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BY

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**“THE MARONITE CHURCH AND THE MODERN WORLD: ISSUES AND
CHALLENGES”**

*Your Excellencies,
Clergy and Religious,
Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

I am deeply honored to have been given the opportunity to speak with you this morning about some of the greatest issues and challenges facing the Maronite Church in today's world. The decisive importance of these issues has been fully recognized by the Patriarchal Synod.

Concerns for the preservation and promotion of the mission of the Church in the modern world stand at the heart of Synodal teachings. As a result, the Synod has dedicated an entire document, File Three, which specifically deals with the Church and her role in today's world. This document is distinguished by its preoccupation with every aspect of social dimension, be it cultural, educational, political, economic or technological.

In discussing this very important issue, the Synod adopts two interrelated points of departure. First, in its effort to truly understand and deeply appreciate the conditions and characteristics of the modern age, the Synod's document offers some valuable insights into the various and diverse elements that constitute today's world sociologically, scientifically, and technologically. It is assumed by the Synod's participants that a critical analysis of the modern age would give the Church the necessary tools to effectively proclaim the Christian message to contemporary men and women as she tries to respond

to their broad human and social needs. Second, the Synod puts forward a specifically Christian perspective as to how these major problems arising out of the complex realities of the modern age ought to be resolved.

The Synod's basic assumption is that a more receptive attitude toward the modern age would greatly assist the Maronite Church in its own-self renewal, and that that renewal, in turn, would enable the Maronites to relate themselves more effectively to the rest of the human family. Moreover, the Synod has reached the inevitable conclusion that the modern age and the Church should no longer exhibit hostile attitudes to one another; rather, they must consider themselves dialogue partners in the struggle for real solutions to the general problems of life. Thus, the only option at our disposal today for peaceful coexistence, prosperous, and more just society is dialogue. It goes without saying, therefore, that belief in our common humanity and its final destiny is what makes dialogue a real possibility. I dare say that without the possibility of real and genuine dialogue the future of our world looks very bleak indeed.

What are some of the issues and challenges that the modern age gives rise to; how do they affect the mission of the Maronite Church in today's world; and what kind of policies and programs does the Maronite Church propose are all questions that the Synod has comprehensively treated in its document on the Maronite Church and the modern world. The document contains an extensive list of these issues and challenges—a clear indication of their magnitude and importance. There are eight areas of major concern that the Synod covers: (1) The Maronite Church and Education: General Education and Technical Education; (2) The Maronite Church and Higher Education; (3) The Maronite Church and Culture; (4) The Maronite Church and Politics; (5) The Maronite Church and Social Conditions; (6) The Maronite Church and Economic Conditions; (7) The Maronite Church and Communication; and (8) The Maronite Church and the Land. A separate text is dedicated to each of these issues and challenges.

In the context of a few minutes allocated to my conversation with you this morning, I will limit my remarks to only few issues and challenges. By grouping several topics together, I hope to do justice to the Synod's comprehensive vision for an effective dialogue and cooperation between Church and culture in their common effort at promoting the dignity of life and the preservation of the rights of fundamental human freedoms. In this respect, three issues and challenges are picked out for today's considerations: (1) Dialogue with other religions; (2) Unity and Diversity within the world Maronite Church; and (3) Church and politico-economic conditions. I am

deliberately leaving out the challenge of modern science and ethical relativism because they require technical analysis which is beyond the scope of my presentation.

Of all the issues and challenges that have commanded the attention of the Synod's participants none is more important than the issue of pluralism of cultures and dialogue with other religions.

According to the Synod, the days when the Maronites lived in one unified way of life are long gone. Today the Maronite Church finds herself immersed in many cultures. A careful study of the modern conditions will show that even within the boundaries of a single nation, the Maronite Church maintains immediate and uninterrupted contact with a multiplicity of cultures, religions, and ethnic groups. In acknowledging this reality, the Synod has recognized the need and importance of dialogue aimed at finding that which unites human societies rather than that which divides them.

DIALOGUE WITH ISLAM

The Patriarchal Synod was not slow in perceiving that the changed attitude of Maronites toward the modern condition called for a corresponding shift in their attitude toward the other religions and their adherents. Accordingly, the Synod's documents contain major sections on Moslem-Maronite relationships. Since the Synod, important dialogues have taken place between Moslems and Maronites aimed at fostering a spirit of mutually understanding our common humanity and strengthening our cooperation for justice and peace in the region.

The principle of interreligious dialogue challenges us to develop mature and responsible attitudes. While Christians and Moslems in Lebanon have made significant progress toward peaceful coexistence and accepting the other as other, we still find commentators—driven by political ideologies of hate, division, and subjugation—who like to introduce an antithesis between purity of religion and dialogue, as if dialogue leads to loss of identity.

For Maronites the most obvious application of the Synod's statements on interreligious dialogue calls to mind historical and existential realities which are shared by Christians and Moslems alike. As noted in the Synod's documents, monotheistic belief stands at the heart of both religions. Moreover, the ethical demands of justice and righteousness equally accepted by Jews, Moslems, and Christians should form the foundation of our common understanding of what it means to live in peace with one another. A world based on the principle of tolerance is perfectly congenial with the

Christian and Moslem worldview which calls into being a society that champions human rights, freedom of religion, and the equality of all citizens under the law.

One of the lessons to be learned from this fruitful dialogue with other religions is pluralism and the respect for diversity. In Lebanon and elsewhere in the region many Christians and Moslems still hold a latent attitude of hostility, deeply rooted in ethnic and sectarian violence. We need to deploy special efforts to rise above these negative attitudes, which are contrary to the gospel precept of love and acceptance.

Dialogue with other religions as one the focal points of Synodal deliberations has surely contributed to our understanding of the other as other. The encounter of cultures leads to a better understanding of one's identity. It should not be forgotten that encounter occasions questions about one's personal identity. The experience of pluralism of religions and cultures as related in the Synod's documents has certainly made it easy for the Synod's participants to appreciate the reality of the emerging world Maronite Church.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN THE WORLD MARONITE CHURCH

A careful reading of the Synodal document on Maronite Identity reveals that the greatest achievement of the Patriarchal Synod is to have been the first official self-actualization of the Maronite Church as a world Church. The emergence of the world Maronite Church, as explained in the Synodal documents, marks the end of the period when Maronite identity as a whole could be equated with its expression in the forms of one single culture. We are witnessing the birth of a new multicultural Maronite ecclesiology in which all regional churches are expected to interact, mutually understand and enrich one another.

The Synod calls the Maronite Church to insert herself into the contemporary cultures of six continents: The Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. This insertion is called, in recent literature on the subject, inculturation. Official Catholic teachings have made ample use of this term in dealing with general and specific issues pertaining to faith and culture.

Accepting the basic insights of the Synodal document on Maronite Identity and Tradition, I am going to draw up few principles that should guide our understanding of inculturation and the reality of the World Maronite Church.

The reality of pluralism of cultures and the emerging world Maronite Church lead us to where we started: Unity and Variety.

If the Maronite Church is a single people, it must have something like a common identity, for a community without identity is a formless society. The Maronite Church as a whole must have a system of meanings (tradition), historically transmitted, embodied in symbols, and instilled into her members so that they are inclined to think, judge, and act in characteristic ways. In order to be a Maronite, therefore, it is not sufficient to be inculcated into a basic community, a parish, or an Eparchy. One must be socialized into the universal Maronite Church, with her shared meanings, common symbols, and normative behavior patterns. The worldwide unity of the church cannot be merely abstract; it must be expressed in tangible signs and upheld by overarching structures of unity. Otherwise, the Maronite Church could not remain an historically and socially identifiable community through time and across cultural boundaries.

Since the principles grounding the world Maronite Church call for unity and variety, continuity and change, the applications will frequently be controversial.

If the Maronite identity is to continue in its role as a source of unity and truth, justice and peace, it is important to preserve dialogue among the regional Maronite communities. Dialogue is needed both because each particular Maronite community may have special insights of value to others and because each, being immersed in a particular culture, has its own characteristic blind spots. Each local or regional Maronite community is accountable to its sister churches and to the Patriarchal Office, which presides over the whole assembly. As noted in the Synodal document on Maronite Identity, the Patriarchal Office has a dual responsibility: to protect the Tradition and to be the guarantor of unity in the Maronite Church. Far from becoming less important, the Patriarchal Office takes on greater responsibilities than ever as the new world Maronite Church becomes a reality. The Patriarchate, in the words of the Synod, has been seen as a symbol and agent of unity.

The emergence of the world Maronite Church as depicted in the Synodal documents need not be viewed as a blow to Maronite unity. Diversity is surely needed for the Maronite Church to become vitally implanted in various cultures of the world, but such diversity cannot flourish except within a larger unity and on solid basis of communal identity (tradition).

THE CHURCH AND POLITICO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

While the Synod refused to be drawn into politics for the sake of politics, it has certainly accepted the task of bringing the Christian faith to bear on the most fundamental

challenges of our time—namely, the ideal of a just political system and equitable economic structures for all people. Thus, the Synod has made it clear that it intends to uphold the long standing Catholic tradition of protecting the dignity of the human person. In the introduction to File Three, the keynote is set when it declares: “The Church exists in the world to proclaim a message of hope, love, and peaceful coexistence among all nations”. The statement reflects the basic premise of the Synod that the mission of the Church and social realities are dependent on mutual respect for the rights and freedoms of all. In what follows I shall not engage in a discussion of the socio, economic, and political conditions of countries where Maronites live; rather, my interest is to bring to the fore the basic Synodal teachings on democracy, justice, and freedom. The objective is to establish the right conditions for a lasting peace in Lebanon and throughout the world.

The synod has issued a declaration, which carries with it the force of the great moral tradition of the Christian faith, to the effect that peace and justice, unity and diversity, economic opportunity and equal participation can only be obtained if the dignity of the human person and the rights and freedoms of all citizen are respected and protected under the law.

While the Synod does not endorse any political ideal of government, it is of the conviction that modern forms of democratic societies present the best possible option for the protection and enhancement of fundamental human rights. Furthermore, the Synod goes on to assert that there can be no just political system without a just and equitable economic system. As a result, it is safe to say that democracy can not survive without the support of a free market economy in which equal participation is guaranteed for all citizens. Here in the United States of America democratic traditions have existed for centuries and have certainly been the catalyst of positive change at the individual level as well as at the social level. I do not pretend to be an expert on the realities of American social conditions; henceforth, what I am going to say about the Church and the challenges of politics and economics should be taken to apply to the condition of the Maronite Church in Lebanon.

The development of the ideal of freedom and its translation into the everyday life of the people in Lebanon should be the product of the efforts of many peoples—Christians and Moslems alike. It should be the fruit of vigorous thinking and courageous action. No one religious or ethnic group can claim to be able do all the work necessary to achieve greater dignity for human beings and great freedom to develop human personality. In each Lebanese religious group and in each Lebanese ethnic group there must be a

continuation of the struggle and new steps forward must be taken since this is preeminently a field in which to stand still leads to retreat.

The field of human rights is not one in which compromise on fundamental principles are possible. The work of the Synod on human rights is illustrative. Paraphrasing the Synod's declaration on human rights provides the following principles which should be upheld by all Lebanese as they strive to form a more just and peaceful society.

1. No single religious group or ethnic group within Lebanon should be held, as a people, to be enemy, for all humanity share the common hunger for peace, fellowship, and justice.
2. Lebanon's security and well-being can not be lastingly achieved in isolation but only in effective cooperation with fellow-nations. Furthermore, all Lebanese should be engaged in a process of nation-building based on a shared vision and common values.
3. Lebanon's right to form of government and an economic system of its own choosing is inalienable.
4. Any nation's attempt to dictate to other nations their form of government is indefensible.
5. Lebanon's hope of lasting peace should be firmly based on just relations and honest understanding with all other nations.

The way I see it, it is not going to be easy to attain unanimity with respect to our different concepts of government and human rights. The struggle is bound to be difficult and one in which we must be firm and patient. If we adhere faithfully to our principles I think it is possible for us to maintain freedom and to do so peacefully and without recourse to violence.

The future must see the broadening of human rights throughout Lebanon. Those who have glimpsed freedom will never be content until they have secured it for themselves. In a truest sense, human rights are a fundamental object of law and government in a just society. Human rights exist to the degree that they are respected by people in relations with each other and by governments in relations with their citizens.

Again we say: the hunger for peace is too great, the hour in history too late, for any political group to mock Lebanon's hopes with mere words and promises and gestures. The test of truth is simple. There can be no persuasion but by deeds.

The fruit of success in all these tasks would present the people of Lebanon with the greatest task, and the greatest opportunity, of all. It is this: the dedication of the energies, the resources, and the imaginations of all peaceful people -Christians and Moslems alike- to a new kind of battle. This would be declared total battle, not upon human enemy but upon the forces of poverty and need.

The peace we seek, founded upon decent trust and cooperative efforts among all Lebanese people, can be fortified not by weapons of war but by jobs and economic opportunities, by bread and butter, by decent housing and safe mobility within Lebanon. These are the words that translate into every language and creed on earth. These are needs that challenge the possibility of peace and peaceful coexistence in Lebanon.

This idea of a just and peaceful Lebanon is not new or strange to us. It inspired generations of Lebanese to initiate a civic dialogue about independence in the 1940s.

To give security to Lebanese people, they must be shielded from the two great dangers: violence and subjugation. We all know the frightful disturbances in which the ordinary citizen is plunged when the curse of violence hits. The awful ruin and destruction of Lebanese society, with all its vanished glories, still glares us in the eyes. When the designs of wicked people or the aggressive urge of violent groups dissolve over large areas the frames of peaceful societies, humble people are confronted with difficulties with which they can not cope. For them all is distorted, all is broken, all is lost.

Now I come to the other side of these two dangers which threatens the peaceful home and the ordinary people-namely, subjugation. We cannot be blind to the fact that the freedoms enjoyed by individual citizens in the great nation of the United States of America, are relatively non-existent in Lebanon. In Lebanon control is enforced upon the common people by various kinds of misleading and confusing political discourses meant to manipulate and mislead the population.

All this means that the people of Lebanon have the right, and should have the power by constitutional action, by free unfettered elections, with secret ballot, to choose or change the character or form of government under which they dwell; that freedom of speech, religion, and thought should reign; that courts of justice, independent of the

executive branch, unbiased by any party, should administer laws which have received the broad assent of large majorities or are consecrated by time and custom.

I have now stated the great dangers which menace the homes of peaceful people: violence and subjugation. I have not yet spoken of poverty and privation which are in many cases the prevailing anxiety. But if the dangers of violence and subjugation are removed, there is no doubt that just economic structures and cooperation between the public and private sectors can bring in the next few years to the Lebanese people an expansion of material well-being beyond anything that has yet occurred in Lebanese society. Now, at this sad and breathless moment, many Lebanese people are still plunged in the hunger and distress which are the aftermath of our struggle for justice, justice, and democracy; but this will pass and may pass quickly, and there is no reason which should deny to all Lebanese the inauguration and enjoyment of an age of plenty. There is a proverb which says that there is enough for all. The earth is a generous mother; she will provide in plentiful abundance food for all her children if they will but cultivate her soil in justice and in peace.

Now, while pursuing the method of realizing our overall goal, I come to the crux of what I have traveled here to say: Neither the sure prevention of violence and subjugation, nor the continuous rise of social organization will be gained without what I am inclined to call the free and fraternal association of all Lebanese people. This means a special relationship between Moslems and Christians in Lebanon. Peaceful coexistence between the adherents of these two great religions requires not only the growing friendship and mutual understanding between them, but the continuance of the intimate relationship between their political leaders, leading to common study of potential dangers to peace and prosperity.

I spoke earlier of the responsibility to build peace. Workmen from all religious denominations and ethnic belongings must build that peace. If two of the workmen, Christians and Moslems, know each other particularly well and are old friends, if their families are inter-mingled, and if they have faith in each other's purpose, hope in each other's future and charity towards each other's shortcomings, why can not they work together at the common task as friends and partners? Why cannot they share their ingenuity to increase each other's ability to live in peace? Indeed they must do so or else the temple of peace may not be built in Lebanon, or being built, it may collapse, and we shall all be proved again unteachable and have to go and try to learn again from our painful past. The peace and security of Lebanon requires a new unity from which no religious or ethnic group should be excluded.

Let no power underrate the abiding hunger and desire of the Lebanese people for peace and justice. Because you see the population of Lebanon harassed about their life supply, even in turbulent times, or because they have difficulty in restarting their economy after years of destructive and violent campaigns, do not suppose that the Lebanese people shall not come through these dark moments of privation as they have come through the painful years of agony and defeat, or that few years from now, you will not see the Lebanese people united in defense of their traditions, their way of life and of the human values which honest Christians and Moslems espouse. If the Lebanese Christian population and the Lebanese Moslem population are truly united with all that such cooperation implies in every field of human endeavor, especially in the moral field, there will be no inner division and no outside power that can influence the progress of peace and prosperity. On the contrary there will be an overwhelming assurance of security. If we adhere faithfully to the basic teachings of Islam and Christianity concerning the dignity and freedom of the human person and walk forward in sober strength seeking no one's land or treasure, seeking to lay no arbitrary control upon the thoughts of men and women; if all Lebanese moral and material forces and convictions are joined together in a strong bond of fraternal association, the high roads of the future will be clear for all Lebanese, not only for our time, but for a century to come.

Thank you.