

The Theology of the Human Person in the Synod

(Spirituality, morals religion and politics)

Introduction

1. The Synod raised the topic of the human person as an independent question, though one could find it in multiple synodal texts, namely the ones dealing with the persons in the Church: clergy, religious, and laymen. The third file deals with topics of different natures: educational, cultural, economic, social, media, and political and the role of the human person in them. Since the time does not allow me to deal with all these subjects I will limit my talk to the following:

1. Theological constants of the persons.

First: The clergy.

Secondly: The lay people.

2. Church (religion) and politics.

3. Church of hope and spiritual constants.

I. Theological Constants of the Human Person

2. I will speak first about clergy and religious men and women, and then about laypersons for the purpose of renewal as foreseen by the synod.

First: The Clergy

1. The Patriarch

a) His qualities

3. The theology of the patriarch is derived from his calling and mission, and from the qualities he must possess to be able to fulfill the functions entrusted to the superior of superiors. This is clearly manifested in the rite of the canonical installation of the patriarch and the meanings of its texts.

4. In the ritual, the biblical passages read emphasize the qualities that the candidate must have: vigilant, zealous, holy, pure in spirit, humble, etc. Hence, his life is no longer his, it's the Church's. His actions are to be guided by the Gospel which is placed on his head during his ordination ceremony. He will be specially guided by Jesus, the Good shepherd.

b) His headship

5. There is two kinds of relations that tie the faithful to the patriarch: the Myron (chrismation) through which they belong to the patriarchal Church and her shepherd, and the historic relation which made him their reference and head. The two aspects are complementary since the patriarch, throughout history, has grown into becoming a symbol of unity who invites respect and love, and not only a temporal leader who heads the Maronite Church. Thus he becomes the servant of unity and the defendant of the Church who watches over her and ensures her growth and development in all domains.

2. The Bishops

a) Required Qualities

6. The ordination rite speaks of the suitability and competence of the candidate that the community of Christian people should bear witness to. We read in the canon of the Apostolic Constitution about those qualities: “The candidate must be irreproachable in everything and without sin... A consensus must evolve around him as deserving to be promoted to the position of head, and since he is a man of piety and righteousness ... The ritual goes on to state: “No candidate should be given authority in the community unless he is known for his zeal and his fear of God, has a good reputation and is capable of managing the affairs of the Church of God”.

7. In the prayers of the immediate imposition of hands, we find: “Fill him with wisdom and grace, adorn him with humility and strength, with energy and gentleness, alertness and patience. Let his actions be guided by the Holy Spirit... that he may serve your people and give honor to your Holy Name... Grant him the gift of knowledge and eloquence that he may preach your word, bring sinners back to repentance, help the orphans, the widows, and the needy, encourage strangers, follow your apostolic commandments and walk according to your will...” We find in these prayers a constant link between him and Christ the priest, wise and true shepherd and high priest of the church, which he loved and endowed her with shepherds to serve her. The Church is Christ’s and the shepherds, her servants, will be held accountable before Christ for their stewardship and their work in it.

b) Constants

- The bishop is the steward entrusted with the Church of Christ, but this Church is not his property.
- His pastoral role is obvious based on what Christ himself has done through his ministry of teaching, administering, and sanctifying.
- His pastoral mission requires vigilance, zeal, love, and the exertion of every effort to insure the spiritual welfare of individuals and communities by rooting them in Christ.
- The success of the bishop as shepherd is founded on the pastoral love which dictates the life style and the conduct of the pastor.
- The guidance provided by the pastor, through his life and conduct is a reflection of that of Christ, the Good Pastor.
- The evangelical images and biblical comparisons that portray the bishop are numerous: he is the shepherd, the spiritual “leader”, the skilled builder, the sower, the faithful steward, the salt, and the light.
- To be able to implement these precepts, the bishop needs to avoid the worldly spirit, and to stay away from the preoccupation with temporal and material concerns.

c) The Renewal

8. After the talk about the ministry of the patriarch and the bishops, the synodal text calls for their renewal based on Maronite constants, we mention without details, since they can be found in chapter 3 of text 6.

- a. Meditating on all the books of the Holy Bible especially the New Testament which reveals the image of Christ the Good Shepherd.
- b. Referring to liturgical sources.
- c. Following in the steps of the fathers.

- d. Longing for the love of the Lord and having a spirit of detachment to worldly matters.
- e. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin and imitation of her virtues.
- f. Creating an action plan to confront the challenges and to pursue a continuing renewal.

3. The Religious

9. The text about religious requires profound consideration since it relates to the life of the Maronite Church since its inception as a monastic Church.

10. Starting in the fourth century, monastic life began with individual hermits reacting to the life of carelessness that spread following the constantinian peace decree, to go out into deserts and hermitages to live an ascetic and detached life. Maron became known in the Cyrrhus area. Many men and women followed in his foot steps and became his disciples.

This characteristic of an active and contemplative monastic life continued in the Church of Antioch and became the backbone of the Maronite Church toward the end of the 7th century. Nowadays, our Church enjoys the existence of several religious congregations, both men and women, whose members could collectively reach 1500 men and women.

11. Their spirituality is marked by its evangelic roots, the spirit of prayer and devotion to God through the intercession of the saints. It is basically a spirituality of resurrection and permanent hope, embodied in the Church and the culture of the land they live in. The synodal text cites the work carried out by religious men and women in the Church of today and the renewal they must follow in order to regain their authentic life and continue to bear witness in today's world.

Secondly: The Laity

a) In the Past

12. The laity of the Maronite Church was known for centuries as "awam", which is a word of Syriac origin (amo in singular; ame in plural) meaning "the people". The Maronite faithful, always had a say in the decision making of his Church; villagers would hand pick a pious man from their midst and present him to the bishop to ordain him a priest, and assign him to shepherd their community.

13. If we look back at the first Maronite community, we find that hundreds of men and women chose to lead lives similar to St. Maron's until the time when the Maronite Church grew from the little community of Beit Maroun in Apamea, into an organized Church in Lebanon, headed by a patriarch and sharing the life of its people in every aspect.

b) In the Present

14. The socio-cultural environment plays an important role in the life of the Maronites, and in the quality of their interaction with the different circumstances surrounding them. The spread of the Maronites all over the globe allowed them to be influenced by different civilizations and traditions while preserving the particularities and constants of their faith. It was their faith that helped them in their inculturation yet prevented them from losing their identity. These constants appeared in the Maronites' commitment to their faith through prayers, sacramental life, parochial, and family life.

1. Individual Commitment

15. The past few years have witnessed a renewed return of many, to a more mature and committed life, exhibiting a profound desire to deepen their faith through adult religious education. The spread of lay groups and associations that aim at guiding married couples and families is but a living testimony of this renewed commitment. Meanwhile, Maronites worldwide are witnessing spontaneous and generous impulses towards liturgical and religious practices that have emerged from a deep sense of tradition and heart felt emotions inherited from their ancestors. With the growing interest in church life, our people are in more need of guidance, education, and development to help them be more active participants in their Church's growth.

2. Apostolic Movements and Organizations

16. The desire of becoming more educated in the faith has found favor with a large number of faithful that belong to lay fraternities, movements, associations, and prayer groups. Many have chosen to frequent schools of theology and higher religious education, and many of them have dynamically partaken in performing the pastoral and apostolic work alongside parish priests.

17. The Maronite Church realizes the importance of the laity's role, participation, and apostolate and is trying to involve in different ecclesiastic structures. It has taken giant steps in this regard, especially on the parish level. However, two related obstacles should be pointed out: some think that the Church calls on them only because of the decrease in the number of clergy on one hand; and some consider laity's involvement in parochial and diocesan work as an attempt to overcome the clergy's authority.

3. Presence of the Laity in Civilian Life

18. The Church invites the laity to adhere to a committed Christian life as "witnesses to the Gospel in the world". She realizes that, through their presence in the world, lay men and women could subject themselves to a life of separation between their faith, on one hand, and their professions and political and economic lives, on the other. This means that they practice their faith in church, yet work according to the law of profit and loss in the world.

19. After analyzing the present situation, the text presents the challenges and proposes an action plan to deal with it.

The challenges consist of: preserving the faith in the midst of the real world; and upholding all human, moral, and spiritual values dictated by it. The action plan is centered on:

- Guaranteeing a continuing education for adults.
- Active participation in Church life and apostolate.
- Encouraging lay involvement in parish and diocesan work.

20. In line with this thought, the two texts on family and youth provide insights that can be helpful to all of us. We could refer to them for a deeper understanding of the theology of human person.

II. Church and Politics

21. This text is among the ones which were discussed at length and re-formulated more than once for many reasons – we cite here some of them:

- The pressure exerted by the political situation that prevailed in Lebanon.
- The stand of the patriarch and the Synod of bishops that triggered the call for freedom and independence.
- To make the text more meaningful to all Maronites worldwide.

a) How did the Maronite Church engage herself in politics and why?

22. The Maronites' experience in politics is one of the most ancient, diverse and comprehensive experiences in the East. When we talk about the Church and politics we mean two things: first, the Church as a religious authority involved in politics; and second, the Maronites involved in politics. The Maronites' political and social destiny proceeded from a religious and cultural attachment that made of them a distinguished community, through fundamental choices where the principles of openness and connection overcome that of seclusion and separation. That is why the Maronites cooperated with the others to create a will of coexistence, and that is why they refuse to have a country of their own, but rather prefer coexistence.

23. During times of crises, the Church intervened more than once, particularly during the 1975-1990 events, to stop violence and facilitate reconciliation among the adversaries in order to save national unity and to safeguard co-existence. The latest most prominent intervention was the famous call on 20 September, 2000 which laid the foundations for ending Syrian hegemony and occupation, and to recuperating sovereignty, independence and freedom of choice.

b) The Maronite expansion in its political dimensions

24. At present, a new picture evolves before the Maronite Church as her children get into politics. Many of them have succeeded in climbing to high political status. The Maronite Church calls on such people, to practice politics based on their value system, their true belonging and loyalty to their new countries, while remaining faithful to their Maronite heritage. Furthermore, it urges them, as Lebanese descendants, to keep close ties to their country of origin in all the human values it represents in that area of the world, values of liberty, coexistence, and human dignity.

25. We conclude this part of our talk by testifying to the role of the patriarchs. Throughout our history, the patriarchs have held great love and esteem, along with their people, to countries in which they live. The Maronite patriarch, in present times, has been a reference to all Lebanese people; he has constantly reminded them of the national constants that should dominate their lives.

III. The Church of Hope

26. During our work on the synod's texts, one of our spirituality's led and inspired our work: HOPE. Because our Maronite prayers, in the liturgy as well as in the office, join the living and the dead to the righteous and saints, it is a splendid hymn of Christian hope.

First: Signs of Hope and New Horizons

1. The Expansion of the Maronite Church

27. Tribulations in Lebanon and the Middle East, have led many Maronites to flee the region and migrate to other countries. This expansion gave our Church a universal dimension. This fact has placed on the Maronite Church a greater responsibility, to remain faithful to its heritage while living in harmony with other church traditions.

2. Attachment to the Centrality of the Patriarchate

28. Wherever they may be, Maronites express their attachment to the patriarchate, and specifically to the person of the Patriarch, as guarantor and symbol of their unity. This attachment protects ecclesial unity and strengthens the ties between the patriarchate and all Maronite dioceses, religious orders, institutions, etc.

3. Awareness of particularities and Spreading the Heritage

29. Maronites have never had a better chance to really come to know their own distinct and unique heritage and tried to spread it than nowadays. Many Maronite researchers and scholars, past and present, have contributed directly in raising awareness about it. Work however, is still in its early stages; it aims to provide cultural, spiritual, and theological nourishment to the children of this heritage on one hand, and to make this heritage enriching to the universal Church, on the other.

4. Sense of Belonging to the Church

30. The positive reception of the Patriarchal Synod by all: clergy, religious, and lay people is a clear proof that the Maronites have a deep sense of belonging to their Church. This impression was evident on different levels, especially in the praying for its success, in thinking together, in responding to questions, in giving suggestions, in writing articles... This response from the faithful, places a greater responsibility on the shoulder of our Church authority, to have a clear vision of the future, and to develop appropriate strategies to implement the synod's decisions.

5. Church's Attractiveness

31. In spite of her long history, and of the many calamities suffered by her people over the centuries, the Church has not aged; instead she has prospered and bore fruits that became visible in the saints who have crowned her forehead. For all these reasons the Church still attracts young men and women to consecrate their lives to Christ, and to serve Him through clerical and monastic life. The spiritual revival has reached the youth who are engaged in different activities in their parishes and beyond.

6. Spiritual Renewal

32. There is a longing for a spiritual renewal and return that springs from our further knowledge of Christ and from discovering Him as in the Gospel. This explains the popularity of spiritually oriented educational initiatives among the youth and adults. Accordingly, a number of youth knowingly commit themselves to their faith, and try to practice it in their private and public life after they have discovered the love of Christ for them.

7. Initiatives of Solidarity

33. Recently, various and numerous social crises have created initiatives of solidarity on the part of both, individuals and ecclesial institutions. They were manifested projects undertaken to provide help for the needy at different levels. Many have been progressively awakened to the need for collaboration to face reality, motivated by a humanitarian and Christian spirit, for love is lived not in words, but in deed and truth. Furthermore, educators having realized the value of social commitment and started encouraging the youth to volunteer in different areas of service.

8. A Church with a Mission

34. Some Christians, including Maronites, have begun to realize that they have a mission in the

Orient, despite their dwindling numbers in countries where the majority of the population embraces the Islamic faith. This is what the Catholic Patriarchs have called for in their pastoral letters to the Christians of the Orient, where they considered the Christian presence in the Orient to be a testimony, a mission, and a service. They warned against the dangers of seclusion, fear, loss of identity, and the dangers of emigration.

35. The mission of the Church has its own historic roots and its reasons even though surrounded by dangers. Christians in general and Maronites in particular, have to realize that to choose this mission, that is to stay in the Orient, is an individual and communal decision. Emphasizing the role of the Church in the Orient does not minimize the importance of her mission in the countries of expansion, provided that she, along with all her children, would remain faithful to her heritage, and would be a living witness to diversity in unity.

9. Participation of the Laity

36. During the last fifty years, lay people have become increasingly more aware of their role in the life and mission of the Church. They can no longer be satisfied with the role of being merely recipients who attend Church services out of obligation, or who meet with their Shepherds (the priests or bishops) only when a specific problem or worldly need arises; they are rather called upon to give more attention to Church affairs and to take part in her life and progress. One would have to acknowledge the positive presence of women, their distinctive role, and their dedication in different areas. As a result, the sense of belonging to the Church has drastically improved, so has the willingness [of believers] to assume the responsibility of Church activities if and when they were called to do so by the shepherds according to Church regulations.

10. Ecumenical Closeness

37. Recently, and especially after the Second Vatican Council, the Church has witnessed many ecumenical initiatives aimed at strengthening relations among Christians, spreading the spirit of mutual love and cooperation, and aiming to remove the barriers which had prevented their communion. This new approach has been disseminated into both secular and religious quarters, especially among the youth.

11. A Church with a Marian Dimension

38. The Church's Marian dimension falls within the signs of hope due to the fact that Mary, by carrying Christ, carried hope. Moreover, this dimension is also due to the place Mary occupies in the official Maronite prayers, in the Syriac theological heritage, in public devotions, apostolic movements, and in Marian Sodalities. It is worth noting the constant and repeated references to the Virgin Mary in all the hymnals of the daily prayers, and at the end of each prayer, as though she were praying with the community: "*Mary your mother intercedes with you on our behalf, along with the prophets, apostles and martyrs.*" The praying community is distinguished by the intercession of Mary saying: "*your prayer is with us, O Mother of God, your prayer is with us. May God have mercy on us and forgive us through your prayers.*" Seeking Mary's help is a common practice; so is her veneration.

Second: Horizons of Hope

39. The signs of hope are more important than those of anxiety, deception, and despair. They

represent a thorough basis for forecasting the future with confidence, and for individually and collectively facing its challenges. This collective ecclesial commitment guarantees the dissipation of all fears. Christ the Lord has already promised his Church that the gates of Hell will never overcome her. Any specific Church, who wants to benefit from this promise, would have to live up to her identity with all her members at all levels.

40. The present Patriarchal Synod should be considered an essential phase in the life of our Church. It provides us with intellectual and practical means to continue the project of its revival and renewal. The synod should strengthen our hope and commitment to continue in this direction at all level, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit and on the blessings, graces and talents God has granted us.

41. The Synod allowed us to appreciate the importance of working together and provided us with a new ecclesial mentality which stipulates the return to the original meaning of the Church as community in a spirit of collaboration, prayer, and dependency on God's providence. It is certain however that collective ecclesial work requires great sacrifices.

“Stay with us”

42. The disciples of Emmaus responded with this expression after Christ explained to them the meaning of His suffering, death and resurrection, opening their minds to understand the scriptures, and rejuvenating in their hearts the flame of love and hope after the setback they had endured. This same expression was used by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on the year of the Eucharist to express the belief in the continuous presence of Christ in His Church through the Holy Eucharist. This expression could also be the call of the Maronite Church to Christ at the end of her Patriarchal Synod, asking Him to accompany her on the path of renewal, using the Synod's logo *“I am with you till the end of time, be not afraid.”*

By the same token, Christ addresses all the children of the Church saying: *“Stay with me.”* Beseeching Christ to remain with us implies that we should be with Him: *“remain in me and I in you... whoever remains in me and I in him bears many fruits, for without me you can do nothing.”* (Jn 15: 4-5).

Conclusion: Gratitude and Joy

43. Various attempts to gain inspiration from the past have been undertaken recently in search of a genuine Maronite ascetic spirituality that can help foster an efficient Christian commitment in today's world. Hence, any hope, and especially the hope of the Church, besides being a grace from God, is an ecclesial responsibility, to which every Church member should contribute in the measure of the gifts he has received from Christ, the source of every hope. This is the lesson we learned from our history; it is also the source of our hope, for the stronger and firmer our faith is in Christ, even to the point of martyrdom, the easier it is for our Church to overcome difficulties and tribulations, and to bear the fruits of holiness, progress, and renewal.

This is our calling for the future, which is well rooted in the history of our Church with Christ who has never let her down. Accordingly, the Patriarchal Synod, in its texts and recommendations, is a test for our Church: if she accepts it and implements it, it could a source of renaissance and renewed hope; if not, it will remain unable to continue the journey of renewal.

Thank you and God bless you.