

Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

“I have given you a model to follow” (John 13:15)

Fifth Pastoral Letter

By His Beatitude and Eminence

Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

Bkerke 2016

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Fifth Pastoral Letter

Addressed

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Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

To the Bishops of the Maronite Church, Superiors General,

Diocesan Priests and Monks

On the occasion of

Holy Thursday

Bkerke– March 24, 2016

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

To our Venerable Brothers the Bishops, Superiors General, Diocesan Priests, Monks and Faithful of our Maronite Church in Lebanon, in the Middle East and in the Countries of Expansion.

Peace and Apostolic Blessing

Dear Beloved Brothers in the Priesthood,

1. Holy Thursday is **the feast of the Sacrament of our Priesthood**, that stems from **the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist**, which the Lord Jesus Christ established on that holy day, in the Last Supper, on the night of His passion and death.

Therefore, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to each one of you on this common feast of ours. I submit together with you before our Lord, Redeemer and Savior, who is present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and raise our greatest prayer of gratitude with the Church, on behalf of all humanity, to God. We thank the Father for His love that brought us into being, and the Son for His death and resurrection for our redemption and salvation, and the Holy Spirit for dwelling in us with the fruits of redemption and our sanctification.

2. On this feast, you renew before your bishops your priestly vows, which you made to yourselves, on the day of your ordination, with Christ the Eternal Priest and Chief Shepherd, who called us, and entrusted us to continue His mission of redemption and salvation, in His name and in His person. He told us, on that night, with the utmost love and humility: "**I have given you a model to follow**" (John 13:15). He has set an example with His love that reached the peak when He gave Himself fully through His death on the cross for the redemption and salvation of the whole world (Refer to John 3:16; 13:1) ; He has set an example with His humility as he washed His disciples' feet (John 13:4-11).

Following the example of Christ's priestly attributes

3. Our priesthood is a continuous quest for following the example of Christ the Priest, **whose priesthood is characterized by three attributes:**

1) **His obedience to His Father**, before any other person. He used to repeat: "I do not seek my own, but the will of the one who sent me" (John 5:30), and confirm: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me" (John 4:34), and he would remind us, saying: "Because I came down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but I should raise it [on] the last day" (John 6:38-39). When the demands of that obedience intensified, as the hour of the cross was at hand, and when loneliness became His sole friend in the Garden of Olives, **He cried out: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from Me"**. Nevertheless, He instantly

submitted to Him **and prayed: "Still, not my will, but yours be done"** (Luke 22:42).

We likewise, **dear brother priests**, are called to such obedience. Nonetheless, we may forget this commitment when we face hard circumstances endangering us, our interests, our desires or our plans. Then, we disobey God's commandments, through being disobedient to the words of the Bible, to Church teachings, and to the measures taken by our spiritual leaders. First of all, **we have proclaimed our love toward God**, His Will and His plan of salvation, when we accepted the call to priesthood, and when we submitted to the imposition of His hands on us for this very purpose, through the laying on of hands by the bishop. Then, we have proclaimed that through our obedience to our church leaders, we obey God Himself. And of course, obedience involves love and respect. However, nowadays we notice that such obedience is lacking; we feel that love has dried up; and we suffer from lack of respect and continuous unconscientious destructive criticism.

2) Laying down His life for His friends. When the twelve apostles, who were appointed to be priests of the New Testament, were interested in personal worldly gains while following Jesus Christ, He said to them: **"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Matthew 20:25-28).

Giving up one's life basically requires **making oneself of no reputation** just as Christ Himself did, according to the words of Paul the Apostle who called us to emulate Jesus' morals: **"Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also**

yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him..." (Phil 2:5-9) .

When we, priests, **were consecrated by the Holy Chrism**, and the Holy Spirit came upon us via the three prayers, the Spirit formed our inner being in the image of Christ, as ministers to Him in the church for the sake of all people. He has not made us masters to look for our comfort and personal gains, whether big or small; He has rather made us servants characterized by honesty, wisdom, the spirit of impartiality, and generous self-sacrifice.

Saint Peter, the Apostle reminded us: "**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. Do not lord 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**" (1Peter 5:1-4).

3) Humility and Meekness

A priest can never enjoy inner peace, unless characterized by the Lord Jesus' humility and meekness. He has thus called us, we priests, to His school to learn and acquire both virtues: "**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). Pride is a vice that ruins both essential virtues in our priestly life, especially when such pride is embodied

in self-admiration and ignorance of one's flaws. This is the attitude of a person that sees a splinter in the eye of someone else, but does not see the wooden beam that is in his own eye (Refer to Matthew 7:3-4). Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Teresa of the Infant Jesus teach us to consider ourselves the weakest of all humans; and this attitude is special grace from God, because it liberates us from watching others and looking for their shortcomings with the aim of offending them, forgetting this wisdom: "He who watches others dies of bitterness". We are indeed in need of such love that covers up a multitude of sins (1Peter 4:8).

How much more **we need priestly spirituality** that revives our souls, lifts them up to soar to the tops of spirituality, and snatches them from the swamps of seeking rest and materialism, which appear as if they were the main purposes of priesthood. How abominable our ministry would become, if it depended on material gains given to us in return! What is indeed even worse is refraining from service if not rewarded by money. What does it mean to say, "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give" (Matthew 10:8) ? How many times did we experience that God is more generous than us ? Therefore, it bitterly hurts that some of those who were given the honor of this sacred priesthood do not celebrate the Divine Liturgy daily, if not given stipend! How can those priests be then nourished spiritually?

Therefore, **the Maronite Patriarchal Synod** advises priests to deepen their spiritual life by celebrating the Holy Eucharist, their daily spiritual nourishment, by persevering in the reading of the sacred scripture, in personal and communal prayer in the parish, as well as praying with their congregations, especially the prayers of the Divine Office (Refer to text 7: The Priests and Deacons in the Maronite Church, 23). The priest prays for and on behalf of his congregation. So he does not forget that "Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God"(Heb 5:1).

We believe it is important to focus at seminary schools on implanting these three priestly virtues in those who will be ordained priests, following the example of Christ the High Priest.

Following the example of Christ in accomplishing His mission.

4. Christ, the High Priest, has entrusted to us, the clergy, **the ministry of His redemptive service** and set to us **an example in accomplishing it: "Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd"** (Matthew 9: 35–36).

Lord Jesus wants us to be constantly **doing missionary work** in our eparchies, among our parishes and in our church. Moreover, our faithful need us to convey to them the Gospel of Jesus, to testify to His compassion and humanitarian sense, to make Him present everywhere, to take Him to their homes, and to reflect His image before them.

Life concerns have overshadowed the priestly mission, which has become limited, for most of our priests, to serving inside the church, while our faithful has become detached from them and alienated from the parish community.

Hence, we appeal to the beloved priests **to balance between their life concerns and priestly duties**. The first of these duties is visiting parishioners, in their homes, knowing about their circumstances, discovering their problems and needs, and bringing them closer to the church. How many couples suffer problems and disagreements that require the mediation

of the parish priest and the bishop of the diocese to resolve them before they escalate? This is especially true given that the number of family lawsuits in our tribunals is alarmingly increasing. Moreover, many of our young people are leading a marginalized life, getting lost, and wasting their youth, during which they have to make their most important life decisions; they are all in need of a parish priest who can befriend them, listen to them, guide them with love, and bring them to Christ through his love! Let alone those who suffer poverty, deprivation, isolation, marginalization, disease and disabilities.

Those, says Pope Francis, will be the responsibility of the Church's love, to heal their wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care. Let us not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from our humanity.

Lord Jesus wandered about in "**towns and villages**", which are nowadays represented in countries of expansion all over the five continents. Many of our church people immigrated, just as others did, following the Lebanese war which having started with the armed conflict lasting from 1975 to 1989, continues to this day in the form of political, economic and security crises. Such crises ruin our families' livelihood and our young people's future, and open the door of immigration wide before them.

While **we are working hard with all means available for the Church**, in all eparchies, religious orders, parishes and in multiple institutions, to maintain our presence in Lebanon and **the Patriarchal Territories of the Middle East**, we should care for our immigrant children, **and heed the call to cover the needs of parishes and missions in the countries of expansion**. Our Church needs the generosity of our priests, whether diocesan or religious, to serve both the roots and the branches scattered all over the world.

Following the example of Christ in His mercy

5. Dear brother priests, the Jubilee Year of Mercy **reminds us** that **our inner being** is made **merciful**, by the Holy Spirit on the day of our ordination, **according to the example of Jesus the merciful**. Just as Jesus Christ is the manifestation of the Father's mercy, the priest is the manifestation of Christ's mercy. He manifests love, tenderness and compassion that Jesus showed on all occasions: with the sick whom He healed (Refer to Matthew 14:14), with lost and burdened people (Matthew 9:36), with the crowd that He fed with a few loaves of bread and fish (Matthew 15:37), with the widow of Nain whose only son was raised from the dead (Matthew 7:15), with Matthew the tax collector whom He called to follow Him (Refer to Matthew 9:9–13), and with the adulterous whom He did not judge (Refer to John 8:4–11). **He taught us divine mercy** that seeks the lost through the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:7–1) and that of the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), and taught us compassion that forgives the sins of the penitent with exceeding joy and reconciles them through the parable of the prodigal son (Refer to Luke 15:32–1). He, in fact, **called us to forgive** those who trespass against us seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), and to have compassion on one another just as God shows compassion unto us (Refer to Matthew 18:33–35). Moreover, He taught us that forgiveness is the means that enables us to attain peace of heart (Refer to the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee of Mercy, par. 8 & 9) .

6. **We can best describe the compassion that should characterize our priesthood** through Lord Jesus' commandments, on which His Holiness Pope Francis elaborates:

The Lord commands us: "Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and the gifts will be given to you; a good measure packed together shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you." (Luke 6:37–38).

Pope Francis explains these commandments as follows: "First of all, He commands us **not to judge and not to condemn**, for he who does not want to be condemned by God must not make himself a judge for his brother. Indeed, human beings judge appearances; as for the Father, He examines the heart.

How harmful are words stemming from feelings of jealousy and envy are! Backbiting a brother distorts his image, blemishes his reputation and makes him prone to gossip. On the other hand, refraining from judging others means that we appreciate what is good in each person and do not cause him or her pain as a result of our partial judgment and of claiming omniscience. But this is not yet enough to express compassion, since **Jesus also asks us to be tolerant and generous**, to flow with God's gifts to us. In other words, this means that we ought to be generous toward everyone, knowing that God also pours His gifts on us abundantly" (Bull of Indiction of Jubilee of Mercy,14).

How painful it is that such folk of whom His Holiness Pope Francis warns be found among the ranks of the clergy! **They cause evil and doubt**, thus losing their listeners' respect. They even degrade the dignity of priesthood, particularly when they judge their superiors and supreme ecclesiastical authority.

Dear Brother Priests,

7. **We have liturgically passed through the door of the holy year of mercy.** We thus hope you and ourselves a Passover with that of Christ to a new life. God the Savior has opened before us the Sacred Paschal path, as He passed

through His death and resurrection from our world to the Father (Refer to John1:13); and through His Passover, He transferred humanity at large from old sin to the new grace, from the state of the old man enslaved to sin, to that of the new one liberated by the grace of God.

I wish you and all of us this Easter Passover, which constitutes the best praise on the feast of our priesthood stemming from the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Without this sacrament, our priesthood would be lost, just as water is wasted and lost in sinks.

Finally, we thank God, together with you, for He shields us with His grace, and protects us with His hand laid upon us at the hour of our ordination, and with His mercy He keeps us, so that we do not fall out of the circle of His merciful hand with which He encompasses us.

With my love, my prayers and my Apostolic Blessing

From our See in Bkerke on March 21, 2016.

+ **Bechara Boutros Cardinal Rai**

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East

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