

## The Maronite Church Identity in varied cultural milieus

### Introduction

The subject of the identity is among the essential human subjects in the life of the individual and the community on the civil and ecclesiastical level. When a person meets another he asks him who he is? When a group is formed it will be known by its "identification" and when the groups become numerous, they will be distinguished one from the other by their identities. This principle is applied to churches: a church is distinguished from another by its identity not only on the ecumenical level, but also on the cultural and intellectual level in the heart of the same church which is in favor of cultural pluralism.

Being part of the Universal Catholic Church, the Maronite church has decided that the subject of the identity, be the first one to be dealt with by her patriarchal synod for many reasons:

The most important one consists of putting in to evidence the elements of this identity in implementation of the call of the Apostolic Exhortation, "New hope for Lebanon", for the Eastern Churches to go back to their roots to discover their varied heritages and the high regard in which Vatican II held these Churches.

The Maronite Church expansion led her to abandon her original eastern milieu and to be part of the milieu distinguished in general by the one Latin Western Character. Her common catholic faith has facilitated her insertion in this new milieu. This development drove many maronites to abandon their church and their identity and join the Latin Church.

The church holds that unity can coexist with a plurality of cultures that use a variety of expressions which show the richness of the one faith embodied in different cultures. Therefore, the unity that abolishes these legitimate differences impoverishes our thinking capacity in its wide expressions and has a negative effect on the faith, restricting it to one culture. The studies of the Syriac heritage have shown that there is a third approach to the theological, spiritual and even canonical thought that is different from the one that is expressed in the Greek and Latin heritage. This requires that it is exploited in many areas.

Basing ourselves on these admitted analysis, the text of Maronite Synod deals with the Maronite identity and aims to discuss three of its aspects:

- First: The elements of the Maronite Church identity.
- Secondly: The Maronite Church identity in its eastern milieu.
- Thirdly: The Maronite Church identity in its world expansion.
- Conclusion: The Maronite Church identity and the mission.

We must note here that the identity cannot be separated from the mission, the synodal text dealt with the Maronite Church identity, her vocation and her mission. Because the church does not exist

for herself and is not a “ghetto”, but, like her founder, she is a lighthouse that illumines the path of man to God, nor is her identity is a closed one, but opened to the influence of the various cultures of the milieu.

### First: Elements of the Maronite Church identity

The elucidation of the Maronite Church identity does not aim to set her apart; instead it's aim is to tie her to the universal church mystery. It is a realization of God's salvation economy, as it continues to be lived in today's world as a live witness in the church that is active in her with the power of his Holy Spirit.

We share the elements of our church identity with the Syro-Antiochene churches, but these elements have developed through time a distinctive Maronite character. This development began with Saint Maron who died around 410, and from the monastery built under his name not long after the Council of Chalcedon (451), in the region of Apamea, situated in second Syria, according to the Roman organization of Syria at the time. This monastery is indeed considered to be the cradle of the Syriac Antiochean Maronite Church. It was the cradle of an independent patriarchy in the eighth century. Saint Maron had founded a very special kind of eremitical life in Mount Cyrrhus in Syria Prima (Antioch being its capital) based on living in the wild. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (459) wrote his biography and that of his disciples in his famous book about Syrian monks and hermits between the start of the fourth century and the mid-fifth century<sup>1</sup>.

#### 1- A Syriac Antiochean Church with a special liturgical heritage

The Maronite Church developed within the Antiochean Church which was initiated by the preaching of the disciples. She acknowledges her Petrine origin. It was in Antioch, the capital of the Oriental region of the Roman Empire, that “the disciples were called Christians for the first time” (Acts 11/26). This is a common characteristic of all the followers of Jesus, and the solid basis of each genuine Ecclesiastic identity. In Antioch too, the Church opened up to all nations, and duly became the “daughter of nations”.

Since her early foundation, the Antiochean Church has been distinguished by living united in faith, and by her partnership in the context of plurality that has characterized the population of that region due to their diversity in civilizations, cultures and languages. This plurality granted the Antiochean Church a spiritual and intellectual wealth as well as an apostolic zeal that characterized her among other Churches. The Christian Antiochean heritage is still considered one of the richest and most profound in the world. It has greatly influenced the Church's history and life, in particular during the first six centuries. In fact, this heritage gave Christian theology the opportunity to express itself through two main interacting cultures, the Arameo-Syriac and the Hellenic. The Aramean culture

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<sup>1</sup>

. Refer to Saint Maron's biography in the book of Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus, *The History of God's Pure Ones*, translated from Greek by Archimandrite Adrianus Shaccour, Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 145-146.

was prevailing in the internal cities and in the countryside, while the Hellenic culture was more prevalent in the coastal cities.

In this cultural and linguistic diversity, many local Churches were born in Antioch, each of which had her own distinguishing features, while keeping the ecumenical structure on which the first Church was based. This structure strengthens the ties among the members of the one local Church – whatever their talents or occupations may be – in order to build the One Body of Christ. There is evidence in several places in the New Testament that testifies to the existence of this structure and to its importance in the safeguarding of partnership and unity. (Refer to Acts 2, 44, 4, 32, 15, 1-29, 1 Corinthians 12, 12-30).

In Antioch we find the first theology of the local Church that expresses her unity and universality and implements them through the Eucharist. In his epistles, Saint Ignatius of Antioch reminded all Churches with which he corresponded – encouraging them and strengthening their unity in times of persecution – saying: “You participate in only one Eucharist. Our Lord has only one body, one chalice that unites us in His blood, and one altar, one bishop along with many deacons that are my partners in service. This way, you would fulfill God’s will in everything<sup>2</sup>.” The Bishop is the successor of the Apostles, and, in the Synodal structure and the service of unity; he occupies the position of the head who works on proclaiming the Word in his local Church. He also is concerned with safeguarding the orthodox faith, and communal living through harmonious diversity. He is responsible for discerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the faithful, and of being continuously vigilant in order to identify them, and invest them toward the building of the One Body of Christ. It is needless to say that this spiritual communion reaches its apogee and is distinctively proclaimed in the Eucharistic celebration headed by the bishop or by the one whom he delegates for this mission.

This Synodal and Episcopal systems are at the basis of the patriarchal system that is still prevailing in the Orient, and at the basis of the Episcopal Council that encompasses the Universal Church. Regional councils and patriarchal synods were and still are the occasion when communion between local Churches is proclaimed. This communion was implemented during these Episcopal Synods, through the practice of mutual love and in the spirit of open consultation regarding common issues, and by making proper decisions. In many writings of the Holy Fathers, we find a strong echo of this synodal spirit because it is the guarantee of unity in the Church. This is why the Church, since her early beginnings, has engaged in holding councils and exchanging letters of communion and peace as a sign for the communion among the diverse Churches.

Our Maronite Antiochean Church belongs to the family of Churches of Syriac heritage in both its “Oriental and Occidental branches”, a commonly used division referring to those Syriacs who live on either the western or eastern bank of the Euphrates. This heritage, in its theological, spiritual and liturgical dimensions, has been enriched by Syriac Fathers who expressed their Christian faith through a Semitic language that is very similar to the language of the Old Testament. Their intellectual activities were centered on the theological schools of Antioch, Roha and Nisibis. At the

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<sup>2</sup>

. Refer to *Pastoral Letters, Second Century*, translated and introduced by George Saber, the series of Christian Oriental Origins, 1, Beirut, 1972, p. 129.

liturgical level, this heritage was expressed in poetic prayers written by theologian poets such as Ephrem (+373), Jacob of Sarrug (+521), Balay (+after 432) and others. These prayers still remain the main source for the Maronite office in its two formats, manuscript and print. We still dwell on its deep spirituality that is rich in references from the Bible in both Testaments. These prayers have a distinctive Marian character, and persistently call to repentance in the hope of meeting the groom at the end of time. The basic characteristics of this common heritage were formed before the birth of the Maronite Patriarchate in the 8th century. The longed-for return to this common heritage would make the Maronites partners with their Antiochean and Syriac brethren in a consolidated effort seeking to rediscover, revive, and benefit from their heritage, as a sign of faithfulness to their common identity and as an enrichment of the Universal Church.

Our synod pays tribute to all the efforts and the various important achievements that took place during the recent decades, in Lebanon and overseas, thanks to Maronite universities and seminaries and other institutions. Gratitude is extended to those individuals, who worked on bringing into the open the Antiochean Syriac heritage, in its theological, spiritual and liturgical dimensions, and presented it in a new form, and made it accessible to the children of our Church wherever they may be. Our Synod also calls on these universities to continue giving this project a priority, so that there is no cause for concern on the part of Orientalists, who have offered and are still offering great services in this field. All dioceses and orders should choose those in whom they detect the scientific skills, and the love of ancient and modern languages, and should encourage them to dedicate themselves to this difficult but fruitful task, by providing them with sufficient spiritual and material support. Consecrating oneself to this theological task is a necessary service that helps in promoting the mission of our Church and updates it in the light of its peculiarities.

## 2- A Chalcedonian Church

While saying that our Church is Chalcedonian, we are aware that she remains faithful to “the mystery of salvation”. The monks of Saint Maron’s monastery, the cradle of our Church, testified to this in the Creed that was renewed by the Fathers of the Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon in 451. This Creed teaches that Christ has two full natures, a divine and a human, which are united in the One Divine Person of Jesus our Lord, and that the distinctiveness of these two natures persists even after that unity. This belief serves the fathers of the Council to assert the human nature of Christ and the reality of his incarnation and salvation<sup>3</sup>.

The Fathers of the Council based their decision on the letter addressed by Pope Leo the Great in 449 to Flavius the Patriarch of Constantinople (446-449), in which he rejected the claim of the monk Eutyches that Christ had only one nature after incarnation. If accepted, this doctrine would lead to the dissolving of the human in the divine, and would consequently empty incarnation from its real

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salvific meaning. The Fathers considered this letter to be “in accordance with the great declaration of Peter and as a common pillar against those who spread misconceptions”<sup>4</sup>. The firm commitment of Saint Maron’s Monastery to the Chalcedonian Creed, as stated in Pope Leo’s letter, was doubtless one of the most important elements that strengthened the full communion of the Maronite Church with the Holy Roman See (no. 29). Our Maronite liturgy eloquently expresses the effects of the mystery of the Incarnation in the life of the people, who repeat daily during Mass: “Lord, you have united your divinity with our humanity, our humanity with your divinity, your life with our death and our death with your life. You took what was ours and gave us what is yours, in order to give us life and salvation, glory be to you for ever”.

However, from the moment of its proclamation, the Nicean-Chalcedonian creed met with stern opposition for many reasons, theological and otherwise, and was even rejected by most Eastern Christians, who form what is now called the community of Eastern Orthodox Churches.<sup>5</sup> Their position was mainly a refusal of the distinctiveness between the two natures after the Incarnation, in order to preempt any split between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ, thus safeguarding the unity in the person of Jesus Christ, as was decreed by the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus in 431. Our Church must be thankful to God for the positive results of the theological discussions, formal and informal, concerning the mystery of the incarnation, and which have taken place between the Catholic Church and the community of Eastern Orthodox Churches. These results have proven that faith in this mystery is one in essence and varied in expression. This diversity is seen no longer, as was the case in the recent past, as a sign of dissension and separation between the Churches which would weaken the Christian testimony, but as a rich and common heritage. Accordingly, one cultural expression would fall short of comprehending this great mystery or of understanding it in an exclusive and final form<sup>6</sup>.

Even if this diversity is limited to terminology without affecting the essence, we can say that it has contributed to bringing to light different and complementary ecclesial patterns which had their impact on the spirituality of our Churches and on their mission in their particular environment. In

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. Refer to the same source, p. 104.

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. This family encompasses the Copts, Syriacs, Armenians, Ethiopians, Eritreans, and Orthodox Malankar.

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light of her long history, the Maronite Church realizes that her Chalcedonian faith in the mystery of the Incarnation has contributed to developing a Maronite spirituality embodied.

### 3- A Patriarchal Church with Monastic and Ascetic Features

The Syriac Antiochean Maronite Patriarchate came into existence around Saint Maron's Monastery during the latter half of the 7th century and the early half of the 8th century. The religious, cultural, political, and social circumstances of that period are still very vague. However, all these circumstances have contributed to splitting the "Melkite" Antiochean See between Maronites and Orthodox. Our Synod relies on Church historians to clarify this delicate period in the history of the Maronite Church. This initiative would be the starting point for writing a common and "Ecumenical" history of the Antiochean See, bearing in mind Saint Paul's saying: "if we work for the achievement of what is right through love, we will grow and develop on all levels towards the head, meaning Jesus Christ" (Ephesians, 4/15). In fact, since the 8th century, the Maronites have emerged as an independent Church within the Antiochean See, along with the Orthodox Syriac Church on the one hand<sup>7</sup> and later, on the other, the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>8</sup> This founding event has had a great impact on Maronites, imprinting them, clergy and laymen alike, with a special ascetic and monastic feature that has influenced their spirituality and their ecclesiastic structure. Our Church today is seeking, through the Patriarchal Synod, for ways and means to update this feature in order to achieve her evangelical mission in her own environment according to her specific talent.

The ascetic and monastic origin of the Maronite patriarchate does not mean that our Church is the result of an independent monastic movement within the Antiochean See. The Monastery of Saint Maron was integrated in the structure of the Antiochean Church since her foundation after the Council of Chalcedon (451) until the creation of the Maronite Patriarchate within its walls. This is asserted by the presence of bishop-monks, at least until the 8th century, who headed this monastery, according to an old ecclesiastic tradition in our Eastern Churches. This cooperation between bishops and monks shows that Saint Maron's monastery and its monks, as well as all monasteries and

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. The Orthodox Syriac used to be known as the Jacobites, after Bishop Jacob of Baradai (+578), the organizer of this Antiochean Church that was against the Chalcedonian Council.

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. In the 18th century, because of the very active movement of union with Rome, these two Churches suffered very tragic internal scission that led to the creation of the Roman Catholic Melkite and Syrian Catholic (1724 and 1783 respectively)

communities around it, were represented in the Antiochean structure through the bishop of the monastery, and bishops of neighboring monasteries. All this shows that the monastery of Saint Maron played the role imparted to it by the Antiochean Church in the 6th century, when the Superior of the Monastery of Saint Maron was nominated as an “exarch” overseeing the other monasteries of Syria Secunda. This means that he was supervising these monasteries and was a mediator between them and the Antiochean Patriarch on the one hand, and the Empire on the other hand.<sup>9</sup>

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. The function of exarque appears in the 6th century in law 133 of Emperor Justinian (527- 565) concerning the life of monks and nuns.

In this context, according to an old tradition handed down to us by Patriarch Estefan Doueihy (1670-1704), our Church considers Saint John Maron, who was first a monk, then the superior of the monastery of Saint Maron, the first Antiochean Patriarch of the Maronites. The Church celebrates his day on March 2nd 10. John Maron was the first of a series of monk-Patriarchs that continued uninterrupted till the 17th century. During that period, the monastic situation seemed to be tied to the Episcopal or Patriarchal services in our Church. In fact, after their ordination as bishops, the monks used to continue living their monastic life. This means that the monastic state was pastoral as much as it was evangelical in its origins and its objectives<sup>11</sup>.

These strong ties between the monastic and the Episcopal situation started fading away when, under the influence of Roman customs and traditions, conveyed through the Maronite School of Rome (1584), the Episcopal or patriarchal function was assigned, as is the case in the West, to those living in chastity, whether they be secular, clergy or monks. Despite this change, the Maronite Book of Ordinations has maintained these traditional ties, since he who is elevated to the episcopate wears the monastic cowl even if he is not a monk.

No doubt this ascetic and monastic origin of the Maronite Patriarchate turned the Maronite Church, throughout her long history, primarily into a big monastic community, a kind of “patriarchal parish”, evolving around the monastery of the Patriarchal See, and seeing in the patriarch a father, a leader, and the guarantor of her unity. This original and basic event had a great influence on the ecclesial organization of the Maronites, and remained in practice until the Lebanese Synod that took place in 1736. All along this earlier period, the Maronites had constituted one parish lead solely by the Patriarch, who carefully managed its affairs. He was sometimes helped by some leading figures in affairs related to earthly matters, and, in pastoral matters, by assistant bishops who used to live with him in the monastery or in neighboring ones. He also used to delegate them to make pastoral visits in his name. Despite the sporadic opposition to the absolute authority of the patriarch, this patriarchal organization remained nevertheless the living testimony of an on-going Episcopal synod based on the constant communion of a monastic life, founded on communal prayers, meditation on the Gospel, manual work, and fasting.

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. Refer to the life of Saint John Maron in the book *Brief Explanations of the Maronites Origins*, of Patriarch Doueihy. The book was published by Father Antoine Daou under the title *The Origin of the Maronites*, Ehdn, 1973.

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. These monk-bishops were in line with Theodoret of Cyrillus in the early life of Abraham the Hermit, a disciple of Saint Maron, after he was ordained a bishop of Harran: “We should not overlook the memory of Abraham the Miracle-worker under the pretext that, after his ascetic life, he honored the Apostolic See. In fact, it is for this same reason that we should keep his memory more than any other. Even after he was forced to change his function, he never changed the lifestyle; he rather carried with him the austerity of the eremitic life, and merged the Episcopal life with the eremitic life, and lived all his life austerely.” See Theodoret Bishop of Cyrillus, *History of God’s Favorites* (Tareekh Asfia’ Allah), previously cited, p. 149. At the end of Abraham the Ascetic Bishop, the Bishop of Cyrillus repeats in summary what he stated in the beginning (p. 152).

The ways of holding Episcopal synods have changed since the Fathers of the Lebanese Synod (1736) issued the decree concerning the repartition of dioceses and called on bishops to reside in their sees<sup>12</sup>. The diocesan reform, even though there was a pastoral need for it, was long only cautiously accepted and even refused by some, perhaps for reasons of safeguarding the unity of that big “monastic community” around its pastor. Today, even three centuries after the Lebanese Synod, the experience of the Episcopal synod according to monastic traditions still persists in the Maronite collective memory. It rears its head especially during times of hardship, due to the genuine ecclesiastic partnership that has developed between the patriarch and the bishops, able to inspire and strengthen the practice of an Episcopal synod even nowadays.

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. As for the repartition of dioceses, refer to *The Lebanese Synod*, annex , chapter 41, The Nomination of Maronite Patriarchs, Bishops and Others, translated by Father Youssef Najem, Cedars Press, Jounieh, 1900, pp. 180-182. Refer to what the Fathers of the Synod said about the Antiochean Patriarchate in Part II, chapter four, No. 8, pp. 350-361.

Along with the change according to which the monastic status was no longer a necessary condition for the Episcopate, another change took place simultaneously regarding the legality of monastic life in our patriarchal Church. Since the end of the seventeenth century, our Church had witnessed monastic reform on a very large scale. Its pioneers tried to bring together both genuine oriental spirituality and the western spirit of organization. The result was the springing up of monastic orders in their present form. It is noteworthy that this reform, on both the ecclesiastic and regulatory levels, was endorsed by the Holy Roman See, after having been consecrated in its first formula by the Patriarchal See in Kannoubine. This of course entailed a “pontifical right” that these Orders still enjoy, and a regulatory independence from the patriarchal structure<sup>13</sup>.

Our Patriarchal Synod is aware that regaining the ascetic and monastic character of our Church goes beyond the level of coordination between bishops and religious orders. Not only does monastic life represent the “spirit of the Eastern Churches”, as Pope John Paul II says, (*Lumen Orientalis*, *The Light of the Orient*, 9), but it is for us also a fundamental evangelical gift (charisma) that molded our Antiochean Church and marked her throughout her long history. This prompts us all, clergy, monks and laity, to discover this founding charisma in its meaning and its components. This was, and still is, a typical evangelical charisma for it calls on believers to take seriously all that is required for following Christ as it is stated in the Gospel: “And He said to everybody: He who wants to follow me, has to leave everything, carry his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). This particular grace or gift is materialized in continuous prayer, in repeating God’s word, in true repentance to be worthy of the kingdom, as well as in simple living, and brotherly solidarity as a testimony of love. The best aspect of this charisma is the insistence on continuity in the power of hope that never deceives (Romans 5:5), and the fear of judgment, awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to judge all the living and the dead (the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) raising all toward His Father “so that God would be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). Those who believe in Christ bear witness to the evangelical virtues in the light of all the dimensions of “the mystery of salvation” which finds its perfection in the event of the Second Coming. The Maronites “remember” this coming as if it already happened. They feel his presence in the celebration of the Eucharist when, in the anaphora of Saint Matthew, the priest announces: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, we remember your plan of salvation for us: your conception, your birth, your baptism, your salvific crucifixion and your vivifying death, your three-day burial, your glorious resurrection, your ascension, your sitting at the right hand of the Father, and your Majestic Return when you will judge all people...”<sup>14</sup>

In this context, it seems that all Maronites in their diverse talents and ways of life share the concern of regaining the ascetic and monastic aspect of the Maronite Church. In the same proportion that this concern expresses an evangelical choice tied to their education, they “have to make a new start with

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. Refer to the letter of Pope Clement XII in the *Confirmation of the Law of Syriac Maronite Monks Known by the Name of the Lebanese monks of Saint Anthony the Great* (1732), in the annex of the Lebanese Synod, no. 16, p. 44-49.

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. Refer to *The Missal According to the Antiochean Syriac Maronite Rite*, Bkerke, 1992, pp. 761-762. Also refer to Saint Jacob of Sarrug pp. 655-656.

Jesus Christ”<sup>15</sup>, turning them into “a consecrated community” to the Lord and a sign of his kingdom. Our Patriarchal Synod is aware of “the importance of this new start in Christ for the achievement of the pastoral and longed-for spiritual renewal in our Church.” This is the title of the second file, which concerns especially the personal renewal of personalities: the patriarch, bishops, priests, monks, laity, families and the young.

#### 4- A Church in Full Communion with the Roman Holy See

The communion with the Roman Church represents an essential element of our Maronite Church’s identity, mission and vocation. Even if the dimensions of this communion were openly set in their historical form at the early beginnings of the second millennium, this communion never was for the Maronites a passing matter dictated by historical circumstances. The astounding continuity of this communion till our very day serves as the best testimony to the Maronites’ faithfulness to an authentic ecclesiastic heritage common between East and West. This heritage accords the Pope of Rome, successor of Peter, Head of the Apostles, the mission of watching over the unity of Christ’s Church and the communion among Churches. The ecclesiastic independence of the Maronites may have been the element that has sustained them since the 8th century in this tradition. In fact, they do not seem to have suffered from the theological conflicts waged between “Latins and Greeks” over the nature and structure of the Church. These conflicts lead in the 11th century to the rupture of the legal communion between Rome and Constantinople. And as the synodal text (no. 15) states, the Antiochean Maronite Church was aware that her faith in the Eucharist according to the Chalcedonian formula was also one of the main elements that consolidated her full communion with the Pontifical Roman See.

The constant effort to remain in communion with Rome did not intend to cause divisions among the Maronites between those who oppose it and those who favor it; this however has happened with other Eastern Churches starting in the 16th century, when a movement of union with Rome prompted a duality in authority and serious divisions among the children of the same spiritual families. The unique and historically rooted communion between the Maronite Church and the Pontifical Roman See gives our Church a special ecumenical role, a role that she is called on to play in order to reinforce the dialogue of theology and of love between these Churches and the Catholic Church. This role is reasserted thanks to the great common heritage that unites our Maronite Syriac Antiochean Church with the other Eastern Churches. Despite the flaws that affected the communion between the Maronite Church and the Pontifical Roman See over their long history, their communion could still set a modest example for reclaiming Church Unity within the Universal Church, through full communion among the Churches.

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. The expression between brackets is the title of the teaching of “The Council of Institutes for the Consecrated Life and Apostolic Life Associations”. (May 16, 2002). It concerns the renewed engagement to consecrated life in the third millennium.

Nonetheless, the experience of communion between the Roman Church and the Maronite Church lead the latter, at the beginning of the 15th century, into the concept of a Church that is in fact a very complicated mixture of a patriarchal system, typical of Eastern Churches throughout the first millennium, and a Roman hierarchical system, typical of the Catholic Church, which has unilaterally developed since the start of the second millennium. As already stated in paragraph. No. 25, the Maronites have become part of the Church headed by the Bishop of Rome, while at the same time largely preserving their liturgical rituals and their ecclesiastic organization. Our Patriarchal Synod appreciates the great and numerous positive aspects that have flourished throughout the history of communion between the Maronite Church and the Roman Church, and allowed our Church to actively play her role by opening up to the West and taking advantage of its scientific and intellectual capacities. With time, this openness has contributed to the elaboration of the unique identity of Lebanon that is based on promoting cultural pluralism. But adopting this Roman concept of the Church, in some cases, as the sole model in practicing this communion, has led to what is called the "latinization" of many different sections of our liturgical life, the theology of the sacraments in particular. On the organizational level, this has contributed to weakening the unity of the Maronite Patriarchal Church by limiting the authority of the Patriarch who is the symbol of her unity.

To emphasize the history of communion between the Maronite Church and the Roman Church in all its dimensions, our Synod relies on specialists and experts to review its very delicate forming stages. A particular interest should be given to the Council of Florence (1439) and its vision of Church union between West and East; the Council of Trent (1545- 1563) and its great effect in the founding of the Maronite school in Rome (1584)<sup>16</sup> and the Maronite synods that were held under the presidency of apostolic delegates, the Jesuit fathers Eliano and Dandini, (1578- 1579, 1580- 1582, 1596)<sup>17</sup>. Special attention should also be given to the Lebanese Synod (1736) and the way it was received in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was common knowledge that the laws that were issued in that Synod were all in accordance with, and inspired by, the reforms adopted during the Council of Trent<sup>18</sup>.

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. For the Maronite School in Rome, refer to Nasser Gemayel, *Les Echanges culturels entre les Maronites et l'Europe*, 2 tomes, Beirut, 1984.

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. For the Maronite Synods refer to Joseph FEGHALI, *Histoire du droit de l'Eglise maronite*, t. 1 Ed. Letouzey et Ané, Paris, 1962.

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. For the Lebanese Synod, refer to, Elias ATALLAH, *Le Synode Libanais de 1736*, 2 tomes, co-Ed. CERO-Letouzey et Ané, For the Maronite School in Rome, refer to Nasser Gemayel, *Les Echanges culturels entre les Maronites et l'Europe*, 2 tomes, Beirut, 1984.

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<sup>18</sup>

. For the Lebanese Synod, refer to, Elias ATALLAH, *Le Synode Libanais de 1736*, 2 tomes, co-Ed. CERO-Letouzey et Ané, Antélias (Liban)- Paris, 2001.

In the twentieth century, a new chapter of the history of communion opened between the Maronite Church and the Roman Church with the holding of Vatican II in Rome (1962-1965). Our Church participated in the works of this Council through her patriarch and bishops. This undoubtedly was the first motivating element in the launching of the Maronite Church on all levels despite the difficulties due to the recent Lebanese war (1975-1990). Our Patriarchal Synod is directly related to this movement of renewal, although "some ecclesiastic and lay voices had been calling for a new Maronite Synod since the beginning of the twentieth century."<sup>19</sup> In the context of her engagement in the synodal venture, our Church accords great importance to the Apostolic Exhortation *A New Hope for Lebanon* (1997), which crowned the works of the Special Assembly of Bishops for Lebanon (1995), initiated by Pope John Paul II (1991). Our Church is aware that this exhortation has set the basis of the ecclesiastic renewal based on the teachings of Vatican II and on the common heritage of our Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Churches. This exhortation, in its principles and aims, became a constitution for the mission of our Churches in Lebanon and the Arab world.

One of the achievements of this synod is that it has set up a theological concept for the Church-communion, with the aim of reviving a biblical and patristic tradition that was prevailing in the East and the West during the first millennium. In this context, our Synod calls on the Maronite clergy, monks, nuns and laity, to delve into the mystery of communion and to discover its practical contents, either on the level of our patriarchal Church or on the level of its relationship with the Holy See in Rome. In the light of the theology of the Church as a Communion of Churches, our Church is also very keen, with all other Eastern Catholic Churches, on pursuing the dialogue with the Roman authorities to clear up and overcome all remaining legal obstacles that hinder the practice of the patriarchs of these Churches in their pastoral mission with their flocks residing out of the Antiochian domain<sup>20</sup>. The pursuit of this dialogue in the context of the Catholic Church undoubtedly has repercussions on the future of the ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches. It is in line with the initiative of Pope John Paul II, who invited five Patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches to convene on September 29, 1998, as the leaders of these Churches who share with the Orthodox Churches a common theological, liturgical, spiritual and legal heritage, "to

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<sup>19</sup>

. Refer to the letter of Patriarch Nasrallah Butros SFEIR, in *The Maronite Patriarchal Synod*, 2003, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup>

. Refer to the text of the document, in French, signed by the seven Oriental Patriarchs. It is entitled: *Relationships between the Catholic Patriarchal Churches and the Roman Holy See*, in the book of Father Elie HADDAD, *The Episcopal Synods in the Oriental Churches (The Experience of the Melkite Catholic Church)*, publication of the Higher Institute for Religious Sciences, Saint Joseph's University, Beirut, 2003, p. 257- 273.

find, with him, appropriate means to achieve the mission of Peter in a way that is satisfactory for everybody” (no. 4)<sup>21</sup>.

## Second: The Maronite Church identity in the eastern context

In its reflection about the identity, vocation and mission of the Maronite Church, the Synod reflects in particular on the relationship of the Maronites with their environment. This prompts us to meditate on the organic link between God's Church and the environment in which it is incarnated, always remembering that the Kingdom of God is not “of this world” (John 18: 36). People, all people, become “a Church”, meaning a collectivity called on by God, in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, to experience their faith as much as possible. Consequently God entrusts these people with a mission. The Church becomes therefore incarnated in the human environment to which her children belong. She instills the values of the Gospel in their original culture and civilization in order to develop God's kingdom. The Church also believes that “the mystery of salvation” of which God made us witnesses in this world is first and foremost for human beings, in time and space, and for their salvation.

### 1. The relationship between Lebanon

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<sup>21</sup>

. See the sermon of JPII in *La Documentation catholique*, no. 2192 (1998) p. 951-953

The canonical parameters of the Maronite Church in the Antiochean domain include nowadays the Middle-East region in general. Mount Lebanon, however, and Lebanon in its present borders, which is a part of that domain, have embraced the majority of the Maronites since the 10th century, when the Maronite Antiochean Patriarchate was settled in Lebanon, until the present<sup>22</sup>.

With respect to the ties of the Maronites in the Patriarchal domain to Lebanon, the land and heritage, the distinctive mission and the call of our Mother Church becomes clear throughout her the long history. In this land characterized by its remarkable pluralism, on both Christian and Muslim levels, our Maronite Church has striven, with all those of good will, to be the bearer of a mission centered on the human being, any human being, which is derived from her apostolic faith. This mission, equated very often to an uprising meant to build a society that believes in human dignity, safeguards the right to religious and cultural differences as a testimony of freedom, and upholds its basic political rights. This historical endeavor was crowned by the proclamation of Greater Lebanon in 1920, soon to become an independent republic in 1943. Patriarch Elias Howayek played a leading role in this matter. Lebanon, in the vision of the Maronite Patriarchy, has never been simply a "Christian country"; it was meant to be a country where both Christians and Muslims lived on an equal footing, in mutual respect. The genuine Lebanese identity has been best captured in what Pope John Paul II said, "Lebanon is more than a country, and it is the message of freedom and a model of pluralism for East and West"<sup>23</sup>. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Maronite patriarchy had a pioneering role in making this pluralistic country a message. Lebanon "the message" being elevated

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. JPII *The Encyclical to All Bishops in the Catholic Church Concerning the Situation in Lebanon* (1989) #6.

to that global human level, our Synod calls on all the Maronites to pursue the testimony of this message in all their countries, in close coordination and unity with their patriarchal Church that upheld this message throughout its history, as a mother hopes to see her child grow “to reach the perfection of the image of Christ” (Ephesians, 4:13).

The children of our Maronite Church know that their Antiochean roots tie them especially to this Good News that was carefully received by the city of God, Antioch, ever since Peter, the Head of the Apostles, along with Paul, Barnabas and others, announced it. They have made of this city a living example of the reconciliation between the Jews and all the “nations” which are internally united by their faith in Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior (Acts 15/22-35; Galatians, 2/11-21). Our Synod reminds Maronites that the conversion of many Syrian and Lebanese from atheism to Christianity, in the Roman era, happened at the hands of preachers, who were motivated by apostolic zeal. They were led by monks who were disciples of Saint Maron of Cyrrhus, Saint John Chrysostom, and Simon Stylites<sup>24</sup>.

Our Maronite Church, and other Eastern Churches, were given the gift of testifying for the apostolic faith in the midst of a religiously pluralistic society, since Islam appeared in the region at the beginning of the 7th century and developed to become the religion of the majority of people living in the Middle East. Despite the decrease in the number of Christians in this region, the Maronites have never forgotten that the Church, being apostolic, is not self-centered. Despite her small size and despite all sorts of obstacles, our Maronite Church has persistently tried to stay present in her environment. She has contributed, with her partners in destiny, to setting the bases of a pluralistic society, which has turned Lebanon into the mission the Pope spoke about, as mentioned above (No. 38). Our Church has to continue carrying the message according to the requirements of the day.

## 2. The relationship with the Muslims

The Eastern framework in which the Maronite Church lived and continues to live is mainly characterized by the Islamic influence, at least since the beginning of the Maronite Patriarchate in addition to a milieu of multiple churches, particularly the Antiochene Orthodox Church. What is the influence of this milieu on the Maronite identity; we will focus though on the influence of Islam and Muslim people. Because the maronites and other Christians have many characteristics in common.

### Past relationship with muslims

We will not deal with the details, but we will point out the important periods

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. To follow the apostolic work of preaching, refer to the book of Youhanna SADER, *Croix et Symbole dans l'art Maronite Antique*, col. *Héritage et patrimoine*, n. 1, Ed. Dar Sader, Beirut, Lebanon, 1989, pp. 235-253. (*Conversion des Libanais par l'intercession de Saint Symeon le Stylite*). pp. 261- 265 (*Jean Chrysostome et la mission de Phénicie*).

The preparatory stages that led to the existence of our Church in the Antiochean region go back to the period before Islam, and her Patriarchal beginnings to the period approaching the advent of Islam. The first person to take this long Maronite-Islamic synchrony completely into account was the Maronite patriarch Stephen Peter Douaihy, in his book *Tarikh Al Azmina* (The Chronicle of the Times). While he was presenting the Maronite identity, moving between two poles, namely loyalty to Maron and loyalty to the Roman See of Peter, Douaihy found himself directly concerned with Islamic history without actually being part of it. Moreover, he wrote about Islam and Muslims with total objectivity, despite his knowledge of the enmity existing then between Christianity and Islam, and of the natural sympathy between the Maronites and the Christian West at a time when there was no distinction between the religious and the temporal.

To continue with our historical review, it is only right to point out that one bright feature of the history of our Church of the East has marked both the Ottoman and modern epochs. In fact the Ottoman period saw the launching of a great Maronite cultural renaissance resulting from the contact of our Church with the Italian renaissance through the Maronite School in Rome which Pope Gregory III founded on 5 July, 1584. Moreover, due to the fact that the Maronite Church had already gone a long way toward a gradual voluntary arabization,<sup>25</sup> the Maronite School became the starting point of the first Arab renaissance thanks to its own students. These students excelled in all fields of science to the point that the saying "learned like a Maronite" became common in the West. They also participated in promoting orientalism in Europe, and in translating the Bible into different languages, Arabic and Syriac among them, between 1628 and 1645 (Sehyouni, Shalak, Haklani). Further, they also introduced Arabic and Syriac typefaces to the Medici press in Tuscany (Yaacoub B. Helaal, 1590-1594). They also taught Arabic in the most important European universities and edited and catalogued the oriental manuscripts in Rome and Madrid (Hawwa, Assem'ani, Al Ghaziri), then translated them into Latin (Assem'ani in his famous book *Al Maktaba Assharqiyya*, The Oriental Library)<sup>26</sup>.

This Arab renaissance in Europe, at the hands of the Maronites, reached back to the Maronite Mount Lebanon which led to a similar renaissance there. As a direct result the first printing press in the East arrived at the Maronite monastery of Saint Anthony of Qozhayya in the year 1610, and the book of Psalms was printed in Syriac and in Arabic but with Syriac characters, because few Maronites at that time were familiar with Arabic script<sup>27</sup>. The Lebanese Council held in the year 1736 called for the

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. The oldest Maronite Arabic references within our reach are *Kitab Al Houda* , The Book of Guidance (the Maronite *نوناق ومون* translated into Arabic in the year 1059, the Syriac original of which cannot be traced); the book *Al Maqalat Al Aashr* ( The Ten Essays, a book of Apologetics written in 1089) by Thomas Al Kfartabi, and *Idah Al Iman* ( Clarification of Faith) by Gabriel Ibn Al Kilai'i ( theological synopsis written as of 1494).

<sup>26</sup>

. Fr. Nasser Gemayel, *Achievements of the Maronite School Students in Europe*, al-Manara # 25 (1984), pp. 235-248.

<sup>27</sup>

. Historians commonly agree that the press of Saint Anthony was the first to be introduced into the Orient, but they still disagree on the date of its establishment. Bishop Evodius (Awwad) Assemani stated in his book

generalization of free grass-roots education as well as the education of girls. They also founded the first institution for higher education in the school of Ain Waraqa (1789) where four languages were taught in addition to grammar and literature, namely Arabic, Syriac, Latin and Italian, French was also added later.

Moreover, the Maronites translated into Arabic all the important works in philosophy and theology. Nevertheless, the main Maronite pioneer in the Arab renaissance remains Germanos Farhat, Bishop of Aleppo (1732-1670), for he was the one who introduced Arabic into the Maronite public conscience when he authored the first book of Arabic grammar entitled, *The Study of Questions* (Baht Al Mataleb), in which he relied completely on the Holy Gospel. Farhat also wrote a book on Arabic stylistics, many poetical works of religious inspiration, and a book of Christian Apologetics. Accordingly, Farhat was indeed the major advocate of harmony between the Christian faith and the Arabic culture. Finally, this scholar played an important role in the translation of the Maronite liturgy from Syriac into Arabic.

This amazing Maronite Arabic renaissance paved the way for a renewal throughout the Arab World, one which began with Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt in 1798. Maronites, and Christians in general, played a leading role in this second phase of the renaissance; in Egypt, they founded the Arabic press, the Arabic theatre, the art of the historical novel, free-verse poetry, and the cinema. They also founded industries and banks, thus playing a key role in strengthening the Egyptian economy.

The contributions of the Maronites have played a decisive role in the Arab cultural renaissance and in linking the Arab World to modernity, which has led to consolidating the relationship between the Maronite Church and Arab culture

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*(Bibliothecae Medicae Laurentianae et Palatinae codicum mss., Orientalium Catalogus, xxx: Orient, p. 411)* that the first edition of the Book of Psalms was finished in 1585, and not in 1610, and its content as detailed by him differed from that of the 1610 edition. Semaan Assemani shared this opinion. However, most of the later historians (Schnurr, De Sassie, and Sheikho) were not of this view, being unable to find a copy of the 1585 edition. It is worth noting that the press of Saint Anthony Qozhayya was established despite the decree by Sultan Bayazeed II, issued in 1483, forbidding the use of printed books under peine of death.

With the establishment of a pluralistic and free Lebanon, Maronites opened a new era in the history of Christians and Muslims, an era that “by-passed the confrontational relations between Islam and Christianity dating back more than a thousand years”<sup>28</sup>, in order to build a model country whose mission was truth and freedom.

This Christian-Muslim partnership in Lebanon, considered in the absolute, represents a historical shift in the relationship between Christians and Muslims. This model has indeed transformed it from a relationship of tension and inequality to that of harmony and equality. Our Maronite Church had an essential role in the establishment of this model, and no doubt she will always have a determinant role in preventing it from failing.

The Christian-Muslim partnership of the Lebanese is made up of two components, partnership in culture and partnership in destiny. The first depends on the centrality of the Arabic language, and the second on the ultimate commitment to Lebanon as the only and final country.

Now, if we take it beyond the Lebanese context, and place it in relation to its proper and ultimate objective, the first partnership means that the commitment of Christians – along with that of Muslims – to the Arabic language is a commitment to modernize this language constantly on the basis of its Syriac and Greek cultural roots, and of its interaction with the living cultural languages giving rise to modernity, rather than a simple defense of it against different dualisms when faced with local dialects. In other words, this partnership means for Maronites their complete commitment to promoting Arabic culture with modernity and originality.

As for the partnership in destiny, considered from the angle of its final objectives, this implies that the commitment of Christians and Muslims to Lebanon as their only and final home country is not merely the rejection of the idea of Lebanon as a nationalistic Christian country or as an Islamic state. It implies a commitment to establish the country of Lebanon on the principles of human dignity and on the rights of the human individual and of societies, as they have been clearly understood by the human family since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued in the year 1948, and as ratified by binding international treaties inspired by that Declaration. In other words, this partnership consists of the final rejection by Lebanese Muslims of minorities having the status of Dhimma merely tolerated under Islamic law.

When considering these worrisome issues, we should not forget certain outstanding and encouraging events marking the history of relations between Maronites and Muslims outside Lebanon. One of these is the famous visit of the Maronite Patriarch Boulos Mass'ad to the Ottoman Sultan Abd Al Aziz in the Assitana in the year 1869. The Patriarch seized this occasion to ask for Lebanese Muslims to be exempted from military service just as their Christian compatriots were. The Sultan was impressed by the Patriarch's wisdom and subtlety and complied with his request<sup>29</sup>.

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. Bishop Anthony Hamid Mourany, *Maronite Historical Conscience between the Old and the New*, Beirut 1981 p, 47.

<sup>29</sup>

. Chorepiscopus Youssef Dagher – *Maronite Patriarchs*. Beirut 1957 p. 104.

b. Relationship with the present

b/1- Highlights

The Holy Father placed great stress on the Lebanese consensual formula between Christians and Muslims as setting the model for the proper and long-awaited relationship between Christians and Muslims in the whole Antiochean domain. The Pope expressly repeated this position in the homily he addressed to the Lebanese people when he was celebrating the closing Mass of the Synod for Lebanon and said: "We want to declare to the world the importance of Lebanon, and of the mission it has fulfilled over the ages. Being the country of numerous religious confessions, it has proved that these different confessions can live together in peace, brotherhood and cooperation. It has proved that it is possible to respect the right of every person to religious freedom, and that all are united in their love for this country that has matured over the centuries, while preserving the spiritual heritage of their fathers, particularly that of the holy monk Maron"<sup>30</sup>.

In an earlier address, His Beatitude Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir thoroughly explained the significance of this citation of the Pope for Lebanon's unique mission. In his words, "What characterizes Lebanon is that the faithful of the two religions enjoy the same rights and carry out the same obligations." Concerning religious rights, "... it is commonly known that religious freedom is well respected in Lebanon, each one of the seventeen confessions worshipping God according to its own conscience dictates ... even with those who may not pray, it is a matter of conscience and there is no coercion in religion"<sup>31</sup>. The Beatitude the Patriarch delivered a thunderous declaration which laid down the red line which, if crossed, would mean the collapse of the pact of communal living. He said: "If the Lebanese were placed before the hard choice between communal living and freedom, history proves that the Lebanese, Christians in particular, would never hesitate before choosing what represents for them one of the most fundamental priorities and principles ... and they have taken refuge in these mountains for centuries only to preserve what are two of the values most cherished by them, namely their faith in God and their responsible sense of freedom. Then if they cannot enjoy them in Lebanon, they must do so in any part of the earth and under any sky"<sup>32</sup>.

We should notice with optimism that Islam is becoming more and more open to the idea of dialogue with Christianity in the East on an equal footing, and that the success of the Lebanese model of partnership between Christianity and Islam and the possibility of its success in other Arab and even non-Arab societies are being ever more widely acknowledged. One late Lebanese Muslim imam summarized this pioneering example by saying: "I see that it is the responsibility of Arabs and Muslims to enhance all means that might make Christianity in the East regain its complete presence,

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<sup>30</sup>

. Pope John Paul II. His homily to the Lebanese people during the closing Mass of the Synod for Lebanon, 11th May 1997.

<sup>31</sup>

. Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir. His speech at the opening session of the regular annual meeting of the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon, 1992.

<sup>32</sup>

. *Ibid*

effectiveness and role in making decisions, and in giving direction to history, and it is their responsibility to establish a total partnership in this regard between Christians and Muslims in all their countries and societies.<sup>33</sup>

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. Mohammad Mahdi Shams Addin. *The Commandments*, Dar Annahar publication. Beirut p. 50.

It is obvious that these fine Islamic appeals, reflecting the nobility of those who made them, should receive all due attention from our Maronite Church, as from all the Antiochean churches. The Maronite Church finds herself directly concerned with them, and she has a sacred duty in this field, particularly by reason of the position of responsibility that God wanted the Maronite Patriarchate to hold as being the strongest voice of the Christians in Lebanon, and sometimes even the voice of all Lebanese, and being, in the view of all, the honorable abode of free Christianity in the East. The Maronite Patriarchs have always accepted this duty. That is why the patriarch of "white Arabism", His Beatitude Boulos Boutros Meouchy, took Lebanon's Mission in the Arab World as the title for one of his pastoral letters when he wrote: "Today Lebanon senses its tight solidarity with Arab states, not just in respect of common culture, but also, and above all, in respect of common destiny. It sees himself as a link between East and West, working to unfurl the banner of understanding and brotherhood ... and it aspires to turn this wish into tangible realities within its borders, as it aspires to participate with all its strength to fulfill this same desire in the Arab World"<sup>34</sup>.

#### b/2. Shadows

Our attention is first drawn to the important religious awakening in our Arab East, simultaneous with counterparts in many contemporary human environments.

Among the effects in the Arab East of this fundamentalism which calls itself Islamic is the increasing rejection of pluralism in either religion, denomination, ethnicity or language. Furthermore, the dangers that this orientation carries with it are no secret, dangers to the survival of Christian or other communities in the Arab East, reversing the process of openness and fraternity among people of different religions, ethnic groups, or languages, increasing their isolation and their withdrawal into themselves, and tending to breed new fundamentalism no less intolerant, exclusive and more hate-filled than before.

Next to the spread of the relatively modern phenomenon of fundamentalism, there are old Arab impasses on the cultural level, the first and most important of which is the absence of political freedom for Christians in most Arab societies, and, in some of these societies, even for Muslims themselves. There is also an extensive violation of other human rights, civil, economic, social and cultural, not to mention the religious rights, especially the rights of women and of minorities. In addition to these there are chronic and crucial political problems such as the Palestinian cause, the tragedy in Iraq, the Lebanese question and other files on hold that have a deep impact on the region's modern history and trouble the Arab person in his/her conscience and entity.

Basing herself on the above, since the rights of individual's and of communities are implied in those of God, the Church sees herself entrusted with them, with the duty to defend them and to condemn those who violate them, whoever they may be. For the same reason, the Maronite Church believes that it is her responsibility, along with her Antiochean sister Churches, to always remain in

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. Patriarch Mar Boulos Boutros Al M'ouchy. *Lebanon's Mission in the Arab World*. 5th Pastoral Letter after his visit *ad liminem*, 1959.

continuous dialogue with Muslim believers in the Arab East so that the two religions may join together in defending these rights, and to remind national leaders that, in order to make peace a political reality, they are required to respect the rights of individuals, all individuals, and the rights of communities, all communities, since peace will not be assured until both of these rights are consolidated.

### b/3. Obstacles

By impediments, we do not mean dogmatic differences between the two religions concerning the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, his death on the cross, and his resurrection from death for our redemption, or the differences about God's relationship to men. All of these exist and no one should ignore them.

The real impediments are those generated by illusions and prejudices against the other religion, and by the distorted ideas derived from past negative residues. They may be due to distorted religious education that presents the other religion in a simplistic way leading to misleading conceptions shared by the community without scrutiny. In this way, collective rancor is nourished until it develops into unacceptable discrimination, be it at the ethnic or at the religious level. Therefore, one of the major challenges facing friendly Christian-Islamic relations today, in our Arab world as in the world at large, is to effectively confront these simplistic conceptions of Islam and of Christianity in their substance and their form, honestly and objectively, whether they were initiated inside or outside these two religions, in order to face them effectively. On many occasions, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, made it clear that true religious faith is radically opposed to racist practices and attitudes arising from the common practice of simplistic classification.

It is only proper to recall the distinguished contributions of Maronite thinkers and scholars, in times past and present, to the objective study, with clarity and in depth, of Islamic principles and spirituality, thinkers and scholars by whom many valuable books have been written. If the dialectical and apologetic approaches were predominant in the early comparative studies by Maronites, from Yohanna el-Hasrouni to Boutros ben Makhlof, to Germanos Farhat, to Estephan Ward and to Antoun Shehwan,<sup>35</sup> the works of contemporary Maronite writers are characterized by a style that is scientific, comprehensive, and increasingly open to Islam's peculiarities in theology, spirituality and ascetics, and to its points of similarity to Christianity<sup>36</sup>.

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. See, for example, Nasser Gemayel, *Les Echanges culturels entre les Maronites et l'Europe*, Beyrouth, 1984, pp. 976-988

<sup>36</sup>

. Fr. Joachim Moubarak, (Arabic),- *Christianity and Islam in Lebanon: Highlights and Contemplations*, Beirut, Lebanese Nadwa Lectures, year 19, Publication 1108, 1965.  
*Pantalogie Islamo-Chrétienne*, Publication du Cénacle Libanais, Beyrouth, 1972-3  
*Recherches sur la Pensée Chrétienne et l'Islam dans les temps modernes et à l'époque contemporaine*, Publication de l'Université Libanaise, Beyrouth, 1977  
Fr. Michel Hayek, (Arabic) *Christ in Islam*, Catholic Press, Beirut, 1962  
*Le mystère d'Ismael*, ed. Mame, Paris, 1964

There are also other obstacles to progress in Christian-Islamic relations in the Arab East, the full responsibility of which should be shouldered by certain Arab authorities. These include preventing Christians from freely practicing their religion in places of worship of their own, or from providing adequate religious education for their children in their own educational centers, or from enjoying equal rights of citizenship in their own homes, due to their minority status. These are obstacles never faced by Muslims in non-Arab countries.

One reason for prudence when working for improved understanding between Muslims and Christians is the question of mixed marriages and the different ways of handling the rights of the two parties at the marriage, during married life, and after its break-up. It is well known that Islam does not allow a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man, while it allows a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman. But in this latter case, the wife automatically finds herself unable to inherit from her husband because of the difference in religion; further, the Christian mother faces extreme, even insurmountable, difficulty in getting custody of her children after the marriage is dissolved. We do not find equivalent legal prohibitions in Christian legal tradition.

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*Nouvelles Approches de l'Islam*, conférences du 6 Mars 1967, Cénacle Libanais, Beyrouth, in *Les Conférences du Cénacle*, XXII<sup>e</sup> années, No. 9-10, 1968  
*Les Arabes ou le baptême des larmes*, ed. Gallimard, Paris, 1972.

Kamal Youssef El-Hajj on "Naslamiyyah", Examples:

*Philosophy of the National Pact* (Arabic), Lebanese Order Press, Beirut, 1961.

*In the Realm of the Truth*, (Arabic) Publications du Cénacle Libanais, Beirut, 1966

It is worth noting that this fundamentalist tone is heard more and more often in Islamic rhetoric, misrepresenting and distorting Christianity ever more aggressively, and so causing aversion and hostility among the Muslim faithful. In addition, this is likely to provoke Christians to sporadic comparable reactions which have nothing to do with the religion of love. Our Fathers, the Catholic Patriarchs of the East, have said: "That is why we need to improve the religious rhetoric on both sides and free it from sterile polemics ... therefore; we call upon Christian theologians and intellectuals in our Arab world to develop, without falling into flattery, a new and fairer view of Islam. We also appeal to Christian educational establishments to include Islamic culture in their academic curricula with the help of specialized professors. We also call upon Muslim scholars and upon Islamic educational establishments to make the same effort in order to understand the Christian religion. If, on the one hand, Christians are given the opportunity to listen to what Muslims have to say about themselves, and, on the other, Muslims to hear what Christians have to say about themselves, then there will be true knowledge along with mutual objectivity. This indeed is the knowledge that can tear down the walls standing between us, and generate an appropriate atmosphere for communication and cooperation."<sup>37</sup>

Finally, there is a recent obstacle which we must consider seriously, foreseeing its consequences and preventing their destructive effects: this is the growing violence in the name of religion, in the Arab East as well as in the whole world. This is an extremely explosive issue that could wreck the whole foundations of universal peace.

#### c- The future

When we view the present state of Christian-Islamic relations in the Antiochean Patriarchal domain, it appears to our Church that when it is founded on honesty and sincerity coupled with love, on understanding and mutual respect, and on belief in the other's good faith, Christian-Islamic dialogue is the best way of establishing that culture of love which we would like to be the culture of the future in our shattered Arab world. In the words of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East, "Dialogue is, above all, a spiritual attitude,"<sup>38</sup> and we "cannot, by any means, accept others that God puts in our way unless we accept God in our lives first... [therefore], our living together is at the core of our standing before God"<sup>39</sup>.

Our Maronite Church has lived this grand dialogue over the years, and, along with her sisters the other Antiochean Churches, she has launched from Lebanon the first cry calling for the interface between Christianity and Islam, for their embrace in time, and for their first true kiss. Her firm hope is to successfully extend this achievement to the whole Antiochean East, which consists today of an Arab World engaged in an active search for the sources of truth as a way out of its problems. In this East, ever since the dawn of Islam, Christians have been face-to-face with Muslims. They were present in the Book of Islam, in its prophetic Hadiths, in its Sufi journeys, and in the debates of its rulers, philosophers and scholars. When Muslims first extended their rule, they were present in the

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<sup>37</sup>

. *Together before God*, n° 26.

<sup>38</sup>

. *Christian Presence in the East*, n° 47.

<sup>39</sup>

. *Together Before God*, n° 48.

courts of the Omayyad and Abbassid caliphates, more recently in the modern Arabic renaissance which they themselves launched, and together with their Muslim brothers in their joint stand against every colonialist. That is why, their qualitative presence will remain firm and shining in the Arab homeland, and they will remain faithful to their oriental origin, in spite of the increasing emigration of their children throughout the world.

Our Church also sees her engagement in promoting the three other types of dialogue, whenever the occasion presents itself, as pertaining to the essence of her mission, namely dialogue of life, of action, and of spiritual experience. For this purpose, the Patriarchal Council recommends the establishment of a permanent committee for contact with Muslims of the Middle East, this committee being directly related to the Maronite Patriarchate and having the task of activating the numerous ecclesiastical committees related to the Christian-Muslim dialogue. The Council also recommends supporting any initiative of dialogue between Muslims and Christians either within the domain of the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon, or through the Middle East Council of Churches, or even within civil Arab societies. The Council also hopes for youth activities which bring Christians and Muslims together to be given special attention, activities such as school partnerships and joint camps. Furthermore, the Council urges educators to disseminate in the souls of the young the Church's teaching, which is open to inter-religious dialogue. Finally the Council attaches great importance to bringing religious Christians and Muslims together in regular meetings so that they may pray and reflect on means that will secure the extension of the culture of love and peace in the souls of the faithful of the two religions.

Among the most serious future responsibilities of our Church, as well as of her Antiochean sister Churches, is to make known the advantages of the free partnership model of communal living between Muslims and Christians, in other words of the Lebanese model of communal living, to all the Arab region, and to protect this model from falling short or from being lost in Lebanon itself. Here we found our role in saving the modern Arab World from its intense cultural struggle, so that it may accept unity in diversity, with civil liberties and with the basic requirements of justice, peace, and human rights, including women's rights, and may deal correctly with minorities no matter how distinctive they might be.

### 3- Conclusion

The Maronite Church identity in its oriental Muslim milieu developed in two directions.

The development in the direction of openness with respect to the maronite identity caused to withdraw and not be involved her to not be involved in nationalism. She never thought becoming a national church. Thus, she worked through her history with her partners specially in Lebanon to create a country that is distinguished by its religious and cultural pluralism, respecting liberty in all its forms and establishing a model of co-living. This example has been evident in today's world in which the struggle between religions and cultures is taking new dimensions that threaten peace even if the causes are not merely religious.

The direction that led her to insert herself in the vast Arabic and Islamic cultures and to work at developing them and tying them with modernity in its many aspects starting from the bonds that the maronites established with the West and its renaissance on all levels. The maronites did not consider that they are strangers to the East of which they are in fact a part. On the contrary, she contributed to its renaissance making hers its fateful and just causes relying on the religious and cultural ties that bind her with the West.

Relying on these facts, the maronites adopted the culture of dialogue with its varied analysis; the most important of these is the dialogue of the life that they led with the Muslims which until now sheltered them from the spreading of fundamentalism and extremism at least in the ranks of the mixed classes which had experienced the co-living and understood the value of liberty. Thus, the Catholic Eastern patriarchs focused in their letters on the importance of the Christian presence in the East and its relation with Islam, because it is a presence of service and witness and a response to a divine call that is an essential part of the church identity and mission.

### Thirdly: The Maronite Church identity in its world expansion

As the synodal text dealt with this topic we will not discuss it here; however, we must point to the factors that weakened and continue to weaken the identity of the Maronite Church and to the elements that strengthen it and keep it from being lost.

We must be clear from the beginning, this discussion deals with the Maronite Church identity and not with the Lebanese identity, although there is certainly a connection between the two. We will deal with this aspect later.

The following are among the factors that weakened and continue to weaken the church identity

    Ceasing to be in contact with the mother church and joining the Latin Church wherever the maronites are

In many expansion countries, the maronites were not provided the required pastoral care. Because the maronites are Catholic they joined the local church to fulfill their religious duties and prove that they belong to the same faith as the Latin Church. Sometimes, they were forced to join this church because their children attended the Catholic schools of these Latin parishes.

However, they did not completely abandon their identity, for they established social clubs that kept their family and social bonds, maintaining them in connection with the heritage they brought with them.

However, the situation was different in the US. Many parishes were established there through individual or communal initiatives, after the emigrants brought diocesan and religious priests to provide the spiritual service, particularly for the early comers who did not know the language of the country and who were still longing for their church heritage in which they were brought up. For this reason an active maronite eparchy was established in the US that accompanied the social, educational development of its faithful. This eparchy resolved to discover and update its liturgical heritage and renew it and translate it in the language of the country in order to preserve its identity. It initiated this task before the liturgical renewal undertaken by the mother church, which was called for by Vatican II in 1965. Despite all of these efforts, a large number of maronites remained far from their church attending the Latin Church because it is closer, and because of other reasons.

#### The Position of the Latin Church

In general, the Latin Church received the Maronites who came to it, but the Latin clergy did not know much about Eastern Churches and their glorious history. Therefore, bishops had different attitudes, some of them preferring to absorb the Maronites in their Latin dioceses while others facilitated the expansion of Maronite congregations and contributed to the construction of their churches. This divergence of attitudes remained causing uncertainty until the Second Vatican Council was held, gathering all Catholic bishops of the world, including bishops of the countries of immigration. This Sacred Council helped in revealing the reality of the Eastern Churches and their

great historical and spiritual value. As a result of this development, after this Council the bishops of Rome allowed the founding of Maronite eparchies in countries of expansion. The Council also decided to establish such eparchies in continents other than America and Australia. Thus the number of eparchies abroad exceeds their number in Lebanon. In fact, the number of dioceses and curacies in Lebanon is twelve, whereas Middle East dioceses outside Lebanon are six and the eparchies of America, Australia and Europe now number eight.

These new measures adopted by the Holy See constituted a major turning point in the history and future of the Maronite expansion, because the Maronite Church had become legally recognized in the world, and was able to embrace her children directly wherever they are.

### The Language and the Vocations

The Arabic and Syriac language were a factor of conservation of the identity, for the first and second generations because the priests who were securing the spiritual service were fluent in them. But things changed with the new generations whose mother tongue was English. Then the Arabic language became a local language used only in the patriarchal territory. But where the clergy remained attached to Arabic and imposed it on the congregation, the new generations left the church and in spite of themselves abandoned their identity.

Moreover, the clergy came from Lebanon without proper preparation particularly with regard to the language and to the understanding of the new mentality, to observe the social and religious developments, follow them, adapt to them and find solutions to the problems that arose. This does not mean that we do not acknowledge what the clergy coming from Lebanon has accomplished in the way of projects and services that became the prelude to the new renaissance.

### The social and educational development

In the beginning of their expansion, the maronites lived in places suitable with their financial situation, but still enabling them to communicate with each other. But things changed with their social development; they became known through political, financial and educational magazines; then they moved to other places more suitable to their new social positions, and they joined other communities that often kept away from their heritage and identity, because they wanted to be completely part of these communities and not be different from the original inhabitants of the country, especially because the word "foreigner" would follow them wherever they would go.

## 2. The elements that consolidate the identity

### Maronite Church unity

The establishment of the Maronite Church in various countries, the creation of maronite eparchies outside the patriarchal territory and the relation of these eparchies with the local churches, which primarily are Latin Churches, raise the question of the unity of the Maronite Church as a principal element of the identity.

The Unity presupposes:  
Unifying the understanding of the Maronite Church

The Maronite Church is a patriarchal church "sui iuris", headed by a patriarch who is the symbol of its unity and guarantor of its steadfastness. In addition, it is a synodal church whose college of bishops meets every year in Bkerke, headed by the Patriarch, to study all the matters that concern it. This unity is apparent in the liturgy, the prayer, the administration of the sacraments and in its dependence on the one Syro-Antiochene heritage.

This unity that binds the fate of the Maronites with one another wherever they may be, keeps them together, despite the different milieus in which the eparchies are and the different arrangements that they imply. Variety and difference do not mean independence and separation from the one body of the church; otherwise there will be many "maronitisms", and many identities lost and spread around.

In addition, the Maronite Church "sui iuris" is in communion with the Holy See. This communion presupposes on the general church level that pluralism within this unity is an obvious and accepted situation by all. This implies that certain practical decisions are made related to the jurisdiction of the patriarch over the maronites wherever they may be, and to the measures that guarantee the preservation of their church identity.

The Catholic Church recognizes the patriarchal Churches as independently existing entities focuses on the concept of pluralism within unity. These patriarchal Eastern Churches have their own theology, rituals, heritage, regulations and traditions, just like the Latin Church. His Holiness Pope John Paul II expressed this reality by saying in his encyclical letter *Let Them Be One*: "the Church breathes with her two lungs", the Eastern and Western. (Number 54). Therefore, the claim for widening the scope of the patriarchal rule is not a matter of rivalry and division of authority, but one of preserving the Eastern ecclesiastic heritage. The Patriarchal Church is in fact the Mother Church of all Maronite eparchies in the East and in the West. The bond between the Patriarchal Church and the Holy See remains solid and deep-rooted in one ecclesiastic communion, the communion of faith and love. In addition to that, our Eastern Churches implanted where the Latin Church dominates can generate interaction and provoke openness to the Eastern heritage. They can give an example of what the ecumenical movement might attain in the future as to achieving the unity of all Christians within one Church, the Church of Christ, revealed in various ecclesiastic heritages.

Priestly vocations, and education of the clergy

The expansion churches rely in a general way on the mother church in Lebanon to supply her with vocations. However, she must rely on herself to find local vocations. The Maronite church in the United States exerted a great deal of effort in this area. But, the education of the clergy in the maronite tradition requires setting some priorities particularly when the vocations are from different milieus which are sometimes not Maronite. This problem ought to be given special attention in order to tie the clergy with the mother church and with the heritage in a fitting manner.

The knowledge of the heritage and its spreading

There is another important element in consolidating the identity which is constituted of the syro-antiochene heritage as is reflected in its patristic, liturgical, theological, spiritual, canonical and historic aspects. It appears that this heritage, when it is lived, will give the Maronite Church a wide ecclesial dimension, because it will show that the heritage of the Universal Church is not limited to the Latin and Greek writing inspite of their richness. But it includes also the Syriac writings which have their special characteristics and their different approach to the mystery of salvation that still create today a special impression. Hence, the maronites will not have a complex of inferiority toward others, because this church does compare with other churches more numerous and more brilliant with their memorable accomplishments. On the contrary, he can be proud of his heritage; if it is updated it can render service to the man of today on both a theological and spiritual level. The renewed liturgy could be the prelude to this widened service. The studies of the Syriac fathers conducted by Orientalists have shown the importance of this service.

### Continuous Mission

The Maronite Church is ascetic and Maronites love to pray and are affected by the piety of the saints. At the same time, she is the Church of communication bridges and the Church where civilizations meet. The Maronite Church united the Aramaeans of the Syrian interior with the Canaanites of the Lebanese coast and the mountains. She then reconciled the Syriac culture and the Arabic culture. She lived a dialogue with Islam in her daily life, and preserved her eastern identity while in communion with the Roman Church. Thus, she became a bridge between peoples. The Maronite Church contributed to making the Eastern Christian heritage known to the West, and to initiating the dialogue and exchange between the Latin Church, the Maronite Church and all other Eastern Catholic Churches. This special destiny of the Maronite Church enabled her children to hold on to their faith, thanks also to their determination to assure their freedom in the Lebanese mountains. It further enabled them to open channels of communication with every kind of people, wherever they might happen to be.

### Relation with Lebanon

The maronites of expansion have shown in many fields particularly, in the field of literature and art that identity is not closed on itself or prisoner of its past, but, on the contrary, it is open and borrows from every culture in which it lives. It will assimilate what is suitable with the basics of its tradition at least for those who have an objective knowledge of their heritage. Few studies show that the new generations whose fathers and grand fathers were born in the countries of expansion, consider themselves by right that they are citizens of these countries, but do not deny their origin, even if they do not carry the Lebanese citizenship.

Hence, we ought to distinguish between citizenship and ecclesial identity. Many do not wish or cannot carry the Lebanese citizenship because of many reasons on account of the troubles and unrest that pervade Lebanon and the Middle East. However, nobody can deny his church identity that does not diminish of his citizenship. We ought to raise the awareness concerning this fact through widening relationships and communications. However the maronites of the lands of expansion ought to understand that Lebanon where the seat of the patriarchate of the mother church is located and

where the maronites played a leading role in consolidating their national and ecclesial identity, is in need of their support, as they support many other peoples and countries in the world, this support on their on the one they give to human rights and to the auto-determination of peoples. Thus, they will be faithful to history, without denying their present, preserving the identity of a country their forefathers came from, and protecting its presence and its mission in the region surrounding it and in the world.

### The Mutual Support

The Maronite Church will not seek to “Lebanize” the emigrants as if all their achievements in other countries were worthless. The expansion of this Church has shifted the future perspectives to a higher and worldwide level. However, the Maronite presence in the world still needs the Mother Church in Lebanon in order to confirm its identity. When a Western Maronite wishes to consider himself as American or Brazilian rather than as Lebanese, he cannot keep his Maronite identity without communicating with his Maronite Church in Lebanon or having a real sense of belonging to her. Otherwise, we shall have several conceptions of the Maronite identity, which will not be able to survive in a wide cultural and spiritual milieu that easily assimilates minorities. Communication with the Mother Church in Lebanon will motivate all the Maronite eparchies to reaffirm their relation with their origin and preserve their unity. The Patriarchate is the trunk of the tree and all eparchies in countries of expansion are the spreading branches that acquire religious and human values from one source.

Just as all Maronite churches abroad need their Mother Church in Lebanon, the latter is in need of them. Ever since her children started to spread out all over the world, she has become more attached to them, for the Church needs all her children who provide strength and support for her. The separation of any member causes damage to the whole body, and equally any solidarity between members gives immunity to the whole body. The Maronite Church as an entity is no longer a particular Church limited to a certain region of the world: she has become an international Church while keeping hold of her Eastern Syriac heritage.

### Accumulated identity

We have seen that the Maronite Church identity has its constants. However, we should never forget that the maronite church identity in the countries of expansion where it is in continuous contact with other oriental and western churches specially the Latin Church, is influenced by the identities of these churches and benefits from their experiences in the varied areas of church life. It will adopt what suits her development, without the essential elements of its identity. The western liturgical renewal moved the maronite church to adopt the same method. The modern means of conveying knowledge, spreading the Good News, and doing pastoral work could be used by our church. The maronites have shown through history their ability to adopt to new circumstances, despite certain events that occurred called latinization. These events cannot be judged by today's criteria but by past criteria, not in an effort to excuse them, but to understand their causes and ends.

The creative interaction with the varied cultural framework is a proof of vitality, because it is an opening to the work of the spirit and his various gifts in every church that listens to him, and our church is one of these churches that is here and every where, especially our recent patriarchal synod.

### Conclusion

The preservation of the Maronite Church identity after considering its constants and understanding the commitment that it implies which enriched it through the centuries with its contacts with a variety of cultures requires two closely connected positions:

The first position consists of continuing the identification of the elements of this identity through the discovery of this heritage and its spreading and adopting as a necessary authority for consolidating the identity. This requires an ecclesial commitment in which the mother church and the churches of the expansion participate and set a practical plan to implement it with the help of the maronite intellectual and universitarian institutions. Moreover, it is to be clear from the beginning that this position in no way wants be a close one.

The second position is the ecclesial openness and the brotherly mutual assistance between the various eastern and western churches in order that the maronite identity becomes an identity that serves to complete the building of the church that the body of Christ will enable her to carry out her mission in today's world.

The construction of this building requires large and small stones and with size bridges and many other materials. But all of them will contribute to the consolidation of the building and give it a beautiful shape, so it will realize the end for which it was built.

This is the situation of our church if we get together and hold on to our identity for the glory of the Lord and the witnessing of his Gospel.