

**ON THE VIRTUE OF TRUTHFULNESS**

THIS IS

THE TWENTY- FIRST LETTER ADDRESSED BY HIS BEATITUDE AND EMINENCE

**CARDINAL**

**MAR NASRALLAH PETER SFEIR**

**Patriarch of Antioch and All the East**

TO

HIS MARONITE SONS AND DAUGHTERS  
CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND LAITY

**ON THE OCCASION OF GREAT LENT**

**2006**

**PATRIARCH NASRALLAH PETER CARDINAL SFEIR**

WITH THE GRACE OF GOD

PATRIARCH OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST

TO ALL OUR BROTHERS THE BISHOPS, THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF  
OUR CHURCH, CLERGY AND LAITY

Dear Brethren, Sons and Daughters,

Peace and Apostolic Blessing.

It gives us pleasure to address this letter to you, on the occasion of Great Lent, to ask God with you, during the days of this blessed Lent, to supply us with strength to raise verses of thanksgiving, to affirm our faith in Him and His Divine Providence that cares for the greatest and the most exalted of His creation, the same care for the smallest and the least of His creation, as expressed by our Lord Jesus Christ in His Holy Gospel: “Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they?”<sup>1</sup> And, Lent is the acceptable time, as our Lord Jesus Christ says through the Apostle Paul: “In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you. Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”.<sup>2</sup> During Lent souls are refined, bodies are purified, intentions are filtered, and believers dedicate themselves to worship their God in sincerity and an upright conscience. Lent, from of old, has been the most efficacious means of drawing closer to God and to people, with hearts distanced from grudges and hatred, devoid of what alienates it from peace and charity. There are demons as our Lord Jesus Christ said, “But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting”.<sup>3</sup>

We wish to speak to you during Lent this year, about the virtue of truthfulness, one of the virtues preferred by God and by people. For man to be truthful with God, with himself, and with people, is what elevates his standing in the eyes of God, himself and others. This is nothing to be slighted, for lying has become prevalent, and when lying is rampant, chaos befalls. And this is what God has punished people for, as has been quoted at the beginning of Genesis: “The whole world spoke the same language... Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky, and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.’ ‘Let us then go down and there confuse their language, so that one will not understand what another says.’ Thus the LORD scattered them from there all over the earth, and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:26

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 17:21

they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the speech of the entire world. It was from that place that he scattered them all over the earth”.<sup>4</sup>

### FIRST – TRUTHFULNESS TOWARD GOD

God loves truth because He is truthful. Truthfulness is among the first attributes of the Most High. The Apostle Paul says: “What if some were unfaithful? Will their infidelity nullify the fidelity of God? Of course not! God must be true, though every human being is a liar, as it is written: That you may be justified in your words, and conquer when you are judged”.<sup>5</sup> God loves faithfulness, truth and truthfulness, as the Book of Psalms recounts: “The LORD is trustworthy in every word, and faithful in every work”.<sup>6</sup> “Truthfulness is the attribute that the Lord Jesus Christ focused on when He spoke about God, His Heavenly Father, saying: “the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true”.<sup>7</sup> He repeated it a second time for fear they might have misunderstood what He said: “I have much to say about you in condemnation. But the one who sent me is true, and what I heard from him I tell the world”.<sup>8</sup> The Apostle Paul also stressed on this noble attribute of God’s, and said: “As God is faithful, our word to you is not ‘yes’ and ‘no’”.<sup>9</sup> And, if He is trustworthy, He is truthful, not accepting obliqueness, deceit and lying, and this is what the Apostle Paul expressed in his Letter to the Hebrews when he said: “So when God wanted to give the heirs of his promise an even clearer demonstration of the immutability of his purpose, he intervened with an oath, so that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to hold fast to the hope that lies before us”.<sup>10</sup>

Truth and justice are closely interconnected as Pope Pius XII said: “The world is in need of truth which is justice, and justice is truth”. Pope John Paul II commented on this statement by saying: “The justice of God and the law of God are radiations from the Divine Life. However, human justice must also strive to reflect truth, sharing in its glory. Saint Thomas Aquinas says: ‘Justice is sometimes called truth, that is the refulgence of the law...and justice must be exercised in accordance with the truth’, i.e. in accord with a sound mind, that is in accord with the truth. He goes on to say: “The love of truth cannot be translated except with love for justice, and consequently with effort in instilling truth in relations within human society”.<sup>11</sup> “God is the way, the truth and the life” as the Evangelist John, asserts.<sup>12</sup>

The Apostle Paul says: “my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness”...<sup>13</sup> not to act in deceit, and not to pervert the word of God, but rather, to reveal the truth...Rather, we have renounced shameful, hidden things; not acting deceitfully or falsifying the word of God, but

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 11:1-9

<sup>5</sup> Romans 3:3-4

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 145:13

<sup>7</sup> John 7:28

<sup>8</sup> John 8:26

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:18

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 6:17-18

<sup>11</sup> *The Catholic Consolidation* magazine 1994, pp.205-206

<sup>12</sup> John 14:6

<sup>13</sup> Romans 1:9

by the open declaration of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God".<sup>14</sup>

As God is truth and truthfulness, so also is Christ, Son of God, truth and truthfulness, as He ascertained by saying: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth".<sup>15</sup> When He stood before Pontius Pilate, and he asked Him in an overwhelmingly mocking tone: "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice".<sup>16</sup> This is what the Old Testament earlier confirmed, as cited in the Book of Isaiah: "By which he will be blessed on whom a blessing is invoked in the land; He who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth; for the hardships of the past shall be forgotten, and hidden from my eyes".<sup>17</sup>

Since God is truth itself, we must interact with Him in trustworthiness and truth. This is what has displeased the Lord, saying in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Since this people draws near with words only and honors me with their lips alone, though their hearts are far from me, and their reverence for me has become routine observance of the precepts of men".<sup>18</sup> The patience of Christ is not deficient as is hypocrisy and lying, and this is what the Scribes and the Pharisees indulged in with words of fire. So, He said to them: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity. [But] these you should have done, without neglecting the others". They bring shame on themselves for straining out the gnat and swallowing the camel, their cleansing of the outside of cups and dishes, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence. He compared them to whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are rotten and ugly".<sup>19</sup> This means that their inside is other than their outside. They show innocence while in fact they are raving wolves. Are there words with more impact on the ear, in what they contain of reprimand, rebuke and reproof?

If words do not reflect the inner intentions of the consciences, and express the thoughts and feelings with which the human heart is preoccupied, then this is delusion and deception. This is what our Lord Jesus Christ rejected. For He does not go by appearances, especially if they are false. He desires truthfulness and reality, as they are without falsification or distortion. This is why He said in His dear Book: "My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes keep to my ways".<sup>20</sup> The *Summary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "All people are called to transparency and truthfulness in conduct and in utterance. They are also bound to seek the truth and to adhere to it, and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of the truth. In Jesus Christ, the whole of God's truth has been made manifest. He is the Truth. To follow Jesus is to live in the "Spirit of truth" and flee from duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy".<sup>21</sup> This is the precept of the eighth Commandment, which says: "You shall not bear false witness against

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<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:2

<sup>15</sup> John 1:14

<sup>16</sup> John 18:37

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 65:16

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 29:13

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 23:23-29

<sup>20</sup> Proverbs 23:26

<sup>21</sup> *Summary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* no 521

your neighbor”<sup>22</sup>. This commandment forbids misrepresenting the truth in our relations with others. “This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. Offences against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant”,<sup>23</sup> established by God.

## SECOND – TRUTHFULNESS WITH ONESELF

Whoever is not truthful with God is not truthful with himself. If a person thinks he can hide whatever he wishes to hide from the sight of God “who tries hearts and minds”<sup>24</sup>, how can he delude himself to think he is the friend of God? The Vatican II Ecumenical Council declares: “Man tends by nature toward the truth. He is obliged to honor and bear witness to it. “It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons . . . are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of truth”.<sup>25</sup>

When a person ascribes to himself a quality to acquire what he has no right to, when he wears a mask to show others a reality other than his, when he deludes them into thinking he is of high standing, power and might, this is considered devoid of truth, and a deceit that will end up bringing shame and disgrace to the person. Truthfulness with self is the duty of duties that a person owes to himself, prior to it being a duty toward others.

“Truth as uprightness in human action and speech is called truthfulness, sincerity, or candor. Truth or truthfulness is the virtue which consists in showing oneself true in deeds and truthful in words, and in guarding against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy”.<sup>26</sup> The disciple of Christ ought to put “away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another”.<sup>27</sup> “By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others. The deliberate intention of leading a neighbor into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity. The culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray”.<sup>28</sup> It is for a person, especially a believer, to live under the shade of the truth and to witness to it, and this is what our Lord Jesus Christ did when He faced Pontius Pilate, boldly testifying to the truth.<sup>29</sup> A Christian is not ashamed of such a testimony, as the Apostle Paul said, in the second letter to his disciple Timothy: “So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me, a prisoner for his sake”.<sup>30</sup> Witness is an act of justice that establishes the truth or makes it known. “All Christians

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<sup>22</sup> Exodus 20:16

<sup>23</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Para. 2464

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 7:10

<sup>25</sup> *Catechism* Para. 2467

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* Para 2468

<sup>27</sup> Ephesians 4:25

<sup>28</sup> *Catechism* Para. 2485

<sup>29</sup> John 18:37

<sup>30</sup> 2 Timothy 1:8

by the example of their lives and the witness of their word, wherever they live, have an obligation to manifest the new man which they have put on in Baptism and to reveal the power of the Holy Spirit by whom they were strengthened at Confirmation". "Martyrdom is the supreme witness. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude, as Saint Ignatius says: "Let me become the food of the beasts, through whom it will be given me to reach God", and continues saying: "Neither the pleasures of the world nor the Kingdoms of this age will be of any use to me. It is better for me to die in order to unite myself to Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for us; I desire him who rose for us".<sup>31</sup>

After "putting away falsehood",<sup>32</sup> Christ's disciples must rid themselves "of all malice and all deceit, insincerity, envy, and all slander".<sup>33</sup> The vices that oppose truth are many. We will enumerate but a few of them: false witnessing, perjury, miscarriage of justice and slander. All these destroy the reputations of others. All exaggeration in flattery, adulation, or complaisance encouraging and confirming another in malicious acts and perverse conduct, boasting or bragging, the belittling of others, and lying with the intention of deceiving, all these are to be avoided. The Lord denounces lying as the work of the devil: "You are of your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies".<sup>34</sup>

Lying is direct violation against the truth. Whoever lies commits an act against the truth by leading others to fall in the wrongdoing. Lying hurts the relation of man to the truth, that is deformed according to the circumstances, and to the intentions of the liar, and to the harm suffered by its victims. If a lie in itself only constitutes a venial sin, it becomes mortal when it does grave injury to the virtues of justice and charity<sup>35</sup>. This is an offence against truth, and this is what Pope Paul VI explained saying: "The proper procedure for work is complete harmony between the idea and the work". In other words, it requires simplicity of spirit and transparency between the inner conduct and the outer, and truthfulness that transcends, through the light of the Spirit, emotions, the word, the deed, the signs, and all that defines man. St. Thomas speaks of truth lived. When we describe the habits of a person who practices the virtue of truth in his life, we speak of character and of a true personality. The Apostle Paul says: we should be "living the truth in love".<sup>36</sup>

"Truth and love are twins. Socially, they define the ideal man, that is, the Christian, at the highest level, a saint. Socially, boasting of private truth often leads to obstinacy and partiality. Socially, boasting of good deeds originating in human feeling devoid of belief in God, assumes doctrinal indifference making such, unworkable, uncharitable and untrustworthy... Faith

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<sup>31</sup> *Catechism* Paras. 2472, 2473, and 1010, respectively

<sup>32</sup> Ephesians 4:25

<sup>33</sup> 1 Peter 2:1

<sup>34</sup> *Catechism* Paras. 2478-2482

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Para. 2484

<sup>36</sup> Ephesians 4:15

without love can, in human relations, become selfish, and love without faith loses the motivation that produces constancy and heroism”<sup>37</sup>.

By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. It is a profanation of speech, whereas the purpose of speech is to communicate known truth to others. The deliberate intention of leading a neighbor into error by saying things contrary to the truth constitutes a failure in justice and charity. The culpability is greater when the intention of deceiving entails the risk of deadly consequences for those who are led astray.

Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, a lie does real violence to another. It affects his ability to know, which is a condition of every judgment and decision. It contains the seed of discord and all consequent evils. Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships.<sup>38</sup>

## **TRUTHFULNESS WITH OTHERS**

As we have indicated earlier, the task of words is to transmit the truth. Therefore, if words point to other than their meaning or the opposite, this is considered deception and delusion and is offensive to truth and to neighbor, precipitating chaos in society, with people unable to grasp what they are being told. We often witness such chaos in the media where a news item is imparted, renounced, confirmed, commented on, its circumstances cited, and so on, so that the reader is at a loss as to the truth of the matter. This is harming itself. The temperament of truth is such that it rises like the sun. Pope John Paul II said on Media Day, 1988: “In this period of spectacular development in mass communications, the bonds which they weave between peoples and cultures represent the most precious and valuable support that they offer to humanity. I know, at the same time, that you communicators are aware of perverse effects as well, which threaten distortion and disfigurement to these relations between peoples and cultures. Exaltation of the self, contempt for and rejection of those who are different can aggravate tensions and divisions. From such attitudes spring violence, mistaken directions, destruction of true communication; for they render impossible all brotherly relationship.

However, respect for others, a willingness to dialogue, justice, healthy ethics in personal and community living, freedom, equality, peace in unity, promotion of the dignity of the human person, the capacity to share with others, are indispensable values in the role of Media networks. Considering their great influence, there must rest on those responsible for them an ethical imperative, obliging them to offer to persons and communities images which favor the mutual penetration of cultures, without intolerance and without violence, in the service of unity”<sup>39</sup>.

Lying is not limited solely to words; rather it is mostly through assumed stands, the method of conduct, attire, groom and posture, and other methods of disguise and concealment of true self. Every offense committed against justice and truth entails the duty of reparation, even if

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<sup>37</sup> *The Catholic Consolidation* 193, p.203

<sup>38</sup> *Catechism* Paras. 2485, and 2486

<sup>39</sup> *The Catholic Consolidation* 1988, p.298

its author has been forgiven. When it is impossible publicly to make reparation for a wrong, it must be made secretly. If someone who has suffered harm cannot be directly compensated, he must be given moral satisfaction in the name of charity. This duty of reparation also concerns offenses against another's reputation. This reparation, moral and sometimes material, must be evaluated in terms of the extent of the damage inflicted. It obliges in conscience. Saint Augustine talked about the three choices: truth, love and freedom, and they go together. He invited youth to love beauty, and he was madly in love with it, not only bodily beauty which causes one to be oblivious to the beauty of the spirit, and not just the beauty of art, but the beauty of inner virtue, especially the eternal beauty of God, from whom comes all beauty of body, art, virtue. God who is the beauty of all beauty, the root of good of all creation that is good and beautiful, and He is its beauty, its start and its regulator. After renouncing the years that preceded his conversion, he lamented bitterly his delay in coming to love this beauty he calls "ever ancient, ever new". What he desires of youth is for them not to follow him but to love, always and above all, all that is beautiful, and to constantly preserve what their youth has by way of inner radiance".<sup>40</sup>

The faithful are bound to speak the truth and to disseminate it, especially religious truth, as indicated in the Second Vatican Council document, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. "The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ, his Master, ever more fully to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it, never – be it understood – having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to love and have prudence and patience in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith".<sup>41</sup>

"Men could not live with one another if there were not mutual confidence that they were being truthful to one another" The virtue of truthfulness gives another his just due. Truthfulness keeps the balance between what ought to be expressed and what ought to be kept secret: it entails honesty and discretion. In justice, "as a matter of honor, one man owes it to another to manifest the truth",<sup>42</sup> says Saint Thomas Aquinas.

The disciple of Christ consents to "live in the truth," that is, in the simplicity of a life in conformity with the Lord's example, abiding in his truth. "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth".<sup>43</sup> The faithful are to bear witness to the Gospel truth throughout their public and private endeavors, even at the expense of sacrificing their own lives if necessary.

Truth is what frees, saves, and revives. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free".<sup>44</sup> Christ is truth and truthfulness. He is king and His kingdom is freedom. He may not shame us for doing wrong as much as to shame us for remaining in it and persisting with it, which means living a lie, and insisting on one type of pride, and clutching on to our private justice and what we truly fancy for ourselves. This method prevents us from entering into God's plan, even if, outwardly, we are living apparent truthfulness

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<sup>40</sup> *The Catholic Consolidation* 1986, p.843

<sup>41</sup> Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom: Dignitatis Humanae*, No. 14

<sup>42</sup> *Catechism* Para. 2469

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Para. 2470

<sup>44</sup> John 8:32

and professing faith. Jesus Christ is not a banner for a social group, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, that may be used to fight other groups. Those who seek the truth belong to it, whatever their ideas are, and maybe more so than those living it.

Jews believed that the world was divided into two parts: Them, the sons of Abraham, and all the rest. They would take pride in their forefathers, forgetting that with God, every person is who he is.

Jesus gave Himself to them as a witness to the truth, and His very presence forced them into self-examination. The truth that Jesus talked about was not a doctrine imposed upon them forcefully by His disciples. That truth was not in need of promoters armed with arguments and written testimonies, but rather, of witnesses relaying their experiences. Jesus said: “the truth will set you free”, and truthfulness also sets you free.<sup>45</sup>

The believer who knows that God loves him and perseveres in being truthful is already abiding in the truth, even if he retains some of the habits of his environment, even if in the course of his life he is led, unaware, to lies and delusions.

Jesus also talked about freedom. Truth and freedom go together, as aforementioned. Individuals, like nations, save no effort in trying to destroy the binding chains of slavery. As soon as they are free, they quickly fall back into other types of slavery, since the root of slavery is implanted in us.

When we are evildoers we are partners with Satan, falling into his traps, even against our will. Afterwards, it becomes difficult to resist the delusions and bad influences through which the father of lies places the world under his dominion.

For as long as we are engaging life without reflecting on the actual state of our affairs, we are really nothing but slaves even though we have riches, connections and high social standing. We are inflating the ranks of the world from below, always in a temporary manner. There are generations upon generations of slaves that successively come and go like the waves of the sea: slaves remain in the house but for a specified time.<sup>46</sup> As for Christ, He makes us to enter now into another world, a world from above where everything remains.<sup>47</sup> From the moment we become children, everything we do will bring forth fruit for eternal life.

“Before Abraham came to be, I AM”.<sup>48</sup> This is the seventh time that the expression ‘I AM’ appears in chapter eight of John’s Gospel. This time, we take this connotation in its true context, which does not apply, except to God alone, as He revealed Himself to Moses.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> John 8:32, and 36.

<sup>46</sup> John 8:35

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> John 8:58

<sup>49</sup> *The Holy Bible for the congregation*, margin: Truth – Freedom – Sin, p. 208

Saint Thomas Aquinas says: “Truth is the mind brought to perfection”. The truth that we seek, love and defend, that is supposed to be the spirit of every university, because it is the deep life of the human mind.

In the course of his talk on the Catholic University, Pope John Paul II said: “The university must be a ‘living unit’ aimed at seeking truth in the midst of impending danger, namely that it would remain an unconnected grouping of knowledge sectors, ultimately becoming independent. It being so, and when it is so, then it may provide serious professional education, however, it will remain short of its desired goal of providing a rich and all-inclusive humane education...”

It is a must to develop this noble summary, which can quench the thirst for the truth that is engraved deep in the human heart. Saint Augustine says: “To what does the human heart long for more, than for the truth? While all of creation is there without knowing the reason for its existence, man alone, with his mind, searches unceasingly for that reason.”

## **WHERE ARE WE IN TERMS OF TRUTH AND TRUTHFULNESS?**

Truthfulness in utterance and speaking the truth; this is the conventional rule. Deviating from this rule is the corruption of society and the sowing of chaos in the ranks of its children. A society without truth and truthfulness is one on its way to disintegration and dissolution.

Relations between nations, individuals and groupings cannot be cemented unless it is built on a foundation of complete transparency, unveiled truthfulness, and the truth that is uncorrupted by cheating and deceit. Pope John Paul II says: “God alone is the absolute truth. But He opened the human heart to desire truthfulness. It was He who declared it, in its fullness, in His Incarnated Son. Wherever we sow lies and deceit, doubt and division blossom. Corruption and political or doctrinal fraud, fundamentally contradict truthfulness, destroy the foundations of communal living, and upset the possibility of sound social relations”.<sup>50</sup> Is this not our present state of affairs?

However, we are people who believe in God and in His Divine care, and we know, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his first encyclical, *God is Love*, that “the love-story between God and man consists in the very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God's will increasingly coincide: God's will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself. Then self-abandonment to God increases and God becomes our joy”.<sup>51</sup>

His Holiness continues, quoting Saint Augustine: “The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics. A State, which is not governed according to justice,

<sup>50</sup> *The Catholic Consolidation* 1997, p. 33

<sup>51</sup> Pope Benedict XVI encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, No. 17

would be just a bunch of thieves... Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics. The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. But this presupposes an even more radical question: what is justice? The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests".<sup>52</sup>

## **OUR INTERNAL STATE**

If we turn back to our internal state of affairs, what can we possibly see? Do we not see trespasses, violations and perpetrations; and how numerous they are!

How many crimes have been committed around us, yet until now, we do not know who the perpetrators were. Had they been found out and received their penalty after being defamed, others would not have dared to commit what they committed!

How many thefts have taken place in government and non-government establishments, and no one dared to uncover them and disclose the identities of those committing them; and thefts still continue in succession, and perpetrators are made to be unknown!

How many employees are appointed to jobs for which they receive a wage yet do no work, whereas those who have qualifications are cut off from such jobs because they refuse to become slaves of this or that person among the influential!

How many of the youth, bearers of high university degrees who travel abroad to find work, because their country, Lebanon, does not know how to use their capabilities, their knowledge and their readiness to work with fidelity, for officials to come and bring in those inferior to them in capability and scientific credentials, with nothing working for them except their belonging to one or the other of those officials!

How much squandering of the government treasury befalls when those in power form companies that lease government property in ways that transgress the law, at cheap prices, for known motives, whereas they alienate those who are willing to pay the fair price!

How many transgressions of laws are perpetrated by those officials who, as it is said, make black white in return for gratuities without ever batting an eye, or feeling one prick of their conscience, with no control and no accountability!

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<sup>52</sup> *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, No. 28

This is in addition to trading in influence, and turning a blind eye to this group or that, when they refrain from paying their dues to the electricity and water companies and the like, for those who have government connections.

Some newspapers have published that it is the intent of the government to increase taxes on citizens because it is in need of money, whereas the people, *en masse*, suffer from poverty and need. Would it not have been better for it to check the squandering and futile expenditures instead of wearing out the people, already in poverty, with taxes? This is an opportunity for it to prove that it is not the cause of the squandering, but others imposed on the nation.

The time is ripe for those countries who want to help us improve our fiscal conditions, to do so, seeing us lagging in curbing expenditures, seeing the squandering all around us without anybody moving a muscle to put an end to it!

This is at government level. As for relations between individuals and groups, the situation is not better. Often, truth is the prime victim in dealings between us. We do what we did not say, and we say what we did not do. Sometimes, lying is the best means of pleasing, except that it is transient, leaving behind deep wounds, if not to say a buried hatred.

However, despite these enormous breaches of trust, we still believe in our nation and its ability to overcome its affliction, to walk the path of truth and righteousness, if only certain men would work to elevate its esteem, rather than work to improve their own standing and that of those around them, at the expense of the common good.

## EPILOGUE

In concluding this letter, I must remind our Christian brethren and children of what Pope Benedict XVI said in his first encyclical *God is Love* that “union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body”, completely joined in a single existence”<sup>53</sup> ... “to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor or hate him altogether. Saint John’s words should rather be interpreted to mean that love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God”.<sup>54</sup>

We must believe that God is always with us, and His Providence includes us, and this is what the encyclical of His Holiness expressed where it said: “God has made himself visible: in Jesus we are able to see the Father”.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, God made himself visible in a number of ways. In the love-story recounted by the Bible, he comes towards us, he seeks to win our hearts, all the way to the Last Supper, to the piercing of his heart on the Cross, to his appearances after the

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<sup>53</sup> *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, No. 14

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* No. 16

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* No. 17, and John 14:9

Resurrection and to the great deeds by which, through the activity of the Apostles, he guided the nascent Church along its path. Nor has the Lord been absent from subsequent Church history: he encounters us ever anew, in the men and women who reflect his presence, in his word, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. In the Church's liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we feel his presence and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives. He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling, which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has 'loved us first', love can also blossom as a response within us".<sup>56</sup>

There is no one among us who does not realize that Lent is a time of reconciliation with God and others. This reconciliation cannot come to pass except by the cleansing of hearts and initiating forgiveness with others, remembering what our Lord Jesus Christ says: "if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions".<sup>57</sup> We will not keep from you how it distresses us to see our Christian children not presenting themselves as a reminder of the first Christians who set the example of loving one another such that non-Christians used to say about them, as recounted by one of the early Fathers, "See how they love one another".

We place our destiny in the hands of our intercessory mediatrix, the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, who knew across history how to be a compassionate mother to us. We realize that the affection of the mother in her will remain alive, untouched by our weakness. She will spread her wing of protection on you as she spreads it over your parents and your grandparents in this homeland, and she will protect you wherever you may be, East or West, that for her you may remain faithful children, and for her Son Jesus Christ, invigorated disciples, with the love, tranquility and peace that they spread around them.

With this hope, we ask God, through the intercession of Saint Maron, to bless all of you and to direct your path toward goodness and success, embracing you with His consent and blessings.

From Our See in Bkerke, on the fifteenth of February, 2006

Cardinal

Nasrallah Peter Sfeir

Patriarch of Antioch and all the East

We order the reading of this letter on successive Sundays and feast days at Mass after the Holy Gospel.

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<sup>56</sup> *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, No. 17

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 6:15