



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II TO THE MARONITE COMMUNITY

Thursday, 10 February 2000

Your Beatitude,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Maronite Church,

1. I welcome you to the house of Peter's Successor and to the Eternal City, where the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and of so many holy martyrs and confessors are preserved. You have come from Lebanon, from other Middle Eastern countries and from the diaspora to celebrate the Great Jubilee in these days with His Beatitude Cardinal Nasrallah Pierre Sfeir, Patriarch of Antioch, the "Father and Head" (cf. *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, can. 55) of your Maronite Church. Your pilgrimage to Rome is the first of the Eastern Catholic Churches, for the Patriarchs, Bishops and faithful of the other Eastern traditions will be coming to Rome in the months ahead.

2. Wishing to give fresh proof of your unfailing, age-old fidelity to the Apostolic See of Rome, you have come here for the feast of St Maron, a pillar of your Church, whose memorial is celebrated according to your liturgical calendar on 9 February. On that day, you took part in a solemn Eucharistic celebration in the Basilica of St Mary Major, at which your beloved Patriarch presided.

Yesterday's celebration, like today's audience, strengthens the close bond that exists between the Sees of Rome and of Antioch, that ancient city where "the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (Acts 11: 26) and where St Peter himself lived. Therefore, spurred by an "inner command" that stems from your faith, you have come "to visit Cephas" (*Gal 1: 18*) in order to live your ecclesial communion with him. Indeed, your full communion with the Church of Rome is a tangible expression of your awareness of unity: "Unity is an essential characteristic of the Church and her deepest nature requires it" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *A New Hope for Lebanon*,

n. 84; cf. Apostolic Letter *Oriente lumen*, n. 19). In these days you are having a powerful experience of this ecclesial unity, which will help you in turn to be more and more committed to evangelizing the world, since the Maronite tradition is also "a privileged opportunity for reviving the dynamism and missionary zeal which each of the faithful must share" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *A New Hope for Lebanon*, n. 84).

3. Aware and proud of the importance of unity with Rome, your Church, the spiritual daughter of St Maron, has seen many saints flourish down the centuries. On 9 October 1977 my Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, canonized Sharbel Makhlouf, a hermit monk and priest of the Maronite Lebanese Order, and on 17 November 1985 I myself had the joy of beatifying Rafka (Rebecca), a Maronite nun of the Maronite Lebanese Order, and on 10 May 1998 Nimatullah Al-Hardini, a monk and priest of the same order and the spiritual father of St Sharbel.

4. Nimatullah Al-Hardini was beatified exactly a year after my pilgrimage to Lebanon in 1997. That is why it is pleasant for me to remember here the time I spent in Lebanon, where the Maronite Church has her roots and real centre.

The new hope for Lebanon described in the Post-Synodal Exhortation, the document that resulted from the work of the Special Assembly for Lebanon of the Synod of Bishops, was "my cry for resurrection and peace", in which I "once again called the world's attention to the biblical land of cedars" (*L'Osservatore Romano* daily edition, 12-13 May 1997, p. 1). I encourage all the pastors and faithful of the Catholic communities in Lebanon to continue to welcome and absorb this Exhortation's ideas and suggestions. I am pleased to know that the first encouraging signs of its practical implementation can already be seen, as is also evident from the work of the last Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon (APECL), which met last November in Bkerké.

5. I am also pleased to announce that yesterday, after a very lengthy closure due to the Second World War and then to the difficult situation in Lebanon, the Pontifical Maronite College has officially reopened its doors, thanks especially to the tireless efforts of Bishop Émile Eid, Patriarchal Procurator in Rome. This institute, desired by Pope Gregory XIII, dates back to the 16th century. It has had countless distinguished students, of whom the most famous were Stéphane Douaihi, the future Maronite Patriarch, and the great scholar, Joseph S. Assemani, First Custodian of the Vatican Library, a renowned orientalist and canon lawyer who, among other things, played an important role in the Lebanese Maronite Synod of 1736.

I hope that the young Maronites who will live in this historic college will make a real contribution, like their predecessors, to Maronite ecclesial life in fidelity to the spirit of the universal Church.

6. As for the beloved land of Lebanon, to which the hearts of believers longingly turn, I hope that it will continue to remain faithful to its vocation as a "Message": a place where Christians can live in

peace and brotherhood with the followers of other beliefs, and can foster this form of coexistence (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *A New Hope for Lebanon*, n. 92). I would also like to tell you today with the force of love: "The Pope is always close to you all". I am beside you like a father and brother during this period when intolerance sometimes revives the ghosts of hatred which we would prefer to see vanish for ever.

Through the intercession of the Mother of God, of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, of St Maron, St Sharbel, Bl. Rafka, Bl. Nimatullah Al-Hardini and all the saints of your land, I ask the Lord to make your celebration in Rome the first fruit of the Great Jubilee. I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.

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