

ON LOVE OF COUNTRY

THIS IS

THE TWENTY SECOND 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

2007

CARDINAL MAR NASRALLAH PETER SFEIR
WITH THE GRACE OF GOD
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

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

Dear Brethren, Sons and Daughters,

Peace and the Apostolic blessing.

It gives us pleasure to address this traditional message to you, at the onset of this Blessed Lent, as it is the acceptable time when God is pleased with fasting, prayer and almsgiving of His faithful more than any other time, because they habitually flock to His Majesty with contrite hearts, fragrant souls and a will seeking to abide by His Most High's will and to listen to His inspiration and direction. Fasting helps the soul empty it self, to be filled with the teachings of God, and put it into practice. Saint John Chrysostom praised Lent in a style abundant in poetry and objectivity when he said, "It is the spring of souls", explaining the reason why by saying:

"Spring is all magic to sailors and farmers. However, neither the sailors nor the farmers find so much magic in the spring as do those who seek wisdom. At the time of Lent, which is the spiritual spring of souls, graced is the soul that contemplates in true serenity".

"Spring enchants farmers because they behold the earth crowned with flowers and colored garments which aged plants shed on them. Spring enchants sailors as they fearlessly roam the seas, when waves calm down and whales dive while performing serenely alongside the boat". He moves on from this portrait to say, "With respect to us, the spring of fasting enchants us because it calms the waves; not the waves, but the roaring waves of desires, and because it gains for us, not crowns of roses, but the crowns of spiritual graces"¹. This is how the saints saw Lent and embraced it as best they could.

The days in which live we know that many Lebanese are assailed by dire need to the extent of not being able to secure their daily bread. If Lent is a time of austerity and subjecting the soul to rigor, it is also a time for charity, a time of hastening to aid the poor and sharing with him the daily bread, as the Holy Bible states in the course of speaking of the righteous, describing him thus: "if he oppresses no one, gives back the pledge received for a debt, commits no robbery; if he gives food to the hungry and clothes the naked; if he does not lend at interest nor exact usury; if he holds off from evil-doing, judges fairly between a man and his opponent; if he lives by my statutes and is careful to observe my ordinances, that man is virtuous--he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD"².

Considering the agitations that have been taking place in Lebanon the past two months, with economic activity paralyzed, causing enormous disarray in social life and the injection of new behavior foreign to it, we saw it fit to address you this year concerning a subject we are perhaps most in need of considering in its correct perspective, encompassing all its facets, fathoming it completely, acting in accordance with its demands, that we may emerge from this vortex spinning us incessantly without halting at any one state of affairs nor settling at what may give the soul a repose and restore tranquility when it is in most need of it.

The subject of our talk this year is: “Love of Country”, and what this imposes in duties sacrifices, equality between the children of the one country, and what it requires in abiding by the law with diligent effort aimed at elevating the esteem of the nation. For that, we need to go back to the teachings of the Church, the Fathers and the Councils, especially the Second Vatican Council and the Maronite Synod. The best expression of love of country is what was said by the president of one of the great nations: “Look not at what your country can do for you, but at what you can do for your country”.

We ask God to inspire us to follow the path of normalcy, that we may know how to preserve our nation, and to be worthy of a unique nation among nations.

What is a Nation?

We wonder: What is a nation? It is, according to one of the dictionaries, a political group of people living on one land drawn together by the feeling of belonging to it, and to one specific cultural and linguistic group. The nation is the place where this group abides and its individuals relate to. The sons and daughters of this nation are bound to it through its land, sky, mountains, canyons, valleys and seas, in addition to its history, culture, language and all that which have any connection to it.

The Second Vatican Council noted in its Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World) that: “Citizens must cultivate a generous and loyal spirit of patriotism, but without being narrow-minded. This means that they will always direct their attention to the good of the whole human family, united by the different ties which bind together races, people and nations”.

It adds: “All Christians must be aware of their own specific vocation within the political community. It is up to them to give an example through their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good. In this way they are to demonstrate concretely how authority can be compatible with freedom, personal initiative with the solidarity of the whole social organism, and the advantages of unity with fruitful diversity. They must recognize the legitimacy of different opinions with regard to temporal solutions, and respect citizens, who, even as a group, defend their points of view by honest methods. Political parties, for their part, must promote those things which in their judgment are required for the common good; it is never allowable to give their interests priority over the common good”³.

These are the teachings of the Council. Where are we with respect to it? Have we given the good example in fostering the meaning of responsibility and shown zeal for the sake of the common good? Have we proved through our actions that we are trying to reconcile between freedom and authority? Between personal initiatives and the solidarity and requirements of the social body? Have we recognized the legitimacy of the opinions of others even if they contradict ours? Have we given preference for the common good over our own personal welfare?

Do We Really have a Nation?

This question might seem strange. However, invariably, we act as if we no longer have a nation to return to, to recall its history, to be proud of, to defend, to sacrifice hearts and lives for it, as did the fathers and forefathers. For many people, ease of emigration and moving about between countries has perhaps weakened the concept of the homeland and what draws people to it. There is a saying used mostly by shallow people: "Poverty in the homeland is estrangement, and riches in strange lands are a homeland". Thus, reducing the homeland only to that place where tranquility, in their day and the morrow, lies.

There are also some who claim that attachment to country raises barriers between peoples instilling animosity instead of support for one another. They speak of a global citizenry. This is a gross error entailing grave consequences, because the human person remains natural disposed to the culture in which he is exposed to in his country of origin, especially so in his family environment. Others say that at least two spheres can foster the concept of patriotism in the minds of citizens, namely, the economy and sports. Politicians in authority often place the national concern above economic considerations. On the other hand, the youth and sports fans often enthusiastically raise their country's flag when they win a sports tournament. One of the great intellectuals once said, "A country is not an abstract or fanaticism. It is the country that permits each one to assume and assure the indispensable first link between the family, which is the fundamental cell, and all the human community in the defined latitude of a people or a nation...and being attached to country does not emanate from a mania or a ferocious egoism. This is not an altogether fragile and sometimes blind sentiment, but, rather, it is an act of steadfast collective responsibility"⁴.

After the home, it is the school that endears the nation to children, the adults of tomorrow. It has to instill in them what General De Gaulle once said: "Patriotism is the love of one's country. Nationalism is the hate of those of others". After the school, we find the Army and Justice, and both of them help implant the concept of patriotism in the minds.

On the family lies the burden of responsibility for instilling love of country in their children. The family and the nation occupy the middle ground situated between the individual and the human community. They are both on the receiving end of the arrows of criticism. Individualism and seclusion place the future of humanity in jeopardy; more so than the sound gathering of families and peoples. There is nothing like the family to curb children from vagrancy, estrangement and drifting into grave sin.

Christians bear a specific responsibility in this domain. They are citizens yet members of the Church which goes beyond national borders. Patriotism has never been a barrier against interconnecting with others. Every dialogue presumes knowledge of the other involved in the dialogue. The Church is the best, in bringing peoples closer together. She encourages understanding between the citizens of a country. She calls upon her sons and daughters, at all levels, to build the international community. Aside from that, the Church extends a support to the nation peculiar to her, and that is prayer, which is a profound response to what has been ingrained in our souls, our faith in God. Let us say, "O Lord, safeguard our country and answer us the day we beseech you"⁵.

How do We Prove our Love of Country

Love is not in word but in deed. Saint John said, “For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome”⁶. Love of country also is built on performing material and personal service for the state; the services that the public good demands, which are part of the civic duties. This is the duty of Christians, as was mentioned in Decree *Ad Gentes* (On the Mission Activity of the Church): “This congregation of the faithful, endowed with the riches of its own nation’s culture, should be deeply rooted in the people. Let families flourish which are imbued with the spirit of the Gospel and let them be assisted by good schools; let associations and groups be organized by means of which the lay apostolate will be able to permeate the whole of society with the spirit of the Gospel. Lastly, let charity shine out between Catholics of different rites”⁷.

Those who love their country must burst forth for the sake of the nation fulfilling their civic duties in a trustworthy manner, as mentioned in Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (On the Apostolate of the Laity) of the Second Vatican Council: “In loyalty to their country and in faithful fulfillment of their civic obligations, Catholics should feel themselves obliged to promote the true common good. Thus they should make the weight of their opinion felt in order that the civil authority may act with justice and that legislation may conform to moral precepts and the common good. Catholics skilled in public affairs and adequately enlightened in faith and Christian doctrine should not refuse to administer public affairs since by doing this in a worthy manner they can both further the common good and at the same time prepare the way for the Gospel”⁸.

Previously, Pope Paul VI warned in 1975 as to the obligation of working for peace by saying, “We must congratulate those working in the service of justice and peace, for the benefit of the weak, encouraging them and for the common good. However, we all have the impression that these noble and sublime goals require an effective and coordinated example in order to breathe power into it. Each thinks for himself. Each wants his own interest attained expeditiously. What we really lack is a democracy that is truly brotherly, respecting the needs and rights of others. What we often lack is respect for the authority with liberality and integrity. This would provide the opportunity to resort to reasonable means leading to gradual reform. It is because collective selfishness stands erect facing us. In a word, what we need is the love that gives; it gives of itself, it forgives and redeems. And what we need is the love that Christ our Lord taught us, of which He made an imposed duty, and which He rendered possible for us. Yes, love”⁹.

Yes, selfishness, whether individual or collective, aims at destroying, not building, at separating, not bringing together. It is the worst of ailments.

Love of the Country Love of the Land

There is no country without known borders, ending where the border of another begins. Invariably, these borders are mostly land, even if sometimes they intertwine with maritime and river borders. The land of a country is the land from which the resident people get their sustenance from its produce, trees, products, animals and fish from its seas and rivers. It is the

land that embraces the remains of the hundreds of its deceased citizens who formed its history and lived its events, its victories and its defeats.

The Maronite Synod paused on the need to preserve the land of the nation, relying on the theological and historical constants. What it said in this respect, after indicating what the Holy Bible mentions concerning clinging to the land: “After the Divine Incarnation, the land assumed a redemptive value. Therefore, it must be taken care of, protected and respected, because it is no longer the land of man only, rather, it has become the land of the Divine Incarnation. This theological concept of the land has become deeply rooted in the depths of the Maronite soul as we learn from the prayers of the Church and the writings of our Fathers the saints...For the land is a gift from God...It becomes in the eyes of the Maronites an expanse for free dignified living, and an authentic witnessing to Christ and the healthy humanitarian interaction with the rest of the people¹⁰. It is the creator of the historical, social and political identity, and it is a national and a collective heritage”.

Those who relinquish their land through its sale, especially to non-Lebanese, are actually violating the sanctity of the nation through the seepage of what it carries of values lived by those of good ancestry who passed over it before and are now lying in its folds in hope of the blessed Resurrection. The Maronite Synod calls on the Lebanese to preserve their land and appeals to the government to be aware of its importance, to help farmers till it profit from it and make use of its yield and fruit.

This is what authentic patriotism demands and that is “organized love for family and home which extend to the borders drawn through a common history”.

“The nation has two dimensions: presence in scope and continuity in time. These two dimensions are expressed through solidarity, because we are in solidarity, in wealth and in burdens, and in what expresses honesty and contemptibility (and shunning the latter), victories and collective catastrophes, language and feeling, traditions, and the method of existence which distinguishes us”.

“Love of nation means accepting all as part of its collective heritage, just as a person accepts his parents and respects them despite recognizing their shortcomings and mistakes, and as he accepts the home in which he first saw the light in and respects it despite it’s being poor and lowly”.

“If patriotism assumes man’s knowledge of his special historical traditions” (then this must appear in curriculum history books). “Without doubt there is no history without a shadow, and there is no personal history detached from the history of others. However, without forgetting that, we believe that the history of the country we belong to presents many examples on moral and civic virtues, and this constitutes a valuable heritage supplying the history of education and culture, negligence in the passing on of this to upcoming generations, is to be considered collective impoverishment”.

“With respect to the Christian, even the non-Christian, without being afraid to fall into error, Jesus Christ was patriotic in the correct positive sense of the word. In the Gospel are indications that He loved His despised, ill treated, little nation of His time. Jesus desired to live in it and share in its destiny, its tribulations and what it received in degradation”¹¹.

The land of the country is like the homeland, a mother that must be loved, either rich or poor. It is the nourishing land that stores the treasures of history. It has witnessed its events, accompanied its mountains, has left its mark on all who saw the light on it, and embraced them to its bosom in the evening twilight of their years, so that the successors may speak of how the predecessors weave history in their lives.

Love of Citizens

In vain do we love the homeland if we do not love the citizens living in it, residing on its land and being nourished by its yield. They are our partners in the homeland, sharing together the sweetness of life as well as its bitterness. Together we write the history of the nation that embraces us. Love is the *Alpha* and the *Omega* in the Christian religion. If we wish to erase the word 'love' from the Gospel, as one of fame explained, all that remains would be little pieces of paper with no value. The Gospel talked at length on the love of the Father for His Son Jesus, the love of Jesus for His Father the love of Jesus for people, the duty of people to love God the Father, the love of the disciples for Jesus, and the love of the disciples for each other and even their enemies. Did He not say, when one of the scholars of the law asked Him one day: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus answered him: "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He said in reply, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." He replied to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise"¹².

Probably, the most difficult thing in the Gospel is His saying about love of enemy, contrary to what was recounted in the Old Testament calling for the love of those who love us and hate of the enemy. This is what Jesus revoked, uttering that which souls would not accept willingly, if not rejecting it completely.

The love of citizens obligates those at odds to reconcile. This is what our Lord Jesus stressed, saying, "If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector". He added saying, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"¹³.

What we have witnessed in these last days on the stage of political life in Lebanon, and specifically between Christians, indicates that we are still a long way from the teachings of Christ who said, “For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest”¹⁴. He also said, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as ‘Benefactors’; but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant”¹⁵. However, here we are competing for a mirage, harboring enmity over the wreckage, fighting over illusions, as if we are living in another world that has no bearing on the lived reality. We have become what we are not. We have been following our instincts and have succumbed to the dictates of our imagination, as if we have gone back twenty years to witness the very same scenes, the very same alignments and the very same hurling that does not change or transform. In vain they died were martyred, and emigrated. It is as if time froze and the orbit did not make its regular turn. Here we are always in the right and those opposing us are in the wrong, even though they are our brethren in the homeland, in religion and in our outlook to the future.

Despite all this, we claim to be the best of people, in character, civility and good dealings. It has also escaped us that in the realm of striving for forgiveness and reconciliation, and diffusing love and peace, we ought to be the model and the exemplar. Not in vain did Christ the Lord say, “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?... You are the light of the world...Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father”¹⁶. These are fundamental issues in the Christian message. This is what Christ our Lord stressed upon again and again. So as not to forget what He taught in the domain of reconciliation and forgiveness, He has left it for us in the very concise expression of the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”¹⁷, as if He linked *His* forgiveness of our trespasses to *our* forgiveness of those who have trespassed against us.

In a message from the Bishops of Portugal to their sons and daughters forty years ago, they addressed them thus: “The issue transpires as it does in international relations: diplomacy, the balance of power and fear, are all insufficient in human relations inside the one nation to avoid disputes. The sharpest weapon to establish rapport among people is, as mentioned by the Holy Father in his message on the occasion of the day of world peace, which is the principle declared by Christ the Lord, “you are all brothers”¹⁸.

If people’s consciousness of the all-encompassing brotherhood is able to penetrate to their hearts, would there be need to arm to the extent of becoming blind and obsessed murderers of their very own innocent brethren, and to commit atrocities with unbelievable violence for the sake of peace? “Peace expresses itself only in peace, a peace which cannot be separated from the demands of justice but which is fostered by personal sacrifice, clemency, mercy and love”, as stated in the Pope Paul VI message of the first of January, 1976.

The words of the late Pope John Paul II addressed to all the Lebanese in his Apostolic Exhortation *New Hope for Lebanon*, promulgated on the tenth of May, 1997, is still valid. The things mentioned in it concerning peace and reconciliation need to be returned to in these troubled times we live in. He says: “Lasting peace must be consolidated, built with patience and care”, because lasting peace alone can be the true source of development and justice”¹⁹. He added saying, “Because Christians embraced this gift from Christ, the Prince of peace, a gift that

transforms them from within, they should be the first witnesses to peace and foremost in its making. The Gospel of peace is a continuous call to forgiveness and reconciliation. Peace passes through perseverance in the exercise of human fraternity, one of the essential prerequisites resulting from our common resemblance to God, and emanating from the requisites of creation and redemption. Wherever people completely ignore what brotherhood is between them, peace collapses from its base. The building of peace, therefore, becomes a service of love and a prophetic sign of the Kingdom of Heaven²⁰.

What is Happening in Lebanon is Incompatible with the Building of Peace

Building peace requires clear vision on the part of citizens without drifting behind this or that of those who are good at agitating feelings, or demeaning opponents and distorting what they do and the stands they take while persisting in pointing out the merits of the stands they venture to assume, the initiatives they undertake and the proposals they proclaim.

Duty dictates that we see things, not through colored glass, but through an unbiased penetrating look. The naked eye shows us just how far we have stooped; and the portrait is grim:

1-Debts have exceeded forty billion dollars and are still mounting considering the servicing of the debt and interest. Likewise, most Lebanese youth find no job opportunities in their homeland even though they have high qualifications and university degrees, resorting to emigration, either to the Arab countries, hoping one day to return to Lebanon, or to the distant West, with very little hope of return to their first homeland.

2-The number of citizens who suffer from poverty and need is increasing daily, and as people are living on the benevolence of the charitable organizations the restaurants of the kind hearted, and what little the government is trying to supply to them, whereas, the number of aliens from every surrounding country is on the rise, among them the armed and those with criminal records, and there is nothing to restrain them nor anyone to keep an eye on them; they are mostly troublemakers and criminals.

3-The closing of numerous privately owned shops in the downtown area because of the tents erected there where strikers spend most of their days and nights in smoking the hubble-bubble, playing cards and otherwise killing time.

4-The slump in the summer and the winter seasons because of the war waged by Israel on Lebanon between July and August of last year and the repercussions had caused extremely heavy losses, inciting some countries to expediently come to our aid, supplying over seven billion dollars.

5-The situation became aggravated as we witness the disputes at the level of the government and the state. Government organizations each contest the legality of the other, ending up being paralyzed to a great extent. There are appointments in the diplomatic corps and the administration and some government councils that are being postponed indefinitely because of the many disputes between those in power.

6-Instead of treating this condition in a spirit of constructive patriotism, we see the politicians, in and out of power, hurling at each other the most horrible of attributes instead of being in solidarity in the search for the best ways to get the country out of its lengthy ordeal, as if they had transmigrated into the bodies of others more important in their respective countries, near and far, to operate in those people's will for the benefit of these countries instead of for the sake of Lebanon and no other.

7-There are differences between those citizens who are paying their dues to the government, and those who do not, so that government institutions suffer from deficit. Suffice to mention that the Department of Power-Lebanon, they say, is losing one billion dollars each year, whereas, its counterpart in all the countries of the world are making abundant profit.

Disapprovals are many and the list is long. Suffice this much. Maybe it will attract the attention of those who must take the initiative and change course and exchange one method with another and expedite in compacting ranks and working together, supporting each other to raise our country and bring it back to its previous state of security, peace and prosperity.

What we have indicated in a worsened situation contradicts with the building of the desired peace. This requires good intentions, a love that is devoid of selfishness and enormous sacrifices embarked upon boldly by all citizens, each at his post and in accordance with his capabilities, so as to uplift the nation.

Epilogue

Before we end this message, it is imperative to recall what His Holiness the Supreme Pontiff Pope Benedict XVI has persistently said about Lebanon ever since he assumed the chair of Peter. He rarely left an opportunity slip by without drawing attention to the bloody events taking place in our country. Yesterday, he spoke to a crowd of the faithful who were packing St. Peter's Cathedral square asking them to pray for peace in Lebanon and the region, saying, "In the past few days, violence caused the spilling of blood in Lebanon anew. It is not acceptable that this trend should continue simply to bolster political ends". He added, "I feel great pain for this dear people. Again, I urge the Christians of Lebanon to work for an effective dialogue with all groups. I know that many of the Lebanese are experiencing despair, and are perplexed by what is taking place...With other religious in authority, I beseech God that all Lebanese, without exception, may be able to work together to make their homeland an actual communal home transcending selfish stands that are preventing them from taking care of their country". He continued saying, "I also hope that the acts of violence would cease in the Gaza Strip as soon as possible. I would like to tell the people in their entirety that I am close to them spiritually and I ask in my prayers for the will to work together to prevail for the sake of the common good, resorting to peaceful means in dealing with disputes and agitations".

I hope we listen to the advice of His Holiness and put it in practice so that we may return our country to a place of tranquility for its sons and daughters, to their glory and honor. Thus we will go back, build ethics and embrace Christian values and virtues.

I hope we come to realize the real value of this homeland in which significant freedom is enjoyed, the likes of which may never be found anywhere else in the region, even though we have spoiled it, making of it chaos which has brought upon us a great damage.

We thank His Holiness, the Supreme Pontiff, for following up on the tragic Lebanese situation with the compassion of a loving father, and we thank him for drawing the attention of the world to the miserable state we are in, from which we hope to egress as soon as possible.

We have to take the opportunity of this acceptable time to God, this time of fasting, austerity and return to self, to ask the Almighty, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Lebanon, to have mercy on us and bring us back to our previous state of concord, solidarity and peace.

We must not be remiss in thanking all those who extended a helping hand to us, from countries to international organizations, who we hope will help us to transcend the difficulties which obstruct our path, that we may regain our well being and continue playing the peaceable and cultural role we assumed and are still capable of assuming in our country and the region.

We must implant in our minds that if we do not help ourselves, it is futile to hope that anyone would help us, and if someone gives us a fish, it satisfies our hunger for a day, but if we learn to fish, we would be able to satisfy our hunger every day.

If anything is to remain in the world, it is that love taught us by Christ our Lord through His example, His words and through His Church, which is still fulfilling His message in the world, the message of accord, love and peace among individual, societies and peoples.

Lastly, we address the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, asking her to draw for us, from her beloved Son Jesus Christ, the grace of reconciliation and forgiveness. We thus gird ourselves to resume living our lives with resolve, diligence and peace of mind, depending on God and on the examples left us by our holy predecessors, and our history abounds with them in this homeland, which they irrigated with the sweat of their foreheads and the blood of their hearts, to bequeath to us, a model of how conviviality should be in an atmosphere of mutual confidence and total respect.

On this hope and reliance on God and His Divine Providence, and the intercession of Saint Maron, the patron saint of our Maronite Church, we ask the Most Exalted one to bless you all and direct your footsteps to your well being and that of our country, Lebanon, and to include you always, residents and emigrants, in the abundance of His grace and blessing.

We order the recitation of this message on Sundays and feast days at Mass after the Gospel Reading.

Fasting and Abstention Dispensations

It is known that fasting is based on abstention from food and drink from midnight till noon – except that drinking water does not break a fast – and abstention stands on abstaining from eating meat and ‘whites’ (dairy products). However, since some of our sons and daughters are not able to find the diverse food that they need, having to be satisfied with what is within their reach, we give the following dispensations from the two laws, from Lent 2007, to Lent 2008:

- 1) We permit the consumption of whites during this period;
- 2) Fasting and abstention from meat is a must on Ash Monday and Good Friday of the Passion Week;
- 3) Abstention from meat on Fridays the year round is a must. However, meat may be consumed on a Holy Day of Obligation as listed below:
 - a) Christmas, New Year, Epiphany, St. Maron, St. Joseph, Peter and Paul, Assumption, Exaltation of the Cross, All Saints, Immaculate Conception and the day of the patron saint of the parish;
 - b) The period falling between Christmas and Epiphany;
 - c) The period falling between Easter and Pentecost; and,
 - d) The week before the entrance into Lent.

In exchange for this dispensation, we urge our sons and daughters to be concerned with spiritual matters, to fulfill their religious obligations and to exercise acts of austerity, mortification, charity and mercy, especially toward the needy and the sick, and to allocate a day's allowance per week to help their brethren the needy to pay its equivalent to the aid fund of their eparchy. This way, their fasting will become a tangible participation in austerity and suffering as they pray for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff for reigning peace in our land and in the whole world, and in applying the recommendations of the Apostolic Exhortation *New Hope for Lebanon*, and in the return of sinners to repentance and the vanquish of our Mother, the Holy Church and the realization of its unity, and the success of our Synod. This is the best thing they can do in exchange for fasting and abstinence.

From our See in Bkerke, on the fifteenth of February, 2007.

Cardinal Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

¹ Homily No. 200.

² Ezekiel 18:7-9.

³ Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World), No. 75, 4th and 5th paragraphs.

⁴ *La Documentation Catholique* Magazine, September 3-17, 2006, page 804.

⁵ Ibid, page 805.

⁶ 1 John 5:3.

⁷ Decree *Ad Gentes* (On the Mission Activity of the Church), No. 15, 4th paragraph.

⁸ Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (On the Apostolate of the Laity), No. 14, 1st paragraph.

⁹ *La Documentation Catholique* Magazine, Issue 1683, page 815.

¹⁰ *The Maronite Synod*, Text 23: The Maronite Church and the land, Chapter 1, No.5.

¹¹ *La Documentation Catholique* Magazine, page 66.

¹² Luke 10:25-37.

¹³ Matthew 18:15-18.

¹⁴ Luke 9:48.

¹⁵ Luke 22:25-26.

¹⁶ Matthew 5:13-16.

¹⁷ Matthew 6:9-15.

¹⁸ Matthew 23:8.

¹⁹ Apostolic Exhortation *New Hope for Lebanon*, No. 97.

²⁰ Ibid.