

Homily of Patriarch Bechara Peter Cardinal Rai at Saint Joseph Church, Waterville, Maine, on June 25, 2016

Bishop Gregory,
Archbishop Paul,
Chorbishop Michael,
Father Larry,
Beloved Priests, Deacons, Subdeacons,
Parishioners and friends of Saint Joseph

"He whom God has sent speaks the words of God" (Jn. 3, 36)

I am very happy to visit you, upon the kind invitation of my Brother Bishop Gregory. I thank him for the organization of this visit with his Vicar General Mgr. Michael Thomas. I visit you with Bishop Paul Sayah, my Vicar General, and Attorney Walid Ghayad, head of the media office in the Patriarchate, and with Deacon Simon Nader who came with us from Lebanon. We bring you warm greetings from Lebanon, the spiritual home of the Maronites, along with the hopes and concerns of our peoples in the Middle East, who are passing through historical and very delicate circumstances. For them all we ask for your prayers and support.

Every Saturday in the Maronite Church we pray for and remember our faithful departed. In a special way today, we remember those who worked so diligently to establish a strong Maronite community here in Waterville, and to build such a beautiful Church. This parish has brought forth such wonderful and prominent families, parents, a mayor, a senator, and so many others who have made their mark on society. We pause today to pray for all those who brought us to this day.

Also today, as we commemorate the Feast of the parents of Saint John the Baptist, Zecharia and Elizabeth, we remember our own parents who gave so much to raise and care for us, instilling in us the love of our Maronite heritage, and our deep Catholic faith. This is an opportunity for us in our diocese and in this parish, and all parishes, to strengthen the pastoral care for marriage and the family. Our best guide in that pastoral care is the Apostolic Exhortation issued by Pope Francis on March 19 of last year, entitled "The Joy of Love". It was issued following two sessions for the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2014 and October 2015, dealing with Marriage and the Family in the Church and Society today.

Marriage between man and women is a divine institution elevated by Christ to sacramental level for it to be a means to the presence of God One and Triune in the life of the married couple, so that the grace of God may indwell in them to support, strengthen and sanctify them.

The family, by the grace of this sacrament, has become "a home Church" through which the faith is passed on from one generation to another, where children learn how to pray and live in close relationship with God. And on the social level, the family is the "Basic Unit" of society and "the first natural school" in which are taught the basic moral, social and human values.

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In the Gospel of today, Saint John describes Christ as the Beloved Son whom the Father has sent, and whose testimony is true because he spoke "the words of God". "The Father loves the Son and places all things in his hands". This is the story of a beautiful relationship between Father and Son, one that brings us to recognize the great love that the Father has for all of us, and the big sacrifice Jesus endured for us because of that love.

We are all disciples by the virtue of our Baptism. We are sent to "carry the Word of God to people", and spread the Christian culture that enriches human society with the spiritual, human and social values. This is how we see the importance of the Christian presence in Lebanon and the countries of the Middle East, plagued by wars, a presence that can be revived only through the Word of God.

Father Larry and parishioners, thank you for your outstanding witness to God's love, generation after generation. May God grant eternal rest to all your faithful departed and bless you all in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.