

“I Am Among You as One Who serves” (Luke 22:27)

Mar Bechara Boutros Rai, Through the Grace of God, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and Cardinal of the Universal Church

*Dear diocesan priests and monks, our brothers in the priesthood, dear and beloved ones
May the Peace and Apostolic Blessing be upon you*

1. I am pleased to write to you, as I do every year, wherever you are, in Lebanon, in the Patriarchal Domain and in the Countries of Expansion, on behalf of my fellow Bishops, your pastors, on the **common anniversary of establishing our priesthood and the Sacrament of Holy Communion**. The purpose of the letter is to confirm my love for you, for each and every one of you, as a priest and head of our Antiochian Syriac Maronite Church, and to strengthen the bond between the Episcopal body and the priestly body, between our people and their pastors, on the basis of the profound communion which we live in full union with the One God and the Trinity. I want **the subject** of the letter to be: «**The Priestly Service**», based on the life of the supreme priest, Jesus Christ: «**I am among you as the one who serves.**»¹

Service of the Priesthood

2. We, priests of the Eucharist were born on that night prior to the passion of the Lord Jesus, and received the anointing of the Holy Spirit, similar to the reality of the priest Jesus Christ. We were called «kings and priests, and taken from among the people, appointed to the service of God for his people»², to serve God and His promise of salvation to His people, whom He made «a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may announce praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His light»³.

3. **Priesthood is a treasure** that we hold in earthen vessels, thus this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us⁴. We were given this ability to serve the body of Christ so that everything may grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head: «from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love»⁵.¹

It is our mission and the honor of our vocation, for the Holy Spirit to achieve Its will to serve the Blessed Body of Christ. Thus, It does not only allow us to reflect the image of Christ, but also makes Christ grow within us; He also saves our priesthood service from regression to a routine level of duties. It keeps us as servants of the work of Christ, who continues throughout history through us. It reminds us of Christ's invitation to us in the first place:

¹ Luke 22:27

² Hebrews 5:1

³ 1 Peter 2:9

⁴ See 2 Corinthians 4:7

⁵ See Ephesians 4:16

«It was not you who choose Me, but I who chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you»⁶.

Service of Generosity

4. Our priesthood is free. It stems from the generosity of the heart of Christ and His greatest love. It is priceless. He invites us to practice it generously, with love, and without personal or materialistic interest. So, be generous in your service and give selflessly; know that the joy of our service lies in the righteousness to which we were invited. The Psalmist says: «Let your priests be clothed with righteousness, and let your faithful ones shout for joy»⁷. Put on the righteousness, in the obedience to the Word of God, deep in your existence. Let our obedience be done with love as it forms the entry into the way of holiness, the walk down the path of justice, and growth in unity.

Continue in your virtue of «asceticism» in the heart of a world stumbling in itself. Do not descend into worldly affairs, but seek to raise the world towards the Mount of Transfiguration, where the glorious face of Christ takes shape and thus attracts us «to follow in His steps»⁸.

Service with generosity generates **joy** for us, which is derived from the fact that the Lord Jesus sees us without us seeing him. This was His promise to us: «I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you»⁹. So, Paul the Apostle reiterated the call: «Rejoice in the Lord always; I shall say it again, rejoice! »¹⁰.

Service of the Preaching of the Gospel

We hear the repeated **call** by **His Holiness, Pope Francis**, «to get out» of ourselves and move toward others, to the «outskirts» of religious illiteracy and **spiritual, material and moral** poverty, to the people distant from the Church, and deprived from the wells of salvation. This calls us «to get out» of ourselves and out of our comfort of deceptive tranquility, which is limited to «completing duties» in what we do of liturgical services, Church rituals and activities which are often described as good, Yet, despite their importance and necessity, they do not meet the **basic requirements** commissioned to us by Christ, the eternal priest. Specifically I mean, the **preaching of the Gospel**: «Go out to the whole world and proclaim the gospel to all creation»¹¹.

The **vibrant life** of the Church is based on **evangelization and missionary work**, to the extent that it is possible to say that the lung through which the Church breathes is preaching. The Book of «Acts of the Apostles» presents us with an example of the Church in Antioch, how, when she elected Paul and Barnabas to preach, she flourished and grew, and the Word of

⁶ John 15:16

⁷ Psalm 131:9

⁸ 1 Peter 2:21

⁹ John 16:22

¹⁰ Philippians 4:4

¹¹ Mark 16:15

God spread in the whole area, with the power of the Holy Spirit who sent them¹²; Here Saint Paul the Apostle reminds us of the Word of the Lord for each and every one of us, on the day of his priestly ordination: «**I have made you a light to the nations, that you maybe an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth**»¹³. Moreover, the periods of fertility and freshness in the life of the Church are those that experienced times of evangelization and preaching, unlike the spiritual drought and dryness which affects the Church when evangelization and a missionary spirit are neglected.

6. Also, **in the parish**, there are indicators similar to those in the entire Church. The high attendance in the parish is honorable during certain occasions throughout the year. But it becomes a misleading indicator when faced by the ordinary attendance on Sundays or when measured against the population of the parish, or with the invitation to Bible Studies meetings and spiritual retreats during Lent and so forth. The turnout to hear **the Word** leads, inevitably, to a mature and conscious commitment to the Church's life and mission, while the opposite is impossible.

Continue in your parishes what the Church started on the day of Pentecost, when the Apostles went out, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in the streets of Jerusalem, in order to preach the Gospel of Christ. Plant it in the fields of your people and protect it from weeds. Beware of despair especially when there is no cooperation with you, with your efforts and with your sacrifices. Perhaps you may justify that by saying: «We played the flute for you, but you did not dance; we sang a dirge, but you did not weep»¹⁴. Remember the Psalm that says: «Those who sow in tears will reap with cries of joy. Those who go forth weeping, carrying sacks of seed, will return with cries of joy, carrying their bundle sheaves»¹⁵.

Service of Shepherds who touch the Wounds

7. The children of our Churches face the crimes of the evil and violent people in our Middle-Eastern region. They are forced to leave their homes, belongings and lifetime earnings. Some of them are taken prisoners, are kidnapped, their dignity is violated, and some are killed. This tremendous pain and sad blood shed rises us, and all priests from various Churches, to the level of the Body of the one Christ, who is the Church in her entirety. This exceeds the boundaries of the parish, the eparchy, and the particular Church and becomes gateways to cross to the blessed membership of the Mystical Body, whom Jesus Christ forms her head. To this Body, His Mystical Body, Christ sends us today. We are the ones whose hands anointed with Chrism of the Spirit anointment, thus we can see His wounds, treat them, carry His pain with him, and be His «Simon of Cyrene»¹⁶.

The enemies of the Cross of Christ have raised their hands to beat our meek people, and push them to bear the burden of their evil and their transgression. We need not to fret over this reality. The Christ himself told us: «they will hand you over to persecution, and they will kill you. You will be hated by all nations because of My name ... the one who endures to the

¹² See Acts of the Apostles 13:2-4, 49

¹³ Acts of the Apostles 13:47; Isaiah 49:6

¹⁴ Luke 7:32

¹⁵ Psalm 126:5-6

¹⁶ Luke 23:26

end, will be saved»¹⁷.

All Christians who have thus suffered have already chosen the persistence of faith, they have testified to all that the Lord Jesus is still worth following in the third millennium. He is still worthy that we leave everything for him. Therefore, strengthen your brothers¹⁸. Relieve them from the troubles of life. Wipe the sweat and blood from their faces. Do not forget, with your prayers and forgiveness, those whose hands have committed crimes against humanity. In this way, you will wipe away from their forehead the shameful disgrace that has come to obscure the original image of their humanity.

Service of Hope

8. Your children, your brothers and your sisters in the faith, hunger for you, to your guidance, instructions, love, sympathy, service and your touch. You are the lamp of their pilgrimage toward the Father. Do not let the flame of their lamp extinguish. Everyone's eyes look to us to give them food at the proper time, as the Lord Jesus entrusted us¹⁹. We do not live for ourselves, but for Him who has called us.

It still really delights us that believers consider our priesthood a pure reflection for the priesthood of Christ, and that is true. If they love us, they love God, the Church, and they practice their faith; and if they reject us, they reject God and the Church, and depart from the right path. We cannot condemn them; they call us, in our position, to be not merely priests - in which they are right.

Remember the commandment of Peter the Apostle: "Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint, but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit, but eagerly; nor by lording it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."²⁰

Do not lose the vision and the power of hope. When the horizon is darkened, you will be sought. Your conscience, enlightened with the words of God, sees the truth and recognizes it, and walks towards it in confident steps. The sheep follow you because you are good shepherds. Do not be afraid!

To the protection of Our Mother, Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles and Mother of the Priests, we entrust our priesthood, and we renew, around the Bishops of our eparchies, before the Eucharist, on this Holy Thursday, our priestly promises that we made on the day of our ordination.

With my prayers, my love and my Apostolic Blessing.
From our See in Bkerke, on Holy Thursday, April 2, 2015
+ Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

¹⁷ Matthew 24:9 and 13

¹⁸ See Luke 22:32

¹⁹ See Luke 12:42

²⁰ 1 Peter 5:2-4