can make a powerful contribution to peace in the region and to respectful coexistence on the part of its peoples.

20. The bonds uniting Christians and Jews are many and they run deep. They are anchored in a precious common spiritual heritage. There is of course our faith in one God, the Creator, who reveals himself, offers his unending friendship to mankind and out of love desires to redeem us. There is also the Bible, much of which is common to both Jews and Christians. For both, it is the word of God. Our common recourse to sacred Scripture draws us closer to one another. Moreover, Jesus, a son of the Chosen People, was born, lived and died a Jew (cf. *Rom* 9:4-5). Mary, his

¹⁷ Cf. *Propositio* 40.

Mother, likewise invites us to rediscover the Jewish roots of Christianity. These close bonds are a unique treasure of which Christians are proud and for which they are indebted to the Chosen People. The Jewishness of the Nazarene allows Christians to taste joyfully the world of the Promise and resolutely introduces them into the faith of the Chosen People, making them a part of that People. Yet the person and the deepest identity of Jesus also divide them, for in him Christians recognize the Messiah, the Son of God.

21. Christians ought to become more conscious of the depth of the mystery of the Incarnation in order to love God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their might (cf. *Dt* 6:5). Christ, the Son of God, became flesh in a people, a faith tradition and a culture which, if better known, can only enrich the understanding of the Christian faith. Christians have come to this deeper understanding thanks to the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. *Lk* 24:26). But they must always be aware of and grateful for their roots. For the shoot grafted onto the ancient tree to take (cf. *Rom* 11:17-18), it needs the sap rising from the roots.

22. Relationships between the two communities of believers bear the marks of history and human passion. Misunderstandings and reciprocal distrust have abounded. Past persecutions, whether surreptitious or violent, are inexcusable and greatly to be deplored. And yet, despite

these tragic situations, the interplay between both communities over the centuries proved so fruitful that it contributed to the birth and expansion of the civilization and culture commonly known as Judeo-Christian. It is as if these two worlds, claiming to be different or opposed for various reasons, had decided to unite in offering humanity a noble alloy. This relationship, which both unites and separates Jews and Christians, ought to open both groups to a new sense of responsibility for and with one another.¹⁸ For both peoples have received the same blessing and the eternal promises which enable them to advance trustingly towards fraternity.

23. The Catholic Church, in fidelity to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, looks with esteem to Muslims, who worship God above all by prayer, almsgiving and fasting, revere Jesus as a prophet while not acknowledging his divinity, and honour Mary, his Virgin Mother. We know that the encounter of Islam and Christianity has often taken the form of doctrinal controversy. Sadly, both sides have used doctrinal differences as a pretext for justifying, in the name of religion, acts of intolerance, discrimination, marginalization and even of persecution.¹⁹

24. Despite this fact, Christians live daily alongside Muslims in the Middle East, where their

¹⁸ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Address at Hechal Shlomo Center, Jerusalem (12 May 2009): *AAS* 101 (2009), 522-523; *Propositio* 41.

¹⁹ Cf. *Propositio* 5.

presence is neither recent nor accidental, but has a long history. As an integral part of the Middle East, Christians have developed over the centuries a type of relationship with their surroundings which can prove instructive. They have let themselves be challenged by Muslim devotion and piety, and have continued, in accordance with their means and to the extent possible, to live by and to promote the values of the Gospel in the surrounding culture. The result has been a particular form of symbiosis. It is proper, then, to acknowledge the contribution made by Jews, Christians and Muslims in the formation of a rich culture proper to the Middle East.²⁰

25. The Catholics of the Middle East, the majority of whom are native citizens of their countries, have the duty and right to participate fully in national life, working to build up their country. They should enjoy full citizenship and not be treated as second-class citizens or believers. As in the past when, as pioneers of the Arab Renaissance, they took full part in the cultural, economic and scientific life of the different cultures of the region, so too in our own day they wish to share with Muslims their experiences and to make their specific contribution. It is because of Jesus that Christians are sensitive to the dignity of the human person and to freedom of religion which is its corollary. For love of God and humanity, thus

²⁰ Cf. *Propositio* 42.

honouring Christ's two natures, and with eternal life in view, Christians have built schools, hospitals and institutions of every kind where all people are welcomed without discrimination (cf. *Mt 25:31 ff.*). For these reasons, Christians are particularly concerned for the fundamental rights of the human person. It is wrong to claim that these rights are only "Christian" human rights. They are nothing less than the rights demanded by the dignity of each human person and each citizen, whatever his or her origins, religious convictions and political preferences.

26. Religious freedom is the pinnacle of all other freedoms. It is a sacred and inalienable right. It includes on the individual and collective levels the freedom to follow one's conscience in religious matters and, at the same time, freedom of worship. It includes the freedom to choose the religion which one judges to be true and to manifest one's beliefs in public.²¹ It must be possible to profess and freely manifest one's religion and its symbols without endangering one's life and personal freedom. Religious freedom is rooted in the dignity of the person; it safeguards moral freedom and fosters mutual respect. Jews, with their long experience of often deadly assaults, know full well

²¹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2-8; BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 2011 World Day of Peace* (8 December 2010): *AAS* 103 (2011), 46-48; *Address to Members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See* (10 January 2011): *AAS* 103 (2011), 100-107.

the benefits of religious freedom. For their part, Muslims share with Christians the conviction that no constraint in religious matters, much less the use of force, is permitted. Such constraint, which can take multiple and insidious forms on the personal and social, cultural, administrative and political levels, is contrary to God's will. It gives rise to political and religious exploitation, discrimination and violence leading to death. God wants life, not death. He forbids all killing, even of those who kill (cf. *Gen* 4:15-16; 9:5-6; *Ex* 20:13).

27. Religious tolerance exists in a number of countries, but it does not have much effect since it remains limited in its field of action. There is a need to move beyond tolerance to religious freedom. Taking this step does not open the door to relativism, as some would maintain. It does not compromise belief, but rather calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between man, religion and God. It is not an attack on the "foundational truths" of belief, since, despite human and religious divergences, a ray of truth shines on all men and women.²² We know very well that truth, apart from God, does not exist as an autonomous reality. If it did, it would be an idol. The truth cannot unfold except in an otherness open to God, who wishes to reveal his own otherness in and through my human brothers and sisters. Hence it is not

²² Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

fitting to state in an exclusive way: "I possess the truth". The truth is not possessed by anyone; it is always a gift which calls us to undertake a journey of ever closer assimilation to truth. Truth can only be known and experienced in freedom; for this reason we cannot impose truth on others; truth is disclosed only in an encounter of love.

28. The attention of the whole world is fixed on the Middle East as it seeks its path. May this region demonstrate that coexistence is not a utopia, and that distrust and prejudice are not a foregone conclusion. Religions can join one another in service to the common good and contribute to the development of each person and the building of society. The Christians of the Middle East have experienced for centuries the dialogue between Islam and Christianity. For them it means the dialogue of and in daily life. They know its rich possibilities and its limitations. They have also experienced the more recent dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. For some time now, bilateral and trilateral dialogues have taken place between Jewish, Muslim and Christian intellectuals or theologians. These offer fruitful opportunities for encounter and the study of various issues, and they ought to be supported. An effective contribution in this regard is made by all those Catholic institutions or centres for the study of philosophy, theology and other disciplines which have long been present in the Middle East, and carry on their activity there in sometimes difficult conditions. I

express my appreciation to them and I encourage them to continue their work as peacemakers, in the knowledge that every effort made to overcome ignorance and to promote knowledge deserves to be supported. God willing, the happy union of the dialogue of everyday life and the dialogue of intellectuals or theologians will slowly but surely contribute to improving relations between Jews and Christians, Jews and Muslims and Muslims and Christians. This is my hope and the intention for which I pray.

Two new realities

29. Like the rest of the world, the Middle East is experiencing two opposing trends: secularization, with its occasionally extreme consequences, and a violent fundamentalism claiming to be based on religion. Some Middle Eastern political and religious leaders, whatever their community, tend to look with suspicion upon secularity (*laïcité*) as something intrinsically atheistic or immoral. It is true that secularity sometimes reduces religion to a purely private concern, seeing personal or family worship as unrelated to daily life, ethics or one's relationships with others. In its extreme and ideological form, secularity becomes a secularism which denies citizens the right openly to express their religion and claims that only the State can legislate on the public form which religion may take. These theories are not new. Nor are they confined to the West or to be confused with Christianity.

A healthy secularity, on the other hand, frees religion from the encumbrance of politics, and allows politics to be enriched by the contribution of religion, while maintaining the necessary distance, clear distinction and indispensable collaboration between the two spheres. No society can develop in a healthy way without embodying a spirit of mutual respect between politics and religion, avoiding the constant temptation either to merge the two or to set them at odds. The basis of a constructive relationship between politics and religion is, first and foremost, human nature – a sound understanding of man – and full respect for inalienable human rights. A sense of this correct relationship should lead to the realization that relations between the spiritual (religious) and the temporal (political) spheres should be marked by a kind of unity in distinction, inasmuch as both are called, while remaining distinct, to cooperate harmoniously in the service of the common good. This kind of healthy secularity ensures that political activity does not manipulate religion, while the practice of religion remains free from a politics of self-interest which at times is barely compatible with, if not downright contrary to, religious belief. For this reason, a healthy secularity, embodying unity in distinction, is necessary and even vital for both spheres. The challenges raised by the relationship of politics and religion can be met patiently and courageously through a sound human and religious formation. Constant emphasis needs to be put on the place

of God in personal, family and civic life, and on the proper place of men and women in God's plan. Above all, greater prayer is required for this intention.

30. Economic and political instability, a readiness on the part of some to manipulate others, and a defective understanding of religion help open the door to religious fundamentalism. This phenomenon afflicts all religious communities, and denies their long-standing tradition of coexistence. It wants to gain power, at times violently, over individual consciences, and over religion itself, for political reasons. I appeal urgently to all Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious leaders in the region to seek, by their example and by their teaching, to do everything in their power to eliminate this menace which indiscriminately and fatally affects believers of all religions. "To use the revealed word, the Sacred Scriptures or the name of God to justify our interests, our easy and convenient policies or our violence, is a very grave fault".²³

Migrants

31. Life in the Middle East is rich in diversity, but all too frequently restrictive and even violent. This affects all the inhabitants of the region and

²³ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Members of the Government, Representatives of the Institutions of the Republic, the Diplomatic Corps and Representatives of the Principal Religions* (Cotonou, 19 November 2011): *AAS* 103 (2011), 820.

every aspect of their lives. Christians, who frequently find themselves in a delicate position, feel keenly, at times with weariness and little hope, the negative consequences of these conflicts and uncertainties. They experience frequent humiliation. They know from experience that they are often the victims when trouble breaks out. After taking an active part for centuries in the growth of their respective nations and helping to forge their identity and prosperity, many Christians are now seeking more favourable horizons and places of peace where their families will be able to live a dignified and secure life, and spaces of freedom where they can express their faith openly without fear of various constraints.²⁴ This is a heart-rending decision. It has a profound impact on individuals, families and Churches. It dismembers nations and contributes to the human, cultural and religious impoverishment of the Middle East. A Middle East without Christians, or with only a few Christians, would no longer be the Middle East, since Christians, together with other believers, are part of the distinctive identity of the region. All are responsible before God for one another. Thus it is important that politicians and religious leaders appreciate this and avoid those policies or partisan

²⁴ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the 2006 World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (18 October 2005): *AAS* 97 (2005), 981-983; *Message for the 2008 World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (18 October 2007): *AAS* 99 (2007), 1065-1067; *Message for the 2012 World Day of Migrants and Refugees* (21 September 2011): *AAS* 103 (2011), 763-766.

strategies which would result in a monochromatic Middle East that would be completely unreflective of its rich human and historic reality.

32. The Pastors of the Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris* realize with regret and concern that the numbers of their faithful are dwindling in the traditional Patriarchal territories, and for some time now they have had to develop a plan of pastoral care for emigrants.²⁵ I am certain that they are doing all in their power to exhort the faithful to continue to hope, not to leave their homelands and not to sell their possessions.²⁶ I ask them to continue to show affection for their priests and faithful in the diaspora, and I encourage them to stay in close contact with their families and Churches and above all to remain steadfast in their faith in God through their religious identity, built as it is upon venerable spiritual traditions.²⁷ By preserving this closeness to God and to their respective Churches, and by cultivating a deep love of their Latin brothers and sisters, they will greatly benefit the entire Catholic Church. I also exhort the Church's Pastors in those places where Eastern Catholics have settled to welcome them with charity and fraternal esteem, to facilitate the bonds of communion between emigrants and their Churches of origin, and to enable them to celebrate in accordance with their own traditions

²⁵ Cf. *Propositio* 11.

²⁶ Cf. *Propositiones* 6 and 10.

²⁷ Cf. *Propositio* 12.

and, wherever possible, to develop pastoral and parish activities.²⁸

33. The Latin Church in the Middle East, which has also seen a dramatic decline in the number of its faithful, operates in different circumstances and has to deal with a variety of new pastoral challenges. In countries with strong economies, her Pastors have to respond to a massive influx of workers coming from Africa, the Far East and the Indian sub-continent. These groups, comprising many single men and women or entire families, face insecurity on two fronts. They are aliens in the country where they work, and they frequently experience discrimination and injustice. God has a special concern for the foreigner, who thus deserves respect. The way we treat strangers will be taken into account at the Last Judgement (cf. *Mt* 25:35, 43).²⁹

34. These persons, downtrodden, at the mercy of others and unable to defend themselves, bound by contracts which are more or less limited, or even legal, are often the victims of violations of local laws and international conventions. They also face powerful pressure and grave religious restrictions. The task of their Pastors is both necessary and delicate. I encourage all the Catholic faithful and all priests, to whatever Church they belong, to manifest sincere communion and pastoral cooperation with the local Bishop, and I ask the Bishops to show paternal understanding

²⁸ Cf. *Propositio* 15.

²⁹ Cf. *Propositio* 14.

towards all the Eastern faithful. It is by working together and above all by speaking with one voice that, in situations like these, all will be able to live and celebrate their faith, enriched by the diversity of spiritual traditions and remaining in contact with their Christian communities of origin. I also invite the leaders of those countries which receive these new groups to respect and defend their rights, and to allow them freely to express their faith by promoting religious freedom and the construction of places of worship. Religious freedom “could become the subject of dialogue between Christians and Muslims, a dialogue whose urgency and usefulness was reiterated by the Synod Fathers”.³⁰

35. Some Catholics born in the Middle East, whether out of necessity, weariness or despair, make the dramatic decision to abandon the land of their ancestors, their family and their believing community. Others, full of hope, choose to remain in their country and community. I encourage the latter to reaffirm their praiseworthy commitment and to remain firm in the faith. Other Catholics decide on a course at least as heartrending as that of their brothers and sisters in the Middle East who emigrate; fleeing from unsure prospects in the hope of building a better future, they choose to come to the countries of the region in order

³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Closing Mass of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East* (24 October 2010): *AAS* 102 (2010), 815.

to live and work. Native and immigrant Catholics together constitute the current reality of Catholicism in the region.

36. As Pastor of the universal Church, I wish to say a word to all the Catholics of the region, whether native or recently arrived, realizing that in recent years their proportionate numbers have come closer together: for God there is only one people and for believers only one faith! Strive to live in unity and respect, and in fraternal communion with one another in mutual love and esteem, so as to be credible witnesses to your faith in the death and resurrection of Christ! God will hear your prayer, he will bless your way of life and give you his Spirit to enable you to bear the burden of the day. For “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (*2 Cor 3:17*). To Christians who were experiencing similar situations Saint Peter wrote the following words of exhortation which I willingly address to you: “Now who is there to harm you, if you are zealous for what is right? ... Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ the Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (*1 Pet 3:13-15*).

PART TWO

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

37. The outward aspect of the nascent Christian community was described in terms of spiritual qualities which express the Church's *koinonia*: those who believed were of *one heart and one soul*. This phrase conveys the profound meaning of giving witness, which is the reflection of an interior life both personal and communitarian. By letting itself be inwardly knit together by divine grace, each particular Church can experience anew the beauty of the first community of believers which was united in that faith moved by charity that visibly characterizes the disciples of Christ (cf. *Jn* 13:35). *Koinonia* brings consistency and coherence to witness, and demands constant conversion. Conversion for its part brings communion to perfection and in turn consolidates witness. "Without communion there can be no witness: the life of communion is truly the great witness."³¹ Communion is a gift to be fully accepted by all

³¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at the Opening Mass of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East* (11 October 2010): *AAS* 102 (2010), 805.

and a reality to be constantly built up anew. I invite all the members of the Churches present in the Middle East, each in accordance with his or her vocation, to consolidate communion, humbly and prayerfully, so that the unity for which Christ prayed may be realized (cf. *Jn* 17:21).

38. The Catholic notion of the Church looks to the communion which exists between the universal and the particular. There is a relationship of mutual interiority between the universal Church and the particular Churches, and this identifies and makes concrete the Church's catholicity. The presence of the whole in each of the parts gives each part an inner impulse towards universality, an impulse that in one sense is manifested in the missionary impulse of each of the Churches and, in another sense, in the sincere recognition of the goodness of the other parts, which includes acting in harmonious cooperation with them. The universal Church is a reality which precedes the particular Churches, which are born in and through the universal Church.³² This truth is faithfully reflected in Catholic teaching, especially that of the

³² Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion *Communio* *Notio*, (28 May 1992), 9: *AAS* 85 (1993), 843-844, especially the statement in the first paragraph: "The universal Church cannot be conceived as the sum of the particular Churches or as a federation of particular Churches.' It is not the result of the communion of the Churches but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular Church."

Second Vatican Council.³³ It leads to an understanding of the hierarchical dimension of ecclesial communion and allows the rich and legitimate diversity of the particular Churches constantly to develop within that unity in which particular gifts can become an authentic source of enrichment for the universality of the Church. A renewed and lived awareness of these basic principles of ecclesiology will allow for a rediscovery of the distinctiveness and richness of Catholic identity in the lands of the East.

Patriarchs

39. As Fathers and Heads of Churches *sui iuris*, the Patriarchs are visible points of reference and watchful guardians of communion. By nature and mission, they are men of communion, charged with tending the flock of God (cf. *1 Pet* 5:1-4), and servants of ecclesial unity. They exercise a ministry which works through charity lived authentically at all levels: between the Patriarchs themselves and between each Patriarch and the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful under his jurisdiction.

40. Patriarchs, whose indefectible union with the Bishop of Rome is rooted in the *ecclesiastica communio* which they request from the Pope following their canonical election, show by this special bond

³³ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

the Church's universality and unity.³⁴ Their care extends to all the disciples of Jesus Christ living in the patriarchal territory. As a sign of communion in the service of witness, they should strive to strengthen union and solidarity within the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East and the various patriarchal Synods, and recognize the need to consult one another in matters of great importance for the Church prior to taking a unified collegial action. For the credibility of their witness, Patriarchs should seek righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness and gentleness (cf. *1 Tim* 6:11), and adopt a sober manner of life in imitation of Christ, who became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf. *2 Cor* 8:9). They should also take care to promote concrete solidarity among the ecclesiastical jurisdictions through careful management of personnel and the Church's resources. This is part of their duties.³⁵ Following the example of Jesus, who passed through towns and villages in the fulfilment of his mission (cf. *Mk* 9:35), Patriarchs are to be zealous in making the required pastoral visitations.³⁶ They ought to do so not only as a means of exercising their right and duty of vigilance, but also as a practical sign of fraternal and paternal charity towards the Bishops, priests and lay faith-

³⁴ Cf. *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Canon 76, §1 and §2; Canon 92, §1 and §2.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, Canon 97.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, Canon 83, §1.

ful, and especially towards the poor, the sick and the outcast, and those who suffer spiritually.

Bishops

41. By virtue of his ordination, a Bishop becomes both a member of the College of Bishops and the pastor of a local community through his ministry of teaching, preaching and governance. With the Patriarchs, Bishops are visible signs of the unity in diversity which is proper to the Church as the Body whose Head is Christ (cf. *Eph* 4:12-15). They were the first to be freely chosen and sent forth to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that the risen Lord commanded (cf. *Mt* 28:19-20).³⁷ Hence it is of vital importance that they themselves hear God's word and treasure it in their hearts. They must proclaim it with courage, defending firmly the integrity and unity of the faith amid the difficult situations which, sadly, are all too common in the Middle East.

42. To promote the life of communion and *dia-konia*, it is important for Bishops to strive constantly for their own personal renewal. This interior vigilance demands "above all a life of prayer, self-denial, sacrifice and listening to others; it also demands an exemplary life as apostles and pastors based on simplicity, poverty and humility; finally

³⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis* (16 October 2003), 26: *AAS* 96 (2004), 859-860.

it includes a constant concern to defend truth, justice, sound morals and to protect the weak”.³⁸ The greatly-desired renewal of communities demands that Bishops show pastoral concern for all the baptized, and in a particular way for their closest co-workers, the priests.³⁹

43. Communion within each local Church is the primary basis of communion between the Churches, which is constantly nourished by the word of God and the sacraments, and by other forms of prayer. I encourage Bishops to show concern for all the faithful present in their jurisdiction, regardless of their social condition, nationality or Church of origin. They should shepherd the flock entrusted to them and watch over them, “not domineering over those in [their] charge, but being examples to the flock” (*1 Pet* 5:3). They should show particular concern for those who do not regularly practise their faith and those who for various reasons no longer practise the faith at all.⁴⁰ They should also strive to be Christ’s loving presence among those who do not profess the Christian faith. By so doing, they will promote unity among Christians themselves and solidarity between all men and women created in the image of God (cf. *Gen* 1:27), the Father from whom all things come and for whom we exist (cf. *1 Cor* 8:6).

³⁸ ID., Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban* (10 May 1997), 60: *AAS* 89 (1997), 364.

³⁹ Cf. *Propositio* 22.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Canon 192, §1.

44. It is the duty of the Bishops to ensure that the temporal goods of the Church are managed wisely, honestly and transparently in accordance with the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches or the Code of Canon Law of the Latin Church. The Synod Fathers called for a serious audit of finances and holdings in order to avoid any possible confusion between personal and Church property.⁴¹ The Apostle Paul calls the servant of God a steward of the mysteries of God: “and it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (1 Cor 4:2). A steward administers property that is not his and which, according to the Apostle, is destined to a higher use, that of the mysteries of God (cf. Mt 19:28-30; 1 Pet 4:10). Such scrupulous and impartial management, called for by the monastic founders – the true pillars of many of the Eastern Churches – should be directed primarily to evangelization and charity. Bishops should see to it that priests, who are their first co-workers, receive a just remuneration so that they will not be distracted by temporal concerns but may devote themselves with dignity to the things of God and to their pastoral mission. Those who help the poor obtain heaven! Saint James insists on the respect due to the poor, their importance and their true place in the community (cf. 1:9-11; 2:1-9). The administration of the Church’s goods must therefore become a clear way of proclaiming Jesus’ message of liberation: “The Spirit of

⁴¹ Cf. *Propositio* 7.

the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (*Lk* 4:18-19). The faithful steward is the one who has understood that the Lord alone is the pearl of great price (cf. *Mt* 13:45-46); he alone is our true treasure (*Mt* 6:19-21; 13:44). May every Bishop be a clear example of this to his priests, seminarians and faithful! Moreover, the alienation of Church goods should adhere strictly to the relevant canonical norms and current papal legislation.

Priests, deacons and seminarians

45. By his ordination the priest is configured to Christ and becomes a close collaborator of the Patriarch and Bishop in whose threefold *munus* he shares.⁴² This itself makes him a servant of communion; the fulfilment of this role demands that he remain closely united to Christ and be zealous in charity and works of mercy towards all. Thus he will be able to radiate that holiness to which all the baptized are called. He will teach and encourage the People of God to build up the civilization of evangelical love and unity. To this end he should renew and confirm his flock in the life of faith by wisely

⁴² Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4-6.

passing on God's word and the Church's Tradition and teaching, and by celebrating the sacraments.⁴³ The Eastern traditions are marked by great insight into the practice of spiritual direction. May priests, deacons and consecrated persons avail themselves of this practice and thereby open to the faithful pathways to eternity.

46. Bearing witness to communion also requires a solid theological and spiritual formation which in turn calls for ongoing intellectual and spiritual renewal. Bishops should provide priests and deacons with the means necessary to enable them to deepen their life of faith and thus benefit the faithful, giving them "food in due season" (*Ps* 145[144]:15). The faithful also rightly expect of them an example of unblemished conduct (cf. *Phil* 2:14-16).

47. Dear priests, I invite you to rediscover each day the ontological dimension of Holy Orders, which inspires you to live the priesthood as a source of sanctification for the baptized and for the betterment of every man and woman. "Tend the flock of God that is your charge ... not for shameful gain, but eagerly" (*1 Pet* 5:2). Hold in high esteem the practice of living and working together, when possible, as a ministerial team, whatever difficulties this may entail (*1 Pet* 4:8-10); this will help you to esteem and experience more

⁴³ Cf. *Final Message* (22 October 2010), 4, 3.

fully priestly and pastoral communion at the local and universal levels. Dear deacons, in communion with your Bishop and the priests, serve the people of God in exercising your ministry in the specific responsibilities entrusted to you.

48. Priestly celibacy is a priceless gift of God to his Church, one which ought to be received with appreciation in East and West alike, for it represents an ever timely prophetic sign. Mention must also be made of the ministry of married priests, who are an ancient part of the Eastern tradition. I would like to encourage those priests who, along with their families, are called to holiness in the faithful exercise of their ministry and in sometimes difficult living conditions. To all I repeat that the excellence of your priestly life⁴⁴ will doubtless raise up new vocations which you are called to cultivate.

49. The calling of the young Samuel (cf. *1 Sam* 3:1-19) teaches us that we need competent guides to assist us in discerning the will of the Lord and in responding generously to his call. Hence the flowering of vocations must be supported by a specific pastoral plan. It has to be sustained by prayer in families, parishes, ecclesial movements and educational institutions. Those who answer the Lord's call need to experience growth in specific centres of formation and be

⁴⁴ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 11.

guided by suitable and exemplary formators, who will train them in prayer, communion, witness and missionary awareness. There should be appropriate programmes to deal with the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral aspects of human life, while taking prudent account of differing social contexts, origins and cultural and ecclesial backgrounds.⁴⁵

50. Dear seminarians, a reed cannot grow where there is no water (cf. *Job* 8:11); nor can you be true builders of communion and authentic witnesses of faith without being deeply rooted in Christ, without constant conversion to his word, without love of his Church and selfless love of neighbour. Even today you are being called to live and build communion for the sake of a courageous and blameless witness. The strengthening of God's People in faith will depend on the quality of your own witness. I ask you to grow in openness to the cultural diversity of your Churches by coming to know other languages and cultures with a view to your future mission. Be open likewise to diversity in the Church and among all Christians, and to interreligious dialogue. A careful reading of my Letter to Seminarians should be of help in this regard.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (19 March 1985), 5-10.

⁴⁶ *Letter to Seminarians*, (18 October 2010): *AAS* 102 (2010), 793-798.

The consecrated life

51. Monasticism in its different forms was born in the Middle East and gave rise to several of the Churches in the region.⁴⁷ Monks and nuns have devoted their lives to prayer, sanctifying the day and night hours and bringing to their prayers the concerns and needs of the Church and all mankind. May they be a constant reminder to everyone of how important prayer is for the life of the Church and of each member of the faithful. May monasteries also be places where the faithful can find guidance in learning to pray!

52. The consecrated life, whether contemplative or apostolic, is a deepening of the consecration received in Baptism. Men and women religious seek to follow Christ more radically through the profession of the evangelical counsels of obedience, chastity and poverty.⁴⁸ Their unreserved gift of self to the Lord and their disinterested love for every individual are a form of witness to God and a real sign of his love for the world. Lived as a precious gift of the Holy Spirit, the consecrated life is an indispensable support for the Church's life and pastoral activity.⁴⁹ Religious

⁴⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen* (2 May 1995): *AAS* 87 (1995), 745-774.

⁴⁸ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 44; Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5; JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), 14; 30: *AAS* 88 (1996), 387-388; 403-404.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Propositio* 26.

communities will be prophetic signs of communion in their Churches and throughout the world if they are truly grounded in the word of God, fraternal communion and the witness of service (cf. *Acts* 2:42). In the coenobitic life, each community or monastery is meant to be a privileged setting for union with God and communion with one's neighbour. It is a place where consecrated persons learn each day to start afresh from Christ⁵⁰ in order to be faithful to their mission in prayer and recollection, and to be for all the faithful a sign of the eternal life which has already begun here below (cf. *1 Pet* 4:7).

53. I invite all of you who are called in the Middle East to follow Christ in the religious life: let yourselves be seduced by the word of God, as was the prophet Jeremiah, and hold that word in your heart like a consuming fire (cf. *Jer* 20:7-9). It is the reason for existing, the foundation and the ultimate and objective reference point of your consecration. The word of God is truth. By obeying this word, you purify your souls so as to love one another sincerely as brothers and sisters (cf. *1 Pet* 1:22). Whatever the canonical status of your religious institute, always be open to cooperate, in a spirit of communion with the Bishop, in pastoral and missionary activities. The religious life is

⁵⁰ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND FOR SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (19 May 2002): *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 21, Nos. 372-510.

one of personal devotion to Christ, the Head of the Body (cf. *Col* 1:18; *Eph* 4:15) and it reflects the indissoluble bond between Christ and his Church. Since this is so, support families in their Christian vocation and encourage parishes to be open to the various priestly and religious callings. This will serve to consolidate the life of communion for the sake of witness within the local Church.⁵¹ Never grow tired of responding to the appeals of the men and women of our time, pointing out the right path and the profound meaning of human life.

54. I would like to add a further consideration directed not only to consecrated persons alone, but to all the members of Eastern Catholic Churches. It concerns the evangelical counsels, which are particularly characteristic of the monastic life, a form of religious life which played a decisive role in the origins of numerous Churches *sui iuris* and continues to do so in their life today. It seems to me that we ought to meditate long and hard on the evangelical counsels: obedience, chastity and poverty, in order to discover anew their beauty, the power of their witness and their pastoral dimension. There can only be inner rebirth of the faithful, the believing community and the

⁵¹ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND FOR SECULAR INSTITUTES, CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS, Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church *Mutuae Relationes* (14 May 1978), 52-65: *AAS* 70 (1978), 500-505. On the role of monks and nuns in the Eastern Catholic Churches, see: *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, Canons 410-572.

whole Church, if each person, according to his or her vocation, makes a determined and unequivocal return to the search for God (*quaerere Deum*) which helps us to define and live authentically our relationship to God, neighbour and self. This certainly concerns the Churches *sui iuris*, and the Latin Church as well.

The laity

55. Through Baptism, the lay faithful are fully incorporated into the Body of Christ and associated with the mission of the universal Church.⁵² Their participation in the life and internal activities of the Church is the perennial spiritual source enabling them to reach beyond the confines of ecclesial structures. As apostles in the world, they translate the Gospel, the doctrine and social teaching of the Church into concrete actions.⁵³ Indeed, “Christians as fully-fledged citizens can and must do their part with the spirit of the Beatitudes, becoming builders of peace and apostles of reconciliation to the benefit of all society.”⁵⁴

⁵² Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 30-38; Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People *Apostolicam Actuositatem*; JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988): AAS 81 (1989), 393-521.

⁵³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban* (10 May 1997), 45, 103: AAS 89 (1997), 350-352; 400; *Propositio* 24.

⁵⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the Closing Mass of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East* (24 October 2010): AAS 102 (2010), 814.

56. Dear lay faithful, since temporal affairs are your proper domain,⁵⁵ I encourage you to strengthen the bonds of fraternity and cooperation that unite you with all people of good will in pursuing the common good, sound administration of public funds, freedom of religion and respect for the dignity of each person. Even when the Church's mission encounters obstacles in environments where the explicit proclamation of the Gospel is hindered or not possible, "maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (*1 Pet* 2:12). Be concerned to give an account of your faith (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15) by the consistency of your daily life and your activity.⁵⁶ To make your witness truly bear fruit (cf. *Mt* 7:16, 20), I urge you to overcome divisions and all subjective interpretations of the Christian life. Take care not to separate that life – with its values and its demands – from the life of your family or from life in society, the workplace, the political and cultural spheres, since all the many areas of the lay person's life fall under God's plan.⁵⁷ I invite you to be bold for the sake of Christ, in the confidence that neither tribulation, nor anguish, nor persecution can separate you from him (cf. *Rom* 8:35).

⁵⁵ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Propositio* 30.

⁵⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), 57-63: *AAS* 81 (1989), 506-518.

57. In the Middle East, lay people have long had fraternal and lasting relationships with the Catholic faithful of the various patriarchal or Latin Churches, and are used to attending one another's places of worship, especially when there is need. To this impressive reality, which demonstrates an authentic experience of communion, one must add the fact that within a single territory various ecclesial jurisdictions overlap in a beneficial way. In this particular area, the Church in the Middle East sets an example for other local Churches in the rest of the world. The Middle East is thus, in a certain sense, a laboratory where the future of the Church is already being developed. Exemplary as it is, this experience also needs to be constantly improved and purified, as does the experience acquired locally in the field of ecumenism.

The family

58. The family, a divine institution founded on marriage as willed by the Creator himself (cf. *Gen* 2:18-24; *Mt* 19:5), is nowadays exposed to a number of threats. The Christian family in particular is faced more than ever before with the issue of its deepest identity. The essential properties of sacramental marriage – unity and indissolubility (cf. *Mt* 19:6) – and the Christian model of family, sexuality and love, are in our day, if not called into question, at least misunderstood by some of the faithful. There is a temptation to adopt models contrary to the Gospel, under the influence

of a certain contemporary culture that has spread throughout the world. Conjugal love is part of the definitive covenant between God and his people, fully sealed in the sacrifice of the cross. Its character as mutual self-giving, even to the point of martyrdom, is clearly expressed in some of the Eastern Churches, where each spouse receives the other as a “crown” during the marriage ceremony, which is rightly called a “liturgy of coronation”. Conjugal love is not a fleeting event, but the patient project of a lifetime. Called to live a Christ-like love each day, the Christian family is a privileged expression of the Church’s presence and mission in the world. As such, it needs to be accompanied pastorally⁵⁸ and supported in its problems and difficulties, especially in places where social, familial and religious bearings tend to grow weak or to be lost.⁵⁹

59. Christian families of the Middle East, I invite each of you to be constantly reborn through the power of God’s word and the sacraments, so as to become more fully a domestic Church which is a place of formation in faith and prayer, a seedbed of vocations, the natural school of virtues and ethical values, and the primary living

⁵⁸ Cf. ID., Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981): AAS 74 (1982), 81-191; HOLY SEE, *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (22 October 1983), Vatican City, 1983; JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families* (2 February 1994): AAS 86 (1994), 868-925; PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Nos. 209-254.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Propositio* 35.

cell of society. Always look to the Holy Family of Nazareth,⁶⁰ which had the joy of receiving life and demonstrating its piety by the observance of the Law and the religious practices of the time (cf. *Lk* 2:22-24, 41). Look to this family which knew anxiety when the child Jesus was lost, as well as the pain of persecution, emigration and hard daily labour (cf. *Mt* 2:13ff.; *Lk* 2:41ff.). Help your children to grow in wisdom, in stature and in grace under the watchful eye of God and of men (cf. *Lk* 2:52); teach them to trust the Father, to imitate Christ, and to let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit.

60. After these brief reflections on the shared dignity and vocation of man and woman in marriage, my thoughts turn in a particular way towards women in the Middle East. The first creation account shows the essential equality of men and women (cf. *Gen* 1:27-29). This equality was damaged by the effects of sin (cf. *Gen* 3:16; *Mt* 19:4). Overcoming this legacy, the fruit of sin, is the duty of every human person, whether man or woman.⁶¹ I want to assure all women that the Catholic Church, in fidelity to God's plan, works to advance women's personal dignity and equality with men in response to the wide variety of forms of discrimination which they experience simply

⁶⁰ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Homily at Mass in Nazareth* (14 May 2009): *AAS* 101 (2009), pp. 478-482.

⁶¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988), 10: *AAS* 80 (1988), 1676-1677.

because they are women.⁶² Such practices seriously harm the life of communion and witness. They gravely offend not only women but, above all, God the Creator. In recognition of their innate inclination to love and protect human life, and paying tribute to their specific contribution to education, healthcare, humanitarian work and the apostolic life, I believe that women should play, and be allowed to play, a greater part in public and ecclesial life.⁶³ In this way they will be able to make their specific contribution to building a more fraternal society and a Church whose beauty is ever more evident in the genuine communion existing among the baptized.

61. In those unfortunate instances where litigation takes place between men and women, especially regarding marital questions, the woman's voice must also be heard and taken into account with a respect equal to that shown towards the man, in order to put an end to certain injustices. Here there needs to be a more sound and fair implementation of Church law. The Church's justice must be exemplary at every level and in every field in which it is exercised. It is absolutely vital to ensure that litigation on marital questions does not lead to apostasy. Christians in the region must also have the opportunity to apply their proper law in

⁶² Cf. ID., Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), 49: *AAS* 81 (1989), 486-487.

⁶³ Cf. ID., Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban* (10 May 1997), 50: *AAS* 89 (1997), 354-355; *Final Message* (22 October 2010), 4, 4; *Propositio* 27.

the area of marriage and in other areas without restriction.

Young people and children

62. I greet with paternal solicitude all the children and young people of the Church in the Middle East. My thoughts turn to the young who are searching for long-term human and Christian direction for their lives. At the same time I think of all those whose youth has been marked by a gradual move away from the Church, leading them to abandon the practice of religion.

63. Dear young people, I encourage you to cultivate a true and lasting friendship with Jesus (cf. *Jn* 15:13-15) through the power of prayer. The firmer that friendship becomes, the better it will serve as a beacon to protect you from youthful failings (cf. *Ps* 25:7). Personal prayer is strengthened by frequent recourse to the sacraments, which make possible an authentic encounter with God and with one's brothers and sisters in the Church. Do not be afraid or ashamed to bear witness to your friendship with Jesus among your family and in public. In doing so, always be respectful towards other believers, Jews and Muslims, with whom you share belief in God, the Creator of heaven and earth, as well as lofty humane and spiritual ideals. Do not be afraid or ashamed to be a Christian. Your relationship with Jesus will help you to cooperate generously with your fellow citizens, whatever their religious affiliation, so as

to build the future of your countries on human dignity, which is the source and foundation of freedom, and on equality and on peace in justice. By loving Christ and his Church, you will come to discern wisely those values in modern culture that will bring you fulfilment and those evils that gradually poison your life. Try not to be seduced by materialism and by some social networks whose indiscriminate use can lead to a distortion of genuine human relations. The Church in the Middle East counts greatly on your prayer, enthusiasm, creativity, know-how and deep commitment to serving Christ, the Church, society and especially the other young people of your age.⁶⁴ Do not hesitate to take part in every initiative that will help you to strengthen your faith and to respond to the particular call that the Lord addresses to you. Do not hesitate to follow Christ's call by choosing priestly, religious or missionary life.

64. Dear children, need I remind you that, in your journey with the Lord, particular honour is due to your parents (cf. *Ex* 20:12; *Dt* 5:16)? They are your educators in faith. God has entrusted you to them as a marvellous gift, for them to care for your health, your human and Christian education, and your intellectual formation. For their part, parents, teachers and guides, and the public institutions have a duty to respect the rights of children from the moment of their concep-

⁶⁴ Cf. *Propositio* 36.

tion.⁶⁵ As for you, dear children, learn how to obey God here and now by obeying your parents, as the child Jesus did (cf. *Lk* 2:51). Learn also to live the Christian life in your families, at school and elsewhere. The Lord does not forget you (cf. *Is* 49:15). He is always at your side and he wants you to walk with him by being responsible, courageous and kind (cf. *Tob* 6:2). Bless the Lord God in everything, ask him to guide your steps and to make your paths and plans prosper; always remember his commandments and do not let them fade from your heart (cf. *Tob* 4:19).

65. Once again I would like to stress the importance of the education of children and young people, which is a matter of the utmost importance. The Christian family is the natural setting for children and young people to grow in faith, their first school of catechesis. In these troubled times, educating a child or a young person is not easy. This indispensable task is made all the more complex by the particular socio-political and religious situation of the region. That is why I want to assure parents of my support and my prayers. It is important that children grow up in a united family that lives its faith simply and with conviction. It is important for children and young people to see their parents pray. It is important that they go with them to church, and that they see and understand that their parents love God and

⁶⁵ Cf. *Propositio* 27.

wish to know him better. And it is especially important that children and young people see their parents' charity towards those in need. In this way they will understand that it is good and beautiful to love God; they will enjoy going to church and be proud to do so, for they will have experienced personally that he is the solid rock on which they can build their lives (cf. *Mt* 7:24-27; *Lk* 6:48). For those children and young people who do not have this good fortune, my hope is that they will find authentic witnesses on their journey through life, friends who will help them to meet Christ and to discover the joy of following him.

PART THREE

*“We proclaim ... a crucified Christ ...
the power and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24)*

66. Christian witness, the primary form of mission, is part of the Church's deepest vocation, in fidelity to the mandate received from the Lord Jesus: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (*Acts* 1:8). When she proclaims Christ crucified and risen (cf. *Acts* 2:23-24), the Church becomes ever more fully what she is already by nature and vocation: the sacrament of communion and reconciliation with God and between men.⁶⁶ Communion and witness to Christ are thus two aspects of a single reality: both draw from the same source, the Holy Trinity, and rest on the same foundations: the word of God and the sacraments.

67. The word of God and the sacraments nourish and give authenticity to other acts of divine worship and the devotional practices of popular piety. Progress in the spiritual life entails an increase in charity and leads naturally to witness.

⁶⁶ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

Before all else, the Christian is a witness. To be a witness, however, calls not only for a Christian formation which imparts an understanding of the truths of faith, but also for a life in harmony with that faith, a life capable of responding to the expectations and needs of our contemporaries.

The word of God, soul and source of communion and witness

68. “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching” (*Acts* 2:42). With these words Saint Luke makes the first community the prototype of the apostolic Church, that is to say, one that is founded on the Apostles chosen by Christ and on their teaching. The Church’s principal mission, which she has received from Christ himself, is to preserve intact the deposit of the apostolic faith (cf. *1 Tim* 6:20), the foundation of her unity, while proclaiming this faith to the whole world. The Apostles’ teaching brought out the relationship of the Church to the Scriptures of the first Covenant, which find their fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. *Lk* 24:44-53).

69. Meditation on the mystery of the Church as communion and witness, in the light of the Scriptures, that great book of the Covenant between God and his people (cf. *Ex* 24:7), guides us to the knowledge of God; it is a “light for our path” (*Ps* 119 [118]:105), “lest we stumble” (*Ps* 121: 3).⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), 24: *AAS* 102 (2010), 704.

May the Christian faithful, as heirs of this covenant, always seek truth in the whole of the divinely inspired Scriptures (cf. *2 Tim* 3:16-17). The Bible is not a historical curio, but “the work of the Holy Spirit, through which we can hear the very voice of the Lord and know his presence in history”⁶⁸ – our human history.

70. The exegetical schools of Alexandria, Antioch, Edessa and Nisibe contributed significantly to the Church’s understanding and dogmatic formulation of the Christian mystery in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁶⁹ For this, the whole Church remains indebted to them. The representatives of the various schools of textual interpretation were agreed on the traditional principles of exegesis accepted by the Churches of both East and West. The most important of these principles is the conviction that Jesus Christ incarnates the intrinsic unity of the two Testaments and consequently the unity of God’s saving plan in history (cf. *Mt* 5:17). The disciples would only come to understand this unity after the resurrection, once Jesus had been glorified (cf. *Jn* 12:16). A second principle is fidelity to a typological reading of the Bible, whereby certain Old Testament events are seen as a prefiguration (a type and figure) of realities in the new Covenant in Jesus Christ, who is thus the hermeneutical key to the entire Bible (cf. *1 Cor*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 19: AAS 102 (2010), 701.

⁶⁹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14.

15:22, 45-47; *Heb* 8:6-7). The Church's liturgical and spiritual writings bear witness to the continued validity of these two principles of interpretation, which shape the ecclesial celebration of the word of God and inspire Christian witness. The Second Vatican Council went on to explain that the correct meaning of the sacred texts is found by considering the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, in the light of the living Tradition of the whole Church and the analogy of faith.⁷⁰ For a truly ecclesial approach to the Bible, it would be most helpful to read, both individually and in groups, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*.

71. The Christian presence in the biblical countries of the Middle East is much more than a sociological factor or a mere cultural and economic success story. By rediscovering its original inspiration and following in the footsteps of those first disciples whom Jesus chose to be his companions and whom he sent out to preach (cf. *Mk* 3:14), the Christian presence will take on new vitality. If the word of God is to be the soul and foundation of the Christian life, the Bible should be readily available within families; this will favour daily reading and meditation on God's word (*lectio divina*). Suitable means must be found to establish a genuine biblical apostolate.

⁷⁰ Cf. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 12.

72. Modern communications media can prove an excellent means for proclaiming the word of God and promoting reading and meditation on that word. Simple and accessible ways of explaining the Bible will help to dispel prejudices and mistaken ideas about the Bible which become the source of needless and demeaning controversies.⁷¹ Here it would be wise to explain the necessary distinction between *inspiration* and *revelation*, inasmuch as a lack of clarity about these two concepts in the minds of many people leads to a false understanding of the sacred texts, with consequences for the future of interreligious dialogue. The media can also help to disseminate the teachings of the Church's magisterium.

73. To achieve these goals, it is important to support the means of communication which presently exist and to work for the development of suitable new structures. The training of specialized personnel in this sector, so critical not only in the light of rapid technical advances but also because of its pedagogical and ethical implications, is an increasingly urgent task, especially in view of evangelization.

74. Nonetheless, for all the importance of a wise use of the communications media, the latter can never take the place of meditating on the word of God, personally appropriating its message, and drawing upon it in order to respond to the ques-

⁷¹ Cf. *Propositio* 2.

tions of the faithful. This will lead in turn to a greater familiarity with the Scriptures, a yearning for a deeper spirituality and a greater involvement in the apostolate and in mission.⁷² Depending on the particular pastoral conditions of each country in the region, a *Year of the Bible* could be celebrated and then followed, if appropriate, by an *Annual Bible Week*.⁷³

The liturgy and sacramental life

75. Throughout history the liturgy has been an essential element in the spiritual unity and communion of the faithful in the Middle East. Indeed, the liturgy is an outstanding witness to the apostolic Tradition as preserved and developed in the particular traditions of the Churches of East and West. A renewal of liturgical texts and celebrations, where necessary, could enable the faithful to draw more deeply from the liturgical tradition and its biblical, patristic, theological and spiritual riches⁷⁴ through their experience of the Mystery to which these give access. Such a renewal must of course be undertaken, to the extent possible, in cooperation with those Churches which are not in full communion, yet are also heirs to the same liturgical traditions. The desired liturgical renewal must be based on the word of God, on the proper tradition of each Church, and upon the new insights of

⁷² Cf. *ibid.*

⁷³ Cf. *Propositio* 3.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Propositio* 39.

Christian theology and anthropology. It will bear fruit if Christians become convinced that the sacramental life introduces them deeply into the new life in Christ (cf. *Rom* 6:1-6; *2 Cor* 5:17) which is the source of communion and witness.

76. There is a vital link between liturgy – the source and summit of the Church’s life, which grounds the unity of the episcopate and of the universal Church – and the ministry of Peter which preserves this unity. The liturgy expresses this reality primarily in the Eucharist, which is celebrated in union not only with the Bishop, but primarily with the Pope, the order of Bishops, all the clergy and the entire people of God.

77. Through the sacrament of Baptism, administered in the name of the Holy Trinity, we enter into the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and are configured to Christ in order that we may live a new life (cf. *Rom* 6:11-14; *Col* 2:12), a life of faith and conversion (cf. *Mk* 16:15-16; *Acts* 2:38). Baptism also incorporates us into Christ’s Body, the Church, the foretaste and first fruits of a humanity reconciled in Christ (cf. *2 Cor* 5:19). In communion with God, the baptized are called to live here and now in fraternal communion among themselves, while also growing in genuine solidarity with other members of the human family, whatever their race or religion. In this context, efforts should be made to ensure that the sacramental preparation of young people and adults is of sufficient depth and duration.

78. The Catholic Church regards validly conferred Baptism as “a sacramental bond of unity among all who through it have been reborn.”⁷⁵ May the day soon come when the Catholic Church and those Churches which are her partners in theological dialogue can reach an ecumenical agreement on the mutual recognition of Baptism, in view of the eventual restoration of full communion in the apostolic faith! To some extent the credibility of the Christian message and witness in the Middle East depends on this.

79. The Eucharist, in which the Church celebrates the great mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation of many, is the basis of ecclesial communion and brings it to its fullness. Saint Paul strikingly made the Eucharist a principle of ecclesiology: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (*1 Cor* 10:17). Since Christ’s Church, in carrying out her mission, suffers from the tragedy of divisions and separations, and is concerned lest her members assemble for their own perdition (cf. *1 Cor* 11:17-34), she fervently hopes that the day will soon come when all Christians will at last be able to receive communion together from one bread, in the unity of one body.

80. In celebrating the Eucharist, the Church also constantly experiences the communion

⁷⁵ SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22.

of her members in their daily witness in society, which is an essential dimension of Christian hope. As she calls to mind the entire economy of salvation, from the incarnation to the *parousia*, the Church becomes ever more conscious of the intrinsic unity between eschatological hope and commitment in the world. This notion could be given greater consideration in an age like our own, when the eschatological dimension of the faith has been attenuated and the Christian sense of history moving towards fulfilment in God has yielded to earthbound perspectives and projects. As pilgrims journeying towards God, following in the footsteps of countless monks, nuns and hermits who devoted their lives to seeking the Absolute, the Christians of the Middle East will find in the Eucharist the strength and the light needed to bear witness to the Gospel, even when, as often happens, this involves going against the grain and encountering countless obstacles. They will draw strength from the intercession of the righteous, the saints, the martyrs and confessors, and all those who were pleasing to the Lord, as our liturgies in both East and West proclaim.

81. The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is an invitation to conversion of heart;⁷⁶ together with the Synod Fathers, I express my hope for a renewed appreciation and practice of this sacrament among the faithful. Christ clearly tells

⁷⁶ Cf. *Propositio* 37.

us: “Before offering your gift at the altar ... go first to be reconciled with your brother” (*Mt* 5:23-24). Sacramental conversion is a gift which demands to be more widely accepted and used. The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation certainly remits sins, but it also grants healing. More frequent confession will surely help to form consciences and foster reconciliation, thus dispelling various forms of fear and combating violence. God alone is the source of authentic peace (cf. *Jn* 14:27). With this in mind, I urge Pastors and the faithful entrusted to their care to work constantly to purify individual and collective memories, dispelling prejudices through mutual acceptance and through cooperation with people of good will. I also urge them to promote every initiative of peace and reconciliation, even amid situations of persecution, and in this way to become true disciples of Christ in the spirit of the Beatitudes (cf. *Mt* 5:3-12). It is only fitting that the “good conduct” of Christians (cf. *1 Pet* 3:16), by serving as an example, should become a leaven in society (cf. *Lk* 13:20-21), for it has its source in Christ, who calls all to perfection (cf. *Mt* 5:48; *Jas* 1:4; *1 Pet* 1:16).

Prayer and pilgrimages

82. The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East forcefully emphasized the need for prayer in the life of the Church; through prayer the Church allows herself to be

transformed by her Lord, and each member of the faithful allows Christ to live within him or her (cf. *Gal* 2:20). As Jesus himself showed when he withdrew to pray at decisive moments in his life, the effectiveness of the mission of preaching the Gospel, and thus of Christian witness, has its source in prayer. Through openness to the working of God's Spirit, believers, by their personal and communal prayer, enable the riches of love and the light of hope within them to break through to the world (cf. *Rom* 5:5). May the desire for prayer grow among the Pastors of the People of God and among the faithful, so that their contemplation of the face of Christ may increasingly inspire their witness and their actions! Jesus taught his disciples to pray unceasingly and not to be discouraged (cf. *Lk* 18:1). Situations of human suffering caused by selfishness, injustice or the thirst for power can lead to weariness and discouragement. That is why Jesus tells us to pray constantly. Prayer is the true "tent of meeting" (cf. *Ex* 40:34), the privileged place of communion between God and man. Let us not forget the meaning of the name of the Child whose birth was proclaimed by Isaiah and who brings salvation: Emmanuel, "God-with-us" (cf. *Is* 7:14; *Mt* 1:23). Jesus is our Emmanuel, the true God in our midst. Let us fervently call upon him!

83. As the land of biblical revelation, the Middle East soon became a major goal of pilgrimage for many Christians throughout world, who came to

be strengthened in faith and to have a profoundly spiritual experience. Theirs was a penitential journey which expressed an authentic thirst for God. Today's pilgrimages to the lands of the Bible need to recover this primordial insight. Marked by a spirit of penitence aimed at conversion and by the desire to seek God, and walking in the earthly footsteps of Christ and the apostles, pilgrimages to the holy and apostolic places, if undertaken with intense faith, can become an authentic path of discipleship (*sequela Christi*). They also provide the faithful with a powerful visual experience of the richness of biblical history, which evokes before their eyes the great moments of God's saving plan. It is fitting that pilgrimages to the biblical sites should be complemented by pilgrimages to the shrines of the martyrs and saints in whom the Church venerates Christ, the wellspring of their martyrdom and their holiness.

84. Certainly the Church lives in vigilant and confident expectation of the final coming of her Spouse (cf. *Mt 25:1-3*). With her Lord, she knows that true worship is offered in spirit and in truth, and not restricted to a sacred place, whatever its religious and symbolic importance in the minds and hearts of believers (cf. *Jn 4:21-23*). Nonetheless, the Church as a whole, and each of the baptized, legitimately feels the need of a return to the sources. In those places where the events of our salvation unfolded, each pilgrim can undertake a path of conversion to the Lord and find renewed

enthusiasm. It is my hope that the faithful of the Middle East can themselves become pilgrims to these sites made holy by the Lord, and enjoy free and unrestricted access to the holy places. Pilgrimages to these sites can also be an opportunity for other Christians to discover the liturgical and spiritual treasures of the Eastern Churches. In this way they can help support and encourage the Christian communities in their steadfast and valiant efforts to remain in these blessed lands.

Evangelization and charity: the Church's mission

85. Passing down the Christian faith is an essential mission for the Church. To respond more effectively to the challenges of today's world, I have called the entire Church to a new evangelization. If this is to bear fruit, it must be completely centred on faith in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul exclaimed: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (cf. *1 Cor* 9:16). In troubled and uncertain times, this new evangelization seeks to make all the members of the faithful conscious that the witness of their lives⁷⁷ makes their words all the more compelling when they speak of God openly and courageously in proclaiming the Good News of salvation. The Catholic Church in the Middle East is summoned, along with the universal Church, to take an active part in this evangelization, carefully

⁷⁷ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (30 September 2010), 97: *AAS* 102 (2010), 767-768.

discerning today's cultural and social context and acknowledging both its possibilities and its limits. Above all else, this is a summons to a new self-evangelization through an encounter with Christ, a summons directed to every ecclesial community and each of her members. As Pope Paul VI put it: "The person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the word and give himself to the Kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn".⁷⁸

86. It is important to come to a deeper appreciation of the theological and pastoral significance of this evangelization, for this will help us to "share the inestimable gift which God has wished to give us, making us sharers in his own life".⁷⁹ This reflection should be open to the ecumenical and interreligious dimensions inherent in the specific vocation and mission of the Catholic Church in the Middle East.

87. For a number of years now, ecclesial movements and new communities have been present in the Middle East. They are a gift of the Spirit for our times. While the Spirit is not to be quenched

⁷⁸ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), 24: *AAS* 68 (1976), 21.

⁷⁹ BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio Ubicumque et Semper* (21 September 2010): *AAS* 102 (2010), 791.

(cf. *1 Th* 5:19), each individual and every community is called to put their charisms at the service of the common good (cf. *1 Cor* 12:7). The Catholic Church in the Middle East rejoices in the witness of faith and fraternal communion given by these communities, which embrace Christians from a number of Churches without confusion or proselytism. I encourage the members of these movements and communities to be builders of communion and witnesses of the peace which comes from God, in union with the Bishop of the place and following his pastoral directives, and with due regard for the history, liturgy, spirituality and culture of the local Church.⁸⁰ In this way they will show their generous and heartfelt desire to be at the service of the local Church and the universal Church. Lastly, their successful integration will serve as a sign of communion in diversity and contribute to the new evangelization.

88. As heir to the apostolic outreach which brought the Good News to distant lands, each of the Catholic Churches present in the Middle East is also called to renew its missionary spirit by training and sending forth men and women proud of their faith in Christ crucified and risen, and able to proclaim the Gospel courageously both in the region and throughout the diaspora, and even in other countries around the world.⁸¹ The *Year of Faith*, which is linked to the new evangelization,

⁸⁰ Cf. *Propositio* 17.

⁸¹ Cf. *Propositio* 34.

if lived with intense conviction, will provide an excellent incentive for Churches of the region to evangelize themselves and to consolidate their witness to Christ. To make known the Son of God who died and rose again, the sole Saviour of mankind, is an essential duty of the Church and a grave responsibility for all the baptized. "God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (cf. *1 Tim* 2:4). As she takes up this urgent and demanding task in a culturally and religiously pluralistic context, the Church is aided by the Holy Spirit, the gift of the risen Lord who continues to sustain his disciples, and the treasury of great spiritual traditions which are a sure guide to all who seek God. I encourage each ecclesiastical jurisdiction and all religious institutes and ecclesial movements to develop an authentic missionary spirit which will serve as a sure pledge of spiritual renewal. In carrying out this work, the Catholic Church in the Middle East can count on the support of the universal Church.

89. For many years, the Catholic Church in the Middle East has carried out her mission through a network of educational, social and charitable institutions. She has taken to heart the words of Jesus: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt* 25:40). The proclamation of the Gospel has been accompanied by works of charity, since it is of the very nature of Christian charity to respond to the immediate needs of all, whatever their religion and

regardless of factions or ideologies, for the sole purpose of making present on earth God's love for humanity.⁸² Through her witness of charity, the Church makes her specific contribution to the life of society and desires to be at the service of that peace which the region needs.

90. Jesus Christ always drew close to those most in need. Inspired by his example, the Church makes every effort to serve children in her maternity clinics and orphanages, as well as the poor, the handicapped, the sick and all those in need, helping them to become part of the community. The Church believes in the inalienable dignity of each human person; she worships God, Creator and Father, by serving his creatures in spiritual or material need. It is because of Jesus, true God and true man, that the Church fulfils a mission of solace which seeks only to reflect God's love for humanity. Here I wish to express my admiration and gratitude to all those men and women who have consecrated their lives to this noble ideal, and to assure them of God's blessing.

91. The Middle East is home to many Catholic educational centres, schools, institutes of higher learning and universities. The men and women religious and the lay people who work in them carry out impressive work which I cannot fail to praise and encourage. Alien to every form of proselyt-

⁸² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 31: *AAS* 98 (2006), 243-245.

ism, these Catholic educational institutions open their doors to students of other Churches and other religions.⁸³ As an invaluable means for ensuring the cultural and intellectual formation of young people, they show in an inspiring way that living together in respect and cooperation is possible in the Middle East, if young people are trained in tolerance and the constant pursuit of human betterment. These institutions are also attentive to the local cultures, which they support by emphasizing the positive elements that they contain. Greater solidarity between parents, students, the universities and the Eparchies and Dioceses, together with the help of credit unions, will ensure access to education for everyone, especially those lacking the necessary resources. The Church asks the various political authorities to support these institutions, whose activities contribute in a real and effective manner to the common good, to the building up and the future of different nations.⁸⁴

Catechesis and Christian formation

92. In his First Letter Saint Peter writes: “Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence”

⁸³ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization* (3 December 2007), 12, n. 49, which deals with proselytism: *AAS* 100 (2008), 502.

⁸⁴ Cf. *Propositio* 32.

(3:15). The baptized have received the gift of faith. This inspires the whole of their lives and leads them to defend it with sensitivity and respect for persons, but also with frankness and courage (cf. *Acts* 4:29ff.). The faithful also need to receive an adequate formation in the celebration of the sacred mysteries, a basic knowledge of revealed doctrine and encouragement in their efforts to put their faith into practice in daily life and activity. This formation is ensured above all by a catechesis which, to the extent possible, should be carried out in a spirit of fraternal cooperation between the different Churches.

93. The liturgy, and above all the celebration of the Eucharist, is a school of faith which leads to witness. The word of God, proclaimed in a way suited to its hearers, should lead the faithful to discover its presence and power for their lives and for the lives of men and women today. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a necessary and fundamental resource. As I have already mentioned, the study and teaching of the *Catechism* is to be encouraged, together with a practical introduction to the Church's social teaching as expressed particularly in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* and in the great documents of the papal magisterium.⁸⁵ The reality of ecclesial life in the Middle East and mutual assistance in carrying out the *diakonia* of charity will enable this forma-

⁸⁵ Cf. *Propositio* 30.

tion to take on an ecumenical dimension, depending on the nature of each place and in agreement with the respective ecclesiastical authorities.

94. Finally, the involvement of Christians in the life of the Church and in civic institutions must be reinforced by a solid spiritual formation. There appears to be a need to assist the faithful, especially those of the Eastern traditions and in the light of the history of their respective Churches, to have access to the treasures of the Fathers of the Church and the great masters of the spiritual life. I invite the various Synods and other episcopal bodies to reflect on how this goal can gradually be attained and how a contemporary presentation of patristic theology can complement and enrich the teaching of Scripture. This would enable priests, men and women religious, and seminarians or novices to draw from the treasures found in the writings of the Fathers and the spiritual masters to deepen their own life of faith, and then faithfully hand those treasures down to others. The teachings of the great spiritual masters of East and West, and of the saints – men and women alike – will assist all those who truly seek God.

CONCLUSION

95. “Fear not, little flock!” (*Lk* 12:32). With these words of Christ, I wish to exhort all the Pastors and Christian faithful in the Middle East courageously to keep alive the flame of divine love both in the Church and in all those places where they live and work. In this way, they will preserve in their integrity the essence and mission of the Church as willed by Christ. Legitimate historical differences will enrich the communion existing among the baptized with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, whose blood cleanses us from all sin (cf. *1 Jn* 1:3, 6-7). At the dawn of Christianity, Saint Peter, Apostle of Jesus Christ, wrote his First Letter to the communities of believers in Asia Minor who were experiencing difficulties. At the beginning of this new millennium, it was beneficial for the Pastors and faithful of the Middle East, and elsewhere, to gather around the Successor of Peter for common prayer and reflection. The demands of the apostolic mission and the complexity of the moment call for prayer and for renewed pastoral enthusiasm. The urgency of the present hour and the injustice of so many tragic situations invite us to reread the First Letter of

Peter and to join in bearing witness to Christ who died and rose again. This “togetherness”, this communion willed by our Lord and God, is needed now more than ever. Let us put aside all that could be cause for discontent, however justifiable, in order to concentrate unanimously on the one thing necessary: the goal of uniting the whole of humanity and the entire universe in God’s only Son (cf. *Rom* 8:29; *Eph* 1:5, 10).

96. Christ entrusted to Peter the specific mission of feeding his lambs (cf. *Jn* 21:15-17) and it is upon him that he built his Church (cf. *Mt* 16:18). As the Successor of Peter, I cannot overlook the trials and sufferings of Christ’s faithful and especially those who live in the Middle East. In a particular way, the Pope continues to be spiritually close to them. That is why, in the name of God, I ask the political and religious authorities of the Middle East not just to relieve these sufferings, but to eliminate the causes which produce them. I ask them to do all in their power to ensure that peace at last prevails.

97. Nor is the Pope unmindful that the Church – the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem – whose corner stone is Christ (*1 Pet* 2:4-7) and which he has received the mission to care for on earth, is built on foundations adorned with precious stones of various colours (cf. *Rev* 21:14, 19-20). The venerable Eastern Churches and the Latin Church are these brilliant jewels, worn down and made smooth by constant worship before “the

river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (*Rev* 22:1).

98. So that men and women may see the face of God and his name marked on their foreheads (cf. *Rev* 22:4), I invite all the Catholic faithful to let the Spirit of God increasingly strengthen their communion, and to live it out in a simple and joyful fraternity. I know that circumstances at times can lead to compromises which threaten to disrupt this human and Christian communion. Unfortunately, these occur all too often and this “lukewarm” spirit is displeasing to God (cf. *Rev* 3:15-19). The light of Christ (cf. *Jn* 12:46) is meant to spread to the farthest ends of the earth and to the hearts of all men and women, even where the darkness is deepest (cf. *1 Pet* 2:9). If we are to be lamps bearing the one Light (cf. *Lk* 11:33-36) and witnesses in every circumstance (cf. *Mk* 16:15-18), it is important to choose the path which leads to life (cf. *Mt* 7:14) and to leave behind the barren works of darkness (cf. *Eph* 5:9-14), resolutely casting them off (cf. *Rom* 13:12ff.).

99. By its witness, may the “brotherhood” of Christians become a leaven in the whole human family (cf. *Mt* 13:33)! May Christ’s followers in the Middle East, Catholics and other Christians as well, be one in courageously bearing this difficult yet exhilarating witness to Christ, and thus receive the crown of life (*Rev* 2:10b)! May they know the encouragement and support of the

Christian world as a whole. May the trials experienced by some of our brothers and sisters (cf. *Ps* 66 [65]:10; *Is* 48:10; *1 Pet* 1:7) strengthen the fidelity and faith of all! “May grace and peace be multiplied to you... Peace to all of you that are in Christ” (*1 Pet* 1:2b; 5:14b)!

100. The heart of Mary, *Theotókos* and Mother of the Church, was pierced (cf. *Lk* 2:34-35) on account of the “contradiction” brought by her divine Son, that is to say, because of the opposition and hostility to his mission of light which Christ himself had to face, and which the Church, his mystical Body, continues to experience. May Mary, whom the whole Church, in East and West alike, venerates with affection, grant us her maternal assistance. Mary All-Holy, who walked in our midst, will once again present our needs to her divine Son. She offers us her Son. Let us listen to her, for she opens our hearts to hope: “Do whatever he tells you” (*Jn* 2:5).

Given at Beirut, in Lebanon, on 14 September 2012, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, in the eighth year of my Pontificate.

Benedictus PP XVI

INDEX

INTRODUCTION [1-6]	3
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PART ONE

*“We give thanks to God always for you all,
constantly mentioning you in our prayers” (1 Th 1:2) [7]*

The context [8-10]	11
The Christian and ecumenical life [11-18]	14
Interreligious dialogue [19-28]	19
Two new realities [29-30]	27
Migrants [31-36].	29

PART TWO

*“The company of those who believed were of
one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32) [37-38]*

Patriarchs [39-40]	39
Bishops [41-44]	41
Priests, deacons and seminarians [45-50]	44
The consecrated life [51-54]	48
The laity [55-57].	51
The family [58-61]	53
Young people and children [62-65]	57

PART THREE

*“We proclaim ... a crucified Christ ...
the power and the wisdom of God”
(1 Cor 1:23-24) [66-67]*

The word of God, soul and source of communion and witness [68-74]	64
The liturgy and sacramental life [75-81]. . .	68
Prayer and pilgrimages [82-84]	72
Evangelization and charity: the Church’s mission [85-91]	75
Catechesis and Christian formation [92-94] .	80
CONCLUSION [95-100]	83

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