

**Patriarch's opening address at the Synod of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church  
Ain Traz - Lebanon June 17, 2013**

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**Speech of Patriarch Gregorios III at the opening of the Synod of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church  
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**God's word is ... a light unto my path** (Psalm 118: 105 LXX)

At the beginning of this Holy Synod we thank Almighty God, in the words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ." (Ephesians 1: 3-12)

In this text we find a wonderful description of our holy calling in Church and society today. We also find in the words of the Apostle Paul consolation and strength in the current tragic conditions experienced by our country, the Church of the Middle East and our fellow-citizens of all Christian and Muslim denominations.

This is what Saint Paul wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation. For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf.” (2 Corinthians 1: 3-11)

### **Tragic circumstances**

These holy verses give strength to us pastors and to our sons and daughters, the priests, monks, nuns and faithful laymen and women who can hear them, thanks to the media. We hope that those words give them reason for fortitude and consolation, patience and perseverance, resilience and moral courage in these circumstances prevailing in our country, especially in dear wounded Syria.

Some eight million of its people have become refugees in their own beloved country and abroad, particularly in Lebanon, which carries the great burden of receiving hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Syria, which received Palestinians sixty-five years ago, Iraqis after the invasion of Iraq, and Lebanese after the 2006 war, now has displaced children whose suffering of every kind is comparable.

We thank their generous host Lebanon, its president, government, institutions and people and ask God to protect Lebanon from the fire of the Syrian crisis, which affects virtually the whole region.

### **Three lights**

We pray God for peace in our region as a whole. May God protect it and us too. As for our Synod this year, its work will take place with **three lights** to illuminate its deliberations and themes .

First there is the **Apostolic Exhortation**, which was signed by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in the Paulist Fathers’ Church of Saint Paul in Harissa. It was distributed through YOUCAT (or Youth Catechism) to every one of our eparchies and parishes. It is essential that we work in the light of the guidance from that document in all aspects of our ecclesial, pastoral, youth, cultural and monastic life.

This Exhortation will really remain a beacon and programme of action for our Churches in the Middle East, particularly as its title defines the meaning of Christians’ presence in the Middle East: **"Communion and Witness"** - communion at home in our Church and among the Churches, and witness in our community, in interaction with it, bringing it the light and values of the Gospel.

Secondly, this year **2012-2013** was proclaimed the **Year of Faith**: a good opportunity to work by all means to strengthen evangelical faith in our parishes, and take initiatives through our faith activities, praying with the Church, “Strengthen, O Christ our God, holy Orthodox faith in thy churches and monasteries unto ages of ages.”

We are asked to provide a report to Rome on initiatives that we've taken in the Year of Faith.

The **third light** comes to us from the **Synod held in Rome in October 2012**, which we, the Patriarch, attended, together with my brother, His Grace Archbishop Joseph Absi, Patriarchal Vicar in Damascus as your representative. Our 2013 Paschal Letter was devoted to clarifying the subject of the Synod entitled “**The New Evangelization**.” It highlighted the importance of the Gospel in our Muslim majority Arab society and in the life of Eastern Christians, because the Gospel was born in our East, and Christ, who is the living Gospel, was also born in our land.

These three lights will illumine all the work of our Synod.

The **topics** that we shall address in this Synod were established by the Synodal Committee in consultation with us.

We now introduce the key points in this synodal programme:--

- We shall study how to implement in practice the above-mentioned **Apostolic Exhortation**, in our Church's eparchies locally, regionally and abroad.
- We shall examine **legal issues** prepared by the Canonical Committee, concerning the particular law of our Church based on the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, and other topics concerning the ecclesiastical tribunal and canon law.
- We shall evaluate **the work of Saint Anna's Major Seminary** which trains all our eparchial priests.
- We shall discuss issues relating to **the observance** in our parishes of **World Priest Day and the Year of Faith**.
- We shall also review **the working of the Holy Synod** during my patriarchal service, take a look at the topics examined and decisions taken, what has been implemented and what still remains to be done, and consider how to implement the work and decisions of the synod so that it can be really at the service of our parishes in order to strengthen their faith and confirm them in their calling, mission and role in the Church and society.
- We shall have plenty of time to hear **reports on the current crisis** from their graces the bishops of our eparchies **in Syria**. We asked each eparchy to establish a detailed report on the situation, describing, for example: the affected villages - churches demolished - IDPs - institutions affected ... and what steps can be taken in the face of this reality.
- This is what we said in the Lent Letter for this year 2013. We described some conditions in our eparchies, and we made a proposal for a special **Solidarity Committee** at the level of our Church:

*“Solidarity Committee*

*So we found it necessary to form a central Solidarity Committee in Syria under our patronage to bring about the content of this appeal. We propose the formation of*

*regional sub-committees also in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait, and also in the eparchies of the expansion, and in our parishes in Western Europe.*

*We hope that our brother Bishops will help us with this and propose names of business-people and people of global influence and relations to be members of local committees.*

*We hope thereby to be well-prepared and practically to cope with future challenges awaiting our faithful and our Christian presence.*

*Solidarity: an act of Faith*

*Solidarity stems from the belief that we are one Church, one body, one Christian family, one single homeland. Faith is expressed in good works, especially through effective charity towards those in need. Those in need are our Church's children."*

- **Nominations to the episcopal ministry:** of course we shall work to draw up a list of priests suitable to serve as bishops. It is axiomatic that one of the most important duties in the Holy Synods is that of preparing good, humane bishops, right for their place and right for the time. The bishop is a man of God and a man of society, a good shepherd after God's heart.
- We shall also study the **five-yearly parish reports** submitted to us. In this way we shall review the general situation of our parishes both in beloved Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq and Kuwait and in the expansion in Europe, North and South America, Australia and New Zealand. Interestingly, our Church is not confined to one country, but we are the Church with the most diverse presence and spread in Arab countries and worldwide. It is useful to explain this through statistics. That is why I have drawn up a list (in an appendix) to show the presence of our Church in the world.

#### **Future challenges and the role of the Church**

We shall face more woes due to some countries' design on armaments here and there, especially in Syria, as the world nowadays seems only to understand the language of arms, war and destruction, violence and terrorism. Are not past wars, and those still on-going, not enough to illustrate and convince states that weapons and armaments do not solve problems or stop wars? On the contrary, they merely fuel violence and hatred, and cause more death and destruction, displacement and suffering, at all the levels of the economy, society, health, family, youth, education and employment. When the convening of the Second Geneva Conference was announced, a ray of hope broke through for everyone, but then we were hit by the decision of the world's biggest country to supply arms while other countries joined in. We consider supplying weapons to be a criminal act akin to murder, as it facilitates massacres, and mass killings are crimes against humanity which deserve prosecution under international law.

That is why, in the name of this Synod and its members, who are scattered across many countries, we call on all parties to halt weapons and armaments, and really to work to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis, based on dialogue and respect for the lives of citizens, and on reconciliation, forgiveness and self-restraint and return to God, that he may have mercy and compassion on our families, on children and orphans, women, young people and students. This is the real atmosphere, which will prepare for the Second Geneva Conference, and pave the way for a peaceful solution to the suffocating Syrian crisis: for everyone knows that there is no winner through weapons and

armaments, but all are losers. Only through reconciliation, dialogue and return to the values of our faith is victory achieved, with peace and security, prosperity and progress for all! This is the way of peace for Arab countries, especially Syria and Lebanon, which we see burning and where day after day we see citizens' suffering at all levels increasing.

Worst of all is the division of the Arab world, which is increasing day by day: a political, social, religious and tribal split... We bitterly regret the latest chapter of this division, in which the Egyptian President severed diplomatic ties with Syria. This is exactly the opposite of what we have been we calling for in all our speeches and talks, I mean the Arab world's unity: unity among Arab ranks, in Arab decisions and of the Arab position.

It is quite wicked to spread hatred, hostility, animosity and revenge, murder and spite among citizens of the same country and city, village and neighbourhood, family, school and place of worship.

Beloved! Our Church, as I just said, is widespread across our Arab countries and overseas. I see our most sacred duty as being to work to disseminate the ideas and tendencies of pastoral, religious and faith-based Gospel values to all countries everywhere. We have to stand together as a Greek Catholic Episcopal Lobby or pressure group to promote the ideas that I have set out at the Opening of this Holy Synod. This is a political act and a real sacred duty that we must carry out with courage and zeal, love and dedication, sincerity and competence. In this way we shall serve our homelands, communities, parishes, churches, communion and coexistence, citizenship, freedom and democracy.

Today in Lebanon there is a real risk of political life being immobilized, which has repercussions right across Lebanon. Lebanon has entered the fire of the Syrian crisis. Real non-intervention in the Syrian crisis means unity in Lebanese internal affairs. Lebanon's salvation lies in working only in its own national interest and in the interest of the rights of every individual and community .

The Church is the only one today against weapons. It is free, so let it be quite free in its advocacy for tolerance and unity. The Church has the right position! We are the only ones not advocating weapons. The Church's only interest is the national interest and human interest, the interest of every human being. The Church today has the great role of working for unity in Lebanon, Syria and the Arab world, because its role is based on Gospel values.

Unfortunately there are some who prefer power to love and act accordingly, but we advocate the power of love and not the love of power.

## **Conclusion**

That is the work that lies ahead of us, beloved brethren in the episcopate and most reverend members of the Holy Synod, and dear Superiors General, you are most welcome to this Holy Synod. I should like to describe the work of our Synod through this kathisma (Tone 8) from Pentecost Matins, "After thy Rising from the tomb, O Christ, and thy divine Ascension to the height of heaven, thou didst send down thy glory to thy disciples who had seen God, renewing a right spirit within them, O merciful Saviour; therefore as a tuneful lyre they mystically made clear as with a divine plectrum thy melodies and thy dispensation." May our Synod be a tuneful lyre!

We place our Synod under the protection of Mother Mary, Our Lady of the Annunciation and Patron of the patriarchal summer headquarters, who visited all areas of Lebanon in the month of May. On Sunday 16 June in Harissa we, together with all Lebanese Church denominations, commemorated and venerated her to ask her intercession for Lebanon, Syria, the Arab world and the whole world!

I should like to end with a hymn in the First Tone chosen for you from Friday evening Vespers in the Octoechos, a book of wonderful spiritual wisdom. "Holy Bride of God, make me holy, sanctified and sober, meek, still, well-ordered, upright and devout, true, courageous, prudent, long-suffering, good, fair and measured, blameless, unblemished and without censure, and beyond all these a partaker in Paradise."

May our Synod be blessed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.