



*Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East*

## **“The Angel of the Lord appeared to them”**

(Luke 2:9)

Christmas and New Year Pastoral Letter  
of

**Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai**

**Patriarch of Antioch and All the East**

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# **“The Angel of the Lord appeared to them”**

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## **Mar Bechara Boutros Rai**

Through the Grace of God

**Patriarch of Antioch and All the East**

**And Cardinal of the Universal Church**

To Their Excellencies, our brothers, the Bishops,  
The Priests, Deacons, Monks and Nuns,  
all the Sons and Daughters of our Maronite Church,  
and all those of Good will.

### **Peace and the Apostolic Blessing**

**1.** When the son of God became human and was born in Bethlehem, **“The Glory of the Lord shone around them in the midst of the darkness of night” (Verse 9).** He is the **Christ-the light** that destroys the darkness: erases despair, sorrow and depression, and frees those who are self-imprisoned –those who are prisoners of both human beings and ideologies. His light triggers faith, revives hope, and fills life with love. Therefore, Isaiah’s prophecy has been fulfilled: The people who walked in darkness have seen great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone” **(Isaiah 9:1).**

**All the darkness of life** vanishes with the light of Christ, the words and the verse of His Bible and the teaching of His Church. His light is waiting for us – waiting for each one of us to put ourselves under His light and His way. Christ cannot deny Himself. He is the one who said about Himself: **“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).**

**2.** On this occasion, I am happy to extend, on behalf of the Patriarchate family, to our brothers, the Bishops, the Superiors General and Mothers Superior, the Priests, Monks and Nuns, our heartfelt congratulations and sincere wishes on the Birth of Christ the Lord, Savior of the World and Redeemer of mankind, joy of the hearts and hope of nations, So we will cheer together: **“Christ is born, Alleluia!”**

**We extend these congratulations and wishes** to all our brothers and sisters in the parishes and religious congregations, in Lebanon, the Middle East and the countries of expansion, especially those who are suffering from the scourge of war in Syria, Iraq, the Holy Land and others. We also extend our best wishes to all Lebanese, Christians as well as Muslims, especially that the birth of Jesus, the Lord, coincides this year with the birthday of the Prophet, as if it were a sign to confirm our distinctiveness, in Lebanon and this Levantine; that is, living together on the basis of the mutual respect, synergy and reciprocity, and the dialog of life, culture and destiny. We have managed to coexist fourteen hundred years, despite difficulties and hardships. This coexistence in our Middle Eastern countries has resulted in a culture and civilization, an identity enriched by both Christian and Islamic values, as well as national gains and principles. We are keen to protect our coexistence from destruction schemes, and creation of religious, cultural and social conflicts. Even we are determined to perform our mission

against this great challenge, movements of fanaticism, expiation and terrorist organizations.

### 3. “The Glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9)

The Glory of the Lord is Jesus Christ, God who became man. In Him **God has been glorified** by showing His infinite love, He sent His only son to redeem mankind from their sins, and save the world from the power of evil, the darkness of oppression, injustice and tyranny. This is how **the Glory of God**, as Saint Irenaeus puts it, becomes a **human being fully alive** and shows the glory of His incarnation through the humanity of Christ who thought with a human mind, acted with a human will and with a human heart He loved.

**The Glory of God is the peace** that the angels sang on Christmas Day. Therefore, peace carried the name of “Jesus Christ” and became a precious celestial gift given to all of us, individuals and groups, so we can be peacemakers. When the son of God became human, he made peace a way of filiation such that we, too, could be children of God. He also confirmed in the Beatitudes, the constitution of Christian life: **“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).**

4. No one can be a **“peacemaker”** unless he has it within him **“as the fruit of his peace with God”**, deep within his conscience. Only then he can **implement social peace** with the people to resolve conflict and misunderstanding; to exercise justice and remove injustice. He can also use this peace to help the poor and the needy, and **to grow it into a political and national peace** in service of the common good, in respect of the law, revival of public institutions, to conserve equality in rights, duties and the development of the human person in all its spiritual,

human, cultural and economic dimensions, so that he may live a dignified life.

**We salute** all “**peacemakers**” in the family and society, in the Church and the State. We appreciate the individual and collective initiatives on the occasion of the Christmas holidays as well as under normal circumstances. We appreciate the work of the various educational, medical and social institutions that contribute to cultivate a sense of hope and optimism in the hearts of people.

**5. Three interrelated and integrated** hymns that the angels sang the night when Christ the Lord was born and are trifecta of gifts from heaven: **Glory, Peace and Hope**. Christmas calls us to raise our hymns from Earth to Heaven; a hymn of **hope** that we plant in the hearts, a **peace** that we cultivate in the family, society and the nation, and a hymn of constant **praise** to God.

The humble and poor **shepherds of Bethlehem** accepted the gift from Heaven. Thus, they visited the manger where the Divine Child was laid. They saw, believed, made known the message and returned with great peace and hope, glorifying and praising God (**Refer to Luke 2: 15-20**). **The Magi of the East**, the wealthy astronomers, accepted this gift, so they traveled with hope for months following the North Star toward Bethlehem, and gave the child from their treasures gifts of prophetic glorification: gold for the New King, frankincense for the High Priest, and myrrh for the Divine Redeemer. They spread the news of peace to Herod, the king and the people of the City of Jerusalem.

However, **Herod** refused the good news of salvation for himself and his servants for fear of losing his throne. He was determined to kill the newborn king, king of glory, peace and hope for everyone; adult and child, rich and poor, and mainly for each partner in the majestic truth, justice and peace. To this end, the arrogant, tyrannical king ordered the

massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under, hoping Jesus would be one of them (**Refer to Matthew 2: 16-18**). **This is the same tragedy** that continues today in one way or another, for the attainment or retainment of authority.

**6. We, the Lebanese people, wished for more than once, and asked** the political and parliamentary parties in Lebanon to offer, the Lebanese people, the country and its institutions, the gift of a president for the Republic. This way, they can propel the nation from depression to hope, from fear and anxiety into a state of peace, so they can glorify God by performing their political duties that originate within the natural system that God has created. As a result, people and nations will be able to live in peace, communicate with each other and manage their worldly affairs as to enjoy goodness and justice at the hands of a political authority that will provide them the same. (**Refer to the Charter of Political Action, page 5**).

**7.** But today, we return to you, you who are present here, you who are watching and listening, **to renew the wish and the request** from Bkerke, this natural historic See, according to the path tread by my predecessors, the great patriarchs, who have steered the ship of the nation; from John Maron who anchored the national identity and message in 686, and Elias Peter Howayek who announced the existence of Great Lebanon in September 1920, to Anthony Peter's push for the National Pact in 1943 and Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir spearheading of the Taef Agreement in 1989.

**8.** The Patriarchate has put in the hands of the political leaders and the Lebanese people **three memoranda** as though to provide a roadmap toward creating a civilized, modern state, and productive with its constitutional and public organizations, founded upon a healthy democracy, a state that respects the rule of law and protects the rights and duties equally among all citizens.

The first memorandum “**Charter of Political Action in the Light of the Teachings of the Church and the Specificity of Lebanon**” (2009) sought to educate the conscience of citizens and to guide the political practice toward its essence, goals and role in service of humankind and society. The second memorandum, “**the National Memorandum**”, (February 9, 2014) sought to advocate presidential era that goes so far as to celebrate the first centennial of announcing the State of Great Lebanon on September first of 2020. It confirmed the national principles and elucidated guideposts of the future according to specific priorities. The third of the series, “**Economic Memorandum: An economy for the Future of Lebanon (March 25, 2015)**”, came into being after a year had passed without the election of a president, and in the face of the economic situation that raised a red flag due to the increase in the public debt, the current economic stagnation, the worsening of poverty, the ongoing brain drain and the labor force migration, and due to the drowning of the country in an overflow of immigrants whose number, along with that of the refugees, constitutes half the population of Lebanon.

**Everyone was on board** with these three memoranda, starting with the political, economic and educational leaders. They considered them a complete blueprint. But then they quickly did a 180, everything was out the window, the personal interests suffocated the plan and the economic deficit kept it from making any bold, courageous and free decision.

**9. Proceeding from these pacts, we join you in making the following interrelated requests:**

**1) That there be the election of a president for the Republic as soon as possible**, considering this a collective national responsibility not limited to the Christians, in general, nor to the Maronites, in particular.

The president is a president for the country, not a representative of any one religion. For this reason, we call upon the political and parliamentary parties to seriously consider taking action toward the new initiative, relevant to electing a president. It appears this matter is marked by seriousness as it appears to bear on trust and hope within the financial and banking industries, as well as on the striking of an agreement between the alliances of March 8 and March 14. Thus, the political and parliamentary parties must gather around this initiative and lay their cards on the table with objectivity and courage so as to reach a national decision and follow through with it in parliament by carrying out an election according to the constitution and democratic dictates.

**What does it mean “despair or complete equality” to elect a president?** It is well known that the main office of the president of the Republic is to respect the constitution, to ensure the efficacy of the public institutions, to protect the solidarity of the nation, its independence, sovereignty and its peace (Article 29 of the constitution), as well as the communal coexistence and to forbid any segregation of the people, fragmentation, partition or colonization in one way or another (**The Preamble to the Lebanese Constitution: J F I**). **The role of the president** is to maintain the determination of the Lebanese people to establish a democratic, parliamentary system, a civil nation and its institutions, and to strengthen the role of civil society in the course of intellectual, political and socioeconomic development.

2) That there be **an adoption of new election law** which is the responsibility of the Parliament as a legislative authority, as stated in the Lebanese constitution. This law should embody effective participation of the people in securing true equality, free access to the poles and the right of the voters to question their representatives and hold them accountable. It also secures democratic competition and eliminates the imposition of some representatives on their constituencies through monolithic sectarian coalitions (National Memorandum, page 12, para. 23).

Hence, the parliament does not have the right to postpone passing the law to conduct parliamentary elections, therefore, it will happen at the beginning of the new president's term.

**3) That the government:** a) **commit to its responsibility** as an executive authority under the constitution; b) strengthen the efficacy of the public institutions; c) eliminate the chaos and corruption within these institutions and motivate the people to become more responsible citizens; d) improve the socioeconomic conditions and the overall standard of living, and; e) uplift citizens from their current state of depression and lack of confidence in their country. It stands to reason that the government is facing multiple challenges due to presidential vacancy, given that the president is the executive authority according to the Constitution. Thus, the prime minister has been reiterating his demand, in every hearing and occasion, to elect a President of the Republic, in order to address these rising challenges.

**The government cannot ignore the ongoing crisis of Syrian refugees pouring into Lebanon.** Last year, the immigrants numbered one and a half million and have since increased by another two hundred fifty thousand due to childbirth. In addition, the number of Syrian students reached four hundred thousand, as indicated during the hearing held in Parliament this month of December 15, 2015. This figure reveals the degree of the socioeconomic burden on Lebanon and its adverse impact on the Lebanese people. While we stand in solidarity with our refugee brothers and sisters and their living needs, we are concerned that if they remain in Lebanon, they risk being exploited by extremists and terrorist organizations for purposes that threaten our safety and security, finding themselves obliged to commit crimes in exchange for money, thereby furthering the chaos and destabilizing the society.

**We thank God for Resolution 2254 regarding Syria,** adopted by the Security Council and focused exclusively on ending the war, finding

political solutions and taking all necessary measures to ensure the safe return of the refugees, as well as national and international migrants to their countries of origin and restoring affected areas. However, **we do not accept a “voluntary” return of migrants** as stated in the text of the resolution. That which applies to the immigrants in Europe cannot apply to immigrants in Lebanon, not only for the aforementioned reasons, but also to prevent the demand to settle them in Lebanon and grant them Lebanese nationality. **Their return must be mandatory** so the refugees can protect their rights in Syria and safeguard their national, educational and cultural identity. Nevertheless, we continue our prayers for peace in our region- the region where peace was announced to the whole world with the birth of the “Prince of Peace” (Ezekiel 8:5), Jesus Christ.

**10.** In closing, we renew to all of you, residents of Lebanon, the countries of the Middle East and countries of expansion our wishes and congratulations on the Birth of the Divine Redeemer and we ask Him to enlighten the coming New Year of 2016 with the lights of truth, love, justice and peace.

**Christ is born, Alleluia!**

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**+ Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai**

**Patriarch of Antioch and All the East**