

**GREAT LENT
AN INTERIOR JOURNEY**

SECOND ANNUAL LENTEN MESSAGE

OF HIS BEATITUDE

**CARDINAL BECHARA PETER RAI
PATRIARCH OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST**

Bkerke, 2013

BECHARA PETER RAI
THROUGH THE GRACE OF GOD
PATRIARCH OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST
AND CARDINAL OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

To our brethren their excellencies the bishops, superiors general and mothers superior;
The priests, deacons, monks and nuns; and
The sons and daughters of our Maronite Church
In Lebanon, the Middle East and throughout the world

Peace and Apostolic Blessings

INTRODUCTION

1. Great Lent is a journey, an interior journey toward Easter, through **fasting, prayer and almsgiving**. And these are the three inter-related foundations of the Christian life, which the Lord called for and specified their condition: That they be **an act of worship and love of God**, hidden far from the eyes of people and from pretention.

“But **when you fast**, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you” (*Matthew 6:17-18*).

“But **when you pray**, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (*Matthew 6:6*).

“But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you” (*Matthew 6:3-4*).

2. It pleases me to address this second message to you on the occasion of Great Lent for 2013, as we are in **this Year of Faith** which was launched by Pope Benedict XVI on the 11th of October on the fiftieth anniversary of the inauguration of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, and the twentieth anniversary of the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Furthermore, we are at the initial stage of implementing the **Apostolic Exhortation: *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente (The Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness)***, completing it through the teachings of the Holy Father in the speeches and sermons he gave during his visit to Lebanon from the 14th to the 16th of September, 2012. We are also in the preparatory stage of the New Evangelization concerning which the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops convened in Rome during the preceding month of October. These three ecclesial events impart on the season of Lent an added worth and special meaning.

In this message, we are demonstrating the value of Lent, its interior journey, its ensuing obligations and the ordering of the Service of Charity; after which, we embrace the requirements of the Year of Faith, the commitment to communion, and the witness to charity.

A. THE VALUE OF LENT

3. Fasting is an obligation with all religions and has an important status in religious pursuits, as it requires repentance, asceticism, restitution, and mourning, beseeching God in humility and hope, acknowledging human weakness and divine sublimity.

However, dangers can distort the practice of fasting, emptying it of its value. Of these, we mention the **danger of just going through the motions** and finding sufficiency in doing so, as well as the **danger of continuing on the path of wrong doing and perversion**. Of those practicing such, the Lord says through the Prophet Jeremiah: “They so love to wander that they do not spare their feet...If they fast, I will not listen to their supplication. If they offer holocausts or cereal offerings, I will not accept them” (*Jeremiah 14:10-12*).

Additionally, we mention the danger of pride and pretention whereby fasting becomes a boast, and still within the heart is the hardness of hate and bad intentions, blemished with the works of iniquity. The Lord Jesus denounced the conduct of those who, when they fast, they “look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward” (*Matthew 6:16*).

4. For the sake of avoiding a fall into such dangers, and so that the law of fasting may not lead to corruption and to satisfying the desires of the flesh, the Apostle Saint Paul calls for the **unite the affairs of fasting and abstinence to Christ and to His Mystical Body**, that is, the Church (Refer to *Colossians 2:16-23*). This linkage means entrance into the school of humility, as taught by Jesus Christ: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves” (*Matthew 11:29*). This also means sharing in the redemptive sufferings of Christ for the expiation of our personal sins and those of all people. It also means the prevalence of free will over slavery to whims, trials and perverted inclinations. This linkage requires that we unite **prayer** to the practice of fasting. Prayer makes the practice of fasting and the accompanying asceticism, spiritual offerings and acts of worship which extract their value and power from the Divine Liturgy known as the Sacrifice of the Mass; and, of **almsgiving** through acts of charity toward all in need, be it material, moral or spiritual, such that that person may himself effect a comprehensive growth.

Depriving self of food and drink through **fasting** opens the heart and the mind to the needy; and so, we strive to help them. As for prayer which raises the soul, mind and heart to God, it helps us see the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Prayer and fasting are the foundation of **almsgiving** and the origin of its meaning and value, and they make it as if it is being done for love of God and the person of Christ: “For I was hungry and you gave me food...” (*Matthew 25:35-36*). In that context, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta reiterated, “Whoever does not give God is given little. Charity makes us find God in the face of the merciful Christ, considering that the principal poverty of peoples is the lack of knowledge of Jesus.”

5. Jesus Christ is the basis of our fasting. He fasted for forty days in solitude devoted to prayer. Thus, He overcame the tests of the devil who tempted Him three times to sway Him

from His filial standing with God, His Father, and from the redemptive mission entrusted to Him (*Matthew* 4:1-11). Everything in the life of Jesus is a sign of His Mystery which He reveals to us through His sayings, deeds and miracles. He is the Son of God who took on flesh for our salvation, and has become for us the model to emulate in all things, as the Apostle Peter puts it: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps” (*1 Peter* 2:21).

His **fasting** was preparation for the Mission of Redemption, being filled with the Word of God and a confident entrance into the Father’s salvific design, which made him triumphant over trials and tribulations. Through this, He teaches us the value of fasting and its aim in our lives and responsibilities.

6. Jesus made prayer to the Father support for His fasting, and it is a prayer from the heart, which He learned from Mary, His Mother. It was a filial prayer in which He embraced the will of God, His Father; a prayer of contemplation on the divine Plan of Salvation. The Lord Jesus continued to persevere in prayer to the Father before every decisive action in His mission, imploring inspiration for support and enlightenment; and after executing acts for thanksgiving and praise. He would withdraw into the wilderness in solitude to pray, carrying all of humanity in His prayers and intercessions.¹ During Lent, **all are invited to intensify their prayers**; personal, familial and those communal in the Divine Liturgy.

7. Jesus fortified His fasting by meditating on the Word of God with which he nourished himself while depriving His Body from material sustenance. That is why when the devil tested Him to remove Him from his hunger: “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” And Jesus replied, “It is written: ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God’” (*Matthew* 4:2-4). We are all in need during this period of Lent to be nourished by the Word of God and the teachings of the Church. For this purpose we invite you, sons and daughters of our Church, to read the New Testament daily as well as the sacred books, and to meditate on the Word of God and to indulge in the reading of the spiritual books and the biographies of the saints and to follow up on the religious programs in the Media, in general, and Tele Lumière, Noursat, Charity Radio and Charity TV, in particular. And, more specifically, we invite you to participate in retreats at the parishes, schools, universities and monasteries and to crown these with the Sacrament of Penance.

8. By virtue of His fasting, prayers and nourishment from the Word of God, Jesus was able to overcome the three temptations of the devil through which he tests the world, as John, the Apostle said, “For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world” (*1 John* 2:16). The devil tested Him with fleshly enticements when he tempted Him to change stones into bread, that He may eat and break His fast. As we have seen, He answered him, “One does not live by bread alone.” He tested Him with the enticements of the eye, by showing Him all the kingdoms of the earth, tempting Him by offering to give them to Him without the toil of Redemption and Death on the Cross, if He is to prostrate and worship him. Jesus answered him that it is written: “‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.’” He also tested Him with the pride of life, when he took Him to the Holy City, and made Him stand on the parapet of the temple, tempting

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2099, and 2602

Him with the Word of God itself: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you and ‘with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” But, Jesus rebuffed him saying, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test’” (Refer to *Matthew* 4:1-11).

9. The Church teaches that because of original sin and the sins of humans, the devil gained semi-control over the human person, despite his freedom, and the world fell under the power of the evil one (*1 John* 5:19). Thus, the life of the human person became a violent struggle against the Evil One and the forces of darkness,² a struggle between good and evil; light and darkness. However, by His Passion, Christ saved us from the devil and from sin, and through His resurrection, gave us a new life in the Holy Spirit, and power to vanquish the devil and his wiles through the grace of God.³

In this period of Lent, our fasting, prayers and meditation on the Word of God are a means and an occasion to triumph over the temptations of the devil, which is at the base of all evil in us, in our society and in our world. And so, we bask in the fruits of Redemption and salvation. Toward that end, we invite you to make use of the Sacrament of Penance and to participate in the Liturgy of repentance and reconciliation organized by the parishes, the monasteries and the ecclesiastical institutions. We also invite those involved in disputes to seek reconciliation and to open a new page in togetherness: brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #407, and 409

³ *Ibid* #1707-1708

B. THE OBLIGATION OF FASTING

10. Following the example of Jesus Christ who fasted for forty days in the wilderness (*Matthew* 4:2), and of the Apostles and the members of the fledgling Church (*Acts* 13:2-3), every Christian who has reached the age of seven⁴ is called to abide by the duty of fasting and abstinence.

In her seven commandments, the Holy Church obligates each of her sons and daughters to “**fast Great Lent and the rest of the enjoined fasts, and to abstain from meat every Friday,**” in remembrance of the Passion and Death of Christ for our redemption.⁵ This obligation is confirmed in Canon 882 of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, and is renewed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as a means of perseverance and penance in preparation for participating in the salvific mysteries and achieving their graces, especially, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, thus enabling us to control our instincts and possess the freedom of heart.⁶ The Church also calls for augmenting times of penance, especially during Great Lent, and to participate in retreats at the parishes and in the penance liturgies, in pious visits and in performing the works of mercy and charity on the personal and communal levels.⁷

11. Fasting is abstaining from food and drink, besides water, from midnight to midday. **Abstinence** is abstaining from eating meat and whites (dairy products and eggs) every Friday the year round, except for the period lying between the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany, between the Sundays of the Resurrection and Pentecost, and, during the week before lent; also excepted are when the following feasts falls on a Friday: Christmas, New Year, Epiphany, Peter and Paul, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, Exaltation of the Cross, All Saints Day, the Immaculate Conception and the patron saint of the parish.

Great Lent starts the Monday after the Sunday of the Entrance into Lent, that is, Ash Monday, **and ends** the Saturday before the Sunday of the Resurrection. The faithful are to comply with the requirements of fasting and abstinence, except for Sundays and Saturdays, but, to maintain the fast on Holy Saturday, known as the Saturday of Light. Also, excepted are the feast days falling within Great Lent, namely: Entrance of Christ into the Temple, Saint Maron, Saint John Maron, the Forty Martyrs, Saint Joseph and the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. As for **exemption from the laws of fasting and abstinence**, those benefiting are the sick and the elderly, being content with minimum intake for the medication. As for those who cannot fast for grave reason, they are to obtain permission from the local ecclesial authority and seek the counsel of the parish priest and the spiritual director in the matter, and, a method for a compensation.

We take this opportunity to remind you of the commendable pious custom ratified by the first ecumenical councils and recommended by the Lebanese Council and safeguarded by our Fathers and ancestors, specifically: the **Fast of the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ**, from December 16 to 24; the **Fast of Saints Peter and Paul**, from June 25 to 28; and, the Fast of the Assumption of

⁴ Personal Status Laws of the Catholic Churches Article 17/2

⁵ The fourth Precept (of the Church) CCC #2043

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2043, and 1387

⁷ *Ibid* #1438

the Blessed Virgin, from August 7 to 14. We invite participation in this laudable spiritual custom for peace in Lebanon and our Middle Eastern region.

C. FAST OF THE JOURNEY WITHIN

12. Great Lent is an interior journey, in the company of Christ, the welling spring of mercy, toward the awesome joy, the joy of Easter, which the Divine Redeemer traveled, through His Death and Resurrection, into a new life, the life of God in us. It is a journey of traversal, as in a ship, across the sea of tribulation, trial and crises, toward the harbor of salvation. This journey within lasts for six weeks reaching the harbor of salvation on the eve of Palm Sunday, then persistently through the Passion Week: the redemption and salvation week; culminating in the dawning of the Resurrection.

13. This interior journey starts with **the first sign performed by Jesus in changing water into excellent wine** at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (*John 2:1-11*), in which He inaugurated the Christian era, an era of joy, conversion and journey to what is better in personal and communal life, and at all levels: human, economic, social and political. With this sign, He has anticipated the changing of wine into His blood, for the redemption of the world in His salvific wedding, for the forgiveness of sins and a new life.

14. Its first station is the sign of the **Healing of the Leper** (*Mark 1:40-45*), a sign of freedom from the leprosy of the soul, which is sin. As leprosy disfigures the human body, so does sin distort the beauty of the Image of God, inclining the mind toward falsehood, the will toward evil and the heart toward malice and hatred. Through Jesus' might and the strength of his faith, the leper found remedy, thus allowing his return to the life of communion with the community, through the service of the priest.

15. The second station is the sign of the **Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman** (*Luke 8:43-48*), symbolizing the hemorrhage of spiritual, moral and social values; hemorrhage of the disintegration of love, respect and cooperation. By the merits of her faith and hope, the woman obtained what she desired through a torrent of Christ's love. We also, through faith, hope and the healing grace of Christ, are able to traverse from a state of hemorrhage of values and praiseworthy traditions, to reconstitute a conjugal, familial, social and national life, where the bonds of charity and humane spirit and relations of love and friendship prevail.

16. In the third station (the parable of the Prodigal Son), there is a **tutorial pause with Christ**, the Divine Teacher, **on the concept of sin, repentance and reconciliation**. For, sin in essence is attachment to self and the riches of the world, and forgetfulness of God and the severance of the communion of union with Him. It is consequently an **offence against God** through violation of His will, His commandments and His teachings. It is an **offence against the human person** through infringement on his right to life or his body, soul, dignity or possessions. It is an **offence toward the Church** through violation of her sanctity and lack of commitment to her life and mission, and transgressing against the unity of the community, and of peace within her and the law of fraternal charity and solidarity. Thus, the result of sin is spiritual, moral and human poverty, living in humiliation and loss of personal dignity (*Luke 15:12-16*).

Repentance is a conscientious stance whereby the human person returns to self and stands before his conscience, which is the voice of God in his depths, beholding the state of affairs of his life, his relationship with God, with self, the Church and the familial, social and national community to which he belongs, all in the light of the teaching of the Gospel and the Church. Thus, he becomes aware of his abnormal state, repents and decides to return to God, confesses his sins to a priest and commits to rectifying his life and effects restitution for his offences (*Luke 15:17-21*).

As for reconciliation, it comes from the fatherhood of God, who is rich in mercy, Who precedes in moving the penitent heart and conscience leading it to repentance. When the penitent returns to God, God Himself initiates with forgiveness, releasing the penitent from all his transgressions, enfolding him with His paternal affection, clothing him with the robe of grace instead of that of disgrace, renewing the covenant of His love in place of his treachery. He opens a new path for him, instead of that of perdition, and, He seats him at the table of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Redeemer, to receive the divine life instead of straying (Refer to *Luke 15:17-24*). God reconciled us to Himself in Christ, and He gave us the service of reconciliation. So, we are ambassadors for Christ inviting in His name: “Be reconciled to God” (*2 Corinthians 5:19-20*).

17. In the fourth station, in the sign of the **Healing of the Paralytic** (*Mark 2:1-12*), Jesus revealed that He is the physician of souls and bodies, which are paralyzed because of the state of sin in man. Only Christ can raise persons and communities from their spiritual, moral, social and national paralysis, transforming them into a new creation. For, He Himself said in John’s Revelation: “Behold, I make all things new” (*Revelation 21:5*). The Apostle Paul experienced the realization of Christ’s promise in him and testified: “So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” (*2 Corinthians 5:17*).

18. In the fifth station, in the sign of the **Healing of the Blind Man** (*Mark 10:46-52*), Jesus is the light of the world (*John 8:12*); the Light of hearts and minds, inviting us to follow Him that we may not walk in darkness (Refer to *John 8:12*). With this inner light, the Blind Man of Jericho “saw” that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, Son of David, Bearer of Divine Mercy and Giver of light to the world, “...he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.’” And when He asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to Him, “Master, I want to see.” And when Jesus gave him sight in both eyes, He proved that the blind man saw with his heart and mind, and this is true sight. As for the true blind, he is blind of heart, mind and conscience.

19. Arriving at the harbor on Palm Sunday is the triumph of Christ over the temptations of Satan at the end of His forty day fast: “He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. The tempter approached...When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time” (*Matthew 4:2-3*, and *Luke 4:13*). This is also a celebration of the royal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, where, in the evening, the entry into the Passion Week starts in remembrance of the redemption of mankind and the salvation of the world. From over the Cross, Jesus Christ reigns over creation. The Kingship of Jesus, in which He made us co-sharers in through Baptism and Chrismation, is **His Death and Resurrection** for the redemption of the world and its resurgence to new life, for, “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (*John 12:24*). The Kingship of Christ is characterized by the **greatest love**; that of lay down one’s life for one’s friends

(Refer to *John* 15:13); by **gentleness, humility and peace** (Refer to *John* 12:15); by the **worship of God in spirit and truth** (Refer to *John* 4:24); and, by **mercy and healing** (Refer to *Matthew* 12:12-13).

D. THE SERVICE OF CHARITY

20. Almsgiving, known as the **Service of Charity**, is the third basic element of the Christian life after prayer and fasting. On November 11, 2012, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI addressed an Apostolic Letter, issued *Motu Proprio*, under the title of *Intima Ecclesiae Natura* (On the Service of Charity), in which he laid out the legal principles for regulating the Service of Charity. We hereby summarize the contents of this Apostolic Letter:

Three tasks express the nature of the Church in her life and mission. They are: Propagating the Word of God (*Kerygma* – proclamation), celebrating the Liturgy (*Leitourgia*), and the Service of Charity (*Diakonia*). These are tasks that are interrelated, integrated and inseparable one from the others.

21. The Service of Charity is a **constituent element** of the mission of the Church, expressing its essence. She cannot relinquish this service, because it is incorporated in Jesus Christ’s new commandment: “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you” (*John* 15:12). Each and every believer has the right and duty to personally commit to live this commandment, that one may offer another material aid, care and spiritual and moral support. These two: the right and the duty, also encompass Christian groups, local churches and the Universal Church. Therefore, it is imperative to lay down regulations for the Service of Charity.

Primary responsibility for regulating and exercising the Service of Charity lies with the **bishop of the eparchy** in his capacity as the successor of the Apostles. For this purpose this *Motu Proprio* has laid down rules for this canonical organization. The Holy Father warns against restricting the Service of Charity to collecting and disbursing aid, especially in the ecclesial organizations, calling for the love and care of the needy person and to respect that person’s dignity and have regard for his feelings, all with a spirit of sharing, in accordance with the logic of the Gospel. Regulating the Service of Charity is not to be restricted to the benevolent ecclesial establishments only. It should also encompass initiatives conducted by individuals from among the faithful or other apostolic movements and organizations.

22. After this introduction, the Holy Father lays down in his *Motu Proprio* **fifteen regulating articles** touching on:

The right of the faithful and the monastic orders to erect establishments concerned with the Service of Charity, and endowments to finance benevolent charity initiatives, provided the erected establishments abide by the ecclesial stipulations drawn and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Article 1). It is also required that special rules be drawn up for the endowments and the establishments, procuring the approval of the appropriate ecclesial authority (Articles 2, and 3).

The bishop of the eparchy is to provide pastoral care for the Service of Charity in his eparchy. He is to encourage the initiatives and the activities concerned with the service of the neighbor and its support and to consolidate zeal for the Service of Charity amongst the faithful as expression of the Christian life and participation in the mission of the Church. He is to be devoted to the administration of the benevolent organizations and the initiatives of the individuals such that they harmonize with the ecclesial regulations and the grants of the benevolent and their intentions, and abide by the regulations of civil law. It is his duty to establish an office to coordinate between the initiatives of the Service of Charity and the benevolent organizations, taking into account their goals and their administrative independence (Articles 4,5,6, and 8).

The bishop of the eparchy is to attend to the theological and pastoral formation of those engaged in the Service of Charity in addition to their professional formation (Article 7). There is a requirement to create an organ for Caritas, or something similar, in every parish to educate on the genuine spirit of sharing and love, provided the parish priest assumes control of the running of this organ and on the other initiatives in this domain (Article 9).

It is for the bishop of the eparchy to take charge of the funds of the charitable organizations which are under his control, whereby, they are invested for the purposes for which they were donated, all in the evangelical spirit. He is “to ensure that these charitable agencies do not accept contributions for initiatives whose ends, or the means used to pursue them, are not in conformity with the Church’s teaching” (Article 10). He has the right to remove the name of ‘Catholic’ off any organization that does not conform to the teachings of the teaching authority of the Church (Article 11).

Necessity dictates organizing the Service of Charity on the national level through cooperation between members of the assemblage of eparchial bishops, and on an **international level** through the counsel of the Holy See (Article 12). Nonetheless, the necessity to procure the approval of the local ecclesial authority remains for all the activities undertaken by Catholic organizations in its eparchy (Article 13).

The Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* (One Heart) is to attend to fostering implementation of these principles taking into consideration the competency of the departments of the concerned See. One of the competencies of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* is to erect organizations of the Service of Charity on the international level, and regulate them as required (Article 15).

E. THE YEAR OF FAITH

23. The Year of Faith, which started on **October** 11, 2012, and will end on November 24, 2013, invites us to delve deeper and deeper into our Christian Faith and to arrive at a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the originator of our Faith and our Way to the Father through the Holy Spirit.

We have established a committee to draft the program for the Year of Faith. The draft was submitted to the Council of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Lebanon in its last December meeting.

Since the goal of this Year is to **rediscover the path of faith for reviving the joy of encountering Christ and zeal to witness to Him and to His love**, we invite our eparchies, parishes, monasteries, seminaries, theological formation colleges, educational institutions, apostolic organizations, family groups, Christian families and youth movements, to undertake initiatives to teach the principles of our Christian Faith emanating from the God of our Faith, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God and the Axis of human history.

It is unavoidable that emphasis should be placed on reading the Holy Bible, especially, **reading the Gospel of St. Luke** to shed light on the mysteries of love and mercy in the person of Jesus Christ; **and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles** for entry into the journey of the mystery of the Church.

24. The Year of Faith requires us to delve into the fundamental Christian doctrines, particularly, the mysteries of the Most Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, Redemption and Sanctification, as well as in the Seven Salvific Mysteries of the Church, the Commandments of God and the moral life. For this purpose, various means are to be employed, such as, publications, sermons, evangelical seminars, symposiums, conferences, retreats, personal reading, Media programs, Internet publishing, pious pilgrimages, prayer processions and contemplation at shrines and religious sights, giving them the title: *Our Faith, a Way of Life*.

Of prime importance is the organizing of formation seminars concerned with Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist, to be prepared and arranged with those requesting them, along with their parents and godparents; the insertion of doctrines of the Christian Faith into the programs of Marriage Preparation Centers, Familial Help Centers, in the preparation for the liturgical marriage celebration, and in pastoral service for the sick at hospitals, homes for the elderly and for those with special needs. At the level of the schools, we call for organizing national competitions focused on the Faith, its mysteries and doctrines through word, drawing, poetry and theater. At the level of eparchies and the Church in general, we call for the organizing of Faith Days for all categories of the faithful.

The period of Great Lent offers the framework for **launching the Year of Faith**. We are quite certain that this will contribute greatly to the dawning of a real new Christian and Arab Spring in the countries of the Middle East.

25. The Year of Faith gains **new horizons** offered by the Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (**On the Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness**). For our Christian Faith is **made manifest in communion** inside each church, among the Catholic Churches and with the rest of our Christian brethren from all the different churches. It is a communion of life, dialogue and cooperation, which extends to our Muslim brethren and believers of other religions, in accordance with the guidelines of this Apostolic Exhortation. Our Christian Faith is embodied in witnessing to love, brotherhood and peace through conduct and initiatives, and through our social, educational and health institutions in all sectors decreed by the Apostolic Exhortation. We call on you to delve into its contents and to work for its implementation through organized programs, conscious that the Holy Spirit speaks through it to the Church in the Middle East, guiding her steps in these difficult circumstances that she lives through in the Middle East.

EPILOGUE

26. We raise our eyes to our Mother and our Lady, the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Star of the New Evangelization, radiating from this East. Let us emulate the mystery of her full union with the most Holy Trinity, where she has become, by Divine Providence, Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son and Spouse of the Holy Spirit. Let us ask her to guide our steps, in this blessed Lent and this Year of Faith, toward her Son, Redeemer of humanity and Savior of the world, hoping to traverse, through the grace of His Death and Resurrection, to a new life; and for our nations in the Middle East to traverse to the harbor of the lasting and just peace, in glorification of the One Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.

From our See in Bkerke, on the 2nd of February, 2013, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

CARDINAL BECHARA PETER RAI

PATRIARCH OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST

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