

The Homily of Patriarch Bechara Peter Rai at his Enthronement as Patriarch of Antioch and all the East.

Friday, March 25, 2011

Feast of the Annunciation

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the son of God” (Lk 1:35)

1. With the annunciation of the Angel to Mary, “communion and love” which I have chosen as the motto for my patriarchal ministry, were brought forth. The One God, out of his love for us, entered into partnership with us. The Father sent the Angel Gabriel to Mary of Nazareth to announce to all of humanity his divine plan of redemption, the Son, Jesus Christ, fruit of divine love, with his supernatural power became flesh in the Virgin Mary by the descent of the Holy Spirit, to achieve the salvation of men and their redemption. Then, humanity entered, by the person of Mary, the Virgin Mother, into communion with the One God, in his Trinity, when she expressed her consent full of faith, hope and love. She said: “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word.” (Lk 1:38) What a miraculous exchange between God and man, an exchange of communion and love, which continues throughout history by the descent of the Holy Spirit and with his action!

2. The event of the annunciation, which has been reported by the Evangelist Luke, was also reported in the honored Koran, in Surat Al-Omran (44-48): “Behold! The angel said: “O Mary! Allah gives you good tidings of a word from him, his name will be Christ Issa, the son of Mary, held in honor in his childhood and in maturity...and Allah will teach him the Book and Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel and appoint him a messenger to the children of Israel.” The honored Koran also continues the story in Surat Mariam (15–36), adding that “the one born from Mariam said that he is a servant of Allah, his prophet, his sign and his mercy”, and then later connects his incarnation, death and resurrection saying: “So Peace is upon me the day I was born, the day that I die and the day that I shall be raised up to life” (32).

This event of the annunciation, common to Christianity and Islam and which the Church celebrates on March 25, the Lebanese State has also decreed (Decree No. 2369-27/2/2010) that it be a National Holiday, meaning by this initiative that Lebanon is a homeland of “communion and love”. Indeed it is already so by its National Pact, the covenant of common life which is fortified by its constitution which says: “There is no legitimacy for any authority that goes against common life” (Forward). It is based upon the mutual recognition of each other, the one destiny, and the forming of a perfect union within the national social fabric. It is likewise found in the Lebanese formula, based upon equality in the participation of Christians and Muslims in the government and the administration. Out of this we expect to assure stability in our existence and achieve democracy and economic prosperity, on the condition that this formula stays in a permanent development so as to meet the requirements of modernity and historical experience (Political Work Policy, pg 30).

3. “Communion and love” have directed my whole life since my birth in Himlaya, in the Matn district, on February 25, 1940. I was baptized at the Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation, in the village of Chouya, on

March 25. "Communion and love" have accompanied me as a monk in the Mariamite Religious Order which I joined in September 1952 and professed my religious perpetual vows in July, 1962, and as I was ordained a priest by the late Bishop Mikhael Doumit, Bishop of Sarba, September 3, 1967, and then as Bishop, Patriarchal Vicar, at Bkerké on July 12, 1986 and later as Bishop of the Eparchy of Jbeil on July 8, 1990.

This same "communion in love", I have requested from His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI as soon as I was elected as Patriarch of Antioch and all the East on March 15 of this year. He granted this to me out of his affection and love, as the supreme shepherd of the Universal Church. This was told to us by His Excellency the Papal Nuncio Monsignor Gabriel Caccia, who also made it public to us, and to whom I expressed my deep thanks for his solicitude and care which he showed and for his presence with us today representing His Holiness the Sovereign Pontiff.

4. Your Beatitude and Eminence, Our father venerable and beloved Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, twenty five years ago you imposed your blessed hands upon me and ordained me bishop by the grace of God and the choice of our Holy Bishops Synod. Today by the imposition of your holy hands and the participation of my brother bishops you enthrone me upon the Antiochian Patriarchal See, as your successor, Father and Head of our Maronite Church. This again is with the grace of God, the choice of our Holy Synod and the prayers of the sons and daughters of the Church, clergy and laity. While expressing to your Beatitude and their Excellencies the Bishops my great thankfulness for the confidence and blessing, I promise you to continue my life in union and love as I receive today the canonical appointment from your hand and the hand of my brother and Patriarchal Vicar General and Administrator of our Patriarchal Church, His Excellency Bishop Roland Abou Jaoude, thanking him for all the sincere and loving efforts he exerted in this mission.

5. This communion in love, I have also expressed to my brothers, their Beatitudes, Patriarchs of our Oriental Churches, in the letter which His Excellency, the Administrator of our Patriarchal Church addressed, in the name of our Holy Synod and here you are, Your Beatitudes, with the venerable Bishops of your churches, exchanging this with me by your blessed presence with us and your generous participation in this solemn celebration. Thank you from the depth of my heart.

6. On this blessed day which God wants us to enjoy and to be happy, I am pleased to express my love and thanks to you, Your Excellency, the President of the Republic of Lebanon, General Michel Sleiman. It is God, who by his divine wisdom and concern, called upon both of us, successively, from the regions of Jbeil and Amchit, where we are neighbors, only a narrow path separates your parents' home and the Eparchial Residence, you to the presidency of our country and me to head our Church. We ask Almighty God, to lead our steps, in communion and love, at the service of the homeland and the Church. Thank you for your presence with the First Lady.

With communion and love I shall cooperate with you, Your Excellency, Speaker of the House of Parliament, Mr. Nabih Berry and with you, Your Excellency Prime Minister Sheikh Saadeddin Hariri and with your Excellency the Appointed Prime Minister Mr. Najeeb Mikati and with their Excellencies the Ministers, members of Parliament and Lebanese government, staff and Ambassadors. Thank you all for your presence, prayers and love. May God help us, with the intercession of the Holy Virgin Mary, Our Lady of the Annunciation, to complete our national structure in "communion and love", so that Lebanon will always prosper in this East by its example and mission, as saluted by the Venerable Pope John Paul the Great, who is to be beatified by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on Sunday May 1, Feast Day of the Divine Mercy and of Our Lady of Lebanon.

7. With regards to “Communion and Love,” communion in its vertical dimension is the union to God and, in its horizontal dimension the union others. At the same time Love joins and secures all, the way cement secures building stones. For this communion and love we work inside our Maronite Church, eparchies and religious orders, clergy and laity, fraternities, apostolic associations and institutions. In “communion and love” we also cooperate on the Catholic level in the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops and their committees, as well as in the Assembly of Oriental Catholic Patriarchs. And in “communion and love” we also work on the ecumenical level, collaborating with all in total love and a sense of responsibility, with their Beatitudes and Holiness, the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Churches and their Bishops and the heads of the Evangelical Churches, especially though the Middle East Council of Churches.

8. We shall live together this “communion in love,” in Lebanon whose “glory is in its mission.” The saying “the glory of Lebanon was given to him” has been applied to the Maronite Patriarch, and was taken from the prophecy of Isaiah 2:35. However, it is given to him and to his Church only in as much as we engage in the building up of communion and witness to love. The glory of Lebanon however, is damaged when we shut ourselves off to others or close in upon ourselves. However, it develops and rises when are open to the other, to this East and to the world. “This glory” is given to Lebanon and to its people “if we are all for the homeland” as we sing in our National anthem. This homeland is not for one community, party or group alone, it should not be monopolized by any, because being monopolized by a group is a humiliation to all and a loss to “this glory” whose greatness is in the diversity of its spiritual families and their richness. I do not say in the “diversity of its confessions” for they have all been tainted by political and partisan colors which have stripped them of their sanctity, the purity of their faith and the spirituality of their religion. As lamented by the son of the cedars, Gibran Khalil Gibran: “Woe to a nation with too many confessions but little faith”.

For the sake of “communion and love” we work together in the countries of the Middle East and with you the representatives of the leaders of our brother and sister countries, and we work to preserve and strengthen our relations of solidarity with the Arab world, and to establish a sincere and complete dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters and build together a future in common life and cooperation. For one single destiny links Muslims and Christians in Lebanon and the countries of the region in which, a culture particular to all of us, was built up by the diverse civilizations which passed one after another in our lands and thus we have a common patrimony in which we all shared in its creation and now work at its cultural development.

We accompany with anxiety the uprisings and protests which are taking place here and there in our Arab countries. We regret the victims and the wounded and we pray for stability and peace.

For a “communion and love”, we work and cooperate in the world of the expansion, where the sons and daughters of our churches live on the five continents. We salute them wherever they are and we feel them present with us in this holy celebration. We treasure them in our hearts and minds and we carry them with our continued prayers. Their bishops and priests have conveyed to our Synod their hopes, expectations and their needs and we shall work earnestly to meet them in their needs.

9. All of you, dear brothers, will ask me about the program of my ministry. You have expressed your expectations, thoughts and challenges in the media, in personal letters, in scientific studies and in social and academic discussions. I have also read them in your eyes and in your faces before my election as Patriarch, and after, during your many delegations which filled Bkerké and in the celebrations of joy in your villages and cities and in the banners which you raised high.

My program is a continuation of the program of my predecessors throughout 1600 years, from what was constant in the faith and national position:

From the founding event, who is Saint Maron and his disciples;

From the first Maronite Patriarch, Saint John Maron, who established the Maronite Church on Catholic doctrine and made of her an independent nation with her government in Mount Lebanon;

From Patriarch Jeremias El Amchiti who professed the Maronite faith at the Fourth Lateran Ecumenical Council in 1213;

From the Patriarch Martyr Gabriel Hjoula who offered himself to the Mamluke Governor of Tripoli in redemption of those arrested bishops, monks, and noble men, and who was burned in the city square in 1367;

From the Patriarchs Rizzi who were open to the modernity of Europe and in their time founded the Maronite College in Rome in 1594, which gave a galaxy of learned men who built bridges of culture between East and West and were the foundation of the Arab Renaissance;

From the two Patriarchs John Makhlouf and George Omeira, who established relations between the Emirs of the mountains, the Popes, and the Kings of Italy and Europe in the 17th Century;

From the honorable Patriarch Estephan Doueih, Father of Lebanese history and the herald of Church reform, who in his time and with his blessing, the three Maronite Religious Orders were founded;

From the Patriarch Joseph Dergham El Khazen, Patriarch of the well known Lebanese Synod held in 1736 in the Monastery of Our Lady of Louaizy, Zouk Mosbeh;

From the Patriarch Joseph Hbeich who confirmed the unity of the Lebanese – Christian, Druze and Muslim – through a common pact in Antelias in 1840;

From Patriarch Elias El Hoyek, the Father of the independent Great Lebanon, who presided at the official Lebanese delegation to the Peace Conference in Versailles – Paris in 1919;

From the Patriarch Anthony Arida who sold even his pectoral cross to feed the hungry of World War II and who worked at completing the independence of Lebanon by the final withdrawal of all foreign armies in 1943;

From the Patriarch Paul Peter Cardinal Meouchi who was open, very wisely, to the wisdom of both the Arab and the Western World and calmed the revolution of 1958;

From the Patriarch Anthony Peter Cardinal Khoreich, who was a wise navigator, and led the boat of the Church and the homeland during the midst of the surging waves of the Lebanese war and refused the project of dividing Lebanon and accepting outside alliances;

From our father the Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Cardinal Sfeir, who struggled with insistence to free both the national decision making and the land of Lebanon from all forms of tutelage and occupation, worked for reconciliation in Mount Lebanon and realized needed Church reforms, and in his time great Church events took place:

The beatification and canonization in our Church of Hardini, Rafqa, Abouna Yacob and Br. Estephan. The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches was published in (1990), the Special Assembly of Bishops for Lebanon was called in 1995, which gave us the Apostolic Exhortation, a New Hope for Lebanon, 1997, the Maronite Patriarchal Synod was convoked from 2003 to 2006, and finally the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East took place in 2010. All of these constitute an extension of the Church's spring-time started by the Second Vatican Council (1961 to 1965).

10. My program is to compliment the implementation and realization of the resolutions and suggestions of those Synods at the level of the structures of the Patriarchal See as well as at the level of the ecclesial educational and social institutions in Lebanon, the Middle East and throughout the world. All this will not be done without the help of everyone and with modern and efficient means. In the midst of all of this we have ever before our eyes our youth, our young men and young women, and the 1,300,000 students - boys and girls in schools and universities - who are our future and the hope of our Church and homeland.

Our concern is also the family, the essential cell of our society and the natural and first school of our values, and the “domestic church” which educates in faith and prayer.

Our strength is our bishops, priests, monks and nuns, our faithful men and women. Our future and promising strength is found in our priestly and religious vocations. The link which keeps us in communication both inside, outside, and throughout the world is the social media and communications, which we salute and wish continual prosperity, and thank them for their presence today and throughout all these days and for their continued cooperation with us. Our assurance is Christ our hope, the Holy Spirit who renews us, and the love of God the Father who overshadows us.

11. Finally, I would like to express my great thanks to the “unknown soldiers” - the technicians, those who worked with all the logistics, the security team, the choir, benefactors and all who participated and prepared this ceremony, working day and night sacrificing their time, money and the effort of their hands. May God reward them with an abundance of his grace and blessings.

12. I begin my spiritual and pastoral service in all the variety of dimensions and levels with your help and with the words of Our Mother, the Virgin Mary, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord”, realizing that I am called to carry the redemptive cross with all its weight. I ask the help of the Divine Redeemer, “My grace is sufficient unto you”, and I ask the intercession of St Rafqa, the daughter of Himlaya and the respected Lebanese Maronite Order, as well as the missionary of suffering, and I rely upon the merits of the blood of the martyrs of Lebanon, the intercession of her saints and on the prayers of the sick, the handicapped, the elderly, and those who suffer in their body, soul or spirit and who join their suffering to the redemptive suffering of Christ. You are in the depth of my heart, mind and prayer - you, your families and all who look after you in homes, hospitals, centers and institutions.

I place our Church and our beloved homeland under the watchful eyes of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of the Annunciation and of Lebanon, consecrating both of them to her Immaculate Heart, and awaiting the consecration of the countries of the Middle East to her motherhood in one act, in recognition of the suggestions of the Bishops of the Middle East gathered last October in Rome.

O Mary our Mother, extend your holy hands and bless our homeland, Lebanon, and this Middle East; intercede for us that we may live like you in communion and love (mahabba wa sharika) and serve the new humanity redeemed by the blood of Christ your Son. Grant that we may all meet, through your help, in a universal brotherhood, as it is seen in this day in which we celebrate the Feast of the Annunciation and our National Holiday, and with you we shall raise glory and thanksgiving to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.