



Melkite – Greek Catholic Patriarchat
Of Antioch and all the East Of Alexandria and of Jerusalem
Spiritual Protector of the Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem

Letter of His Beatitude Gregorios III,
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Of Alexandria and of Jerusalem,

Solidarity in Faith and Charity

February 2013

Come ye faithful! Let us work the works of God in light. (Friday Vespers, First Week)
While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit. (Wednesday Vespers, First Week)

Solidarity in Faith and Charity

Through these and many similar words, the voice and words of our holy Fathers, our Mother Church exhorts and invites us to practise the blessed virtue of fasting, which is the soul's springtime.

In my turn, I address to the sons and daughters of our Melkite Greek Catholic Church, pastors and faithful, this quadragesimal letter entitled, "Solidarity in Faith and Charity."

Today, faced with the disasters evidenced by our Arab countries, we have especial need of solidarity, expressed through these words of Saint Paul, "... whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." (1 Corinthians 12: 26)

Today the members of this same one body, the whole Church, or most of it, is suffering. Members of the homeland are suffering! Our families are suffering.

That is why we are all called to solidarity in the Lenten services, where we read,

Those who show compassion to the poor, lend to the Saviour with awakened understanding, as it is written. What indescribable joy! For God grants them for eternity abundant recompense for their alms. (Meatfare Tuesday)

Through fasting let us all ascend the mountain of virtuous action, forsaking the sensual temptations that creep upon the ground. Let us enter into the darkness of holy visions; by the divine and mystical ascent, let us become godlike and let us look upon Christ our beloved in his beauty. (Tuesday of the First Week of Lent: Matins, Canticle Two)

While fasting with the body, brethren, let us also fast in spirit. Let us loose every bond of iniquity; let us undo the knots of every contract made by violence; let us tear up all unjust agreements; let us give bread to the hungry and welcome to our house the poor who have no roof to cover them, that we may receive great mercy from Christ our God. (Wednesday of the First Week of Lent: Vespers Sticheron Tone 8)

The situation in the Eparchies

The current situation in Syria has exceeded the scope of limited aid. Here is a description of the tragic situation in our Syrian eparchies. We need to be informed about it, both within our Church, in the Arab world beyond and in emigration countries.

The news reaching you through the media does not adequately express the catastrophic situation that citizens in general and our parishioners in particular are experiencing in the eparchies of Homs, Lattakieh, Safita and Marmarita (Christian Valley with 143 villages), Aleppo, the Hauran and Damascus.

Many of our faithful have been abducted, and have had to pay big sums as ransom in order to be freed. One hundred of our faithful have been killed, martyred, and 1000 Christians of all communities.

Twenty churches have been destroyed, damaged, laid waste, abandoned, in the above-mentioned regions, and the Divine Liturgy can no longer be celebrated. The faithful have left them, the priests have gone, as they can no longer gain access to these churches, nor have the parishes been able to hold services, for the last year or more.

To all this should be added displaced citizens in general. It is said that they number about two million. They are scattered everywhere. They pay exorbitant rents, not finding work. They have lost their homes, their jobs, their factories, shops and means of livelihood...

In addition we have poor people due to the economic crisis caused by the reduction of revenue and price increases.... Besides this, many of our faithful have left Syria for neighbouring countries, and for Europe or America.

This is but a pale reflection of the situation of our parishes. Let us add to that the situation of our students who are pursuing their studies with great difficulties, because of the perils around schools. Some schools have been closed or moved to safer places, but less appropriate for teaching, including our new school in Damascus (at Mleiha on the road to the airport), with 2200 pupils, which we have transferred to our old patriarchal school within the Cathedral precincts. The school was hit by three rockets, causing heavy damage.

Let us not mention the state of mind that overwhelms our parishes: doubt – fear – apprehension – suspense – depression – despondency ... the loss of a husband, mother, daughter, relative, friend, abductee, displaced person...

There follows a list of regions and areas damaged or laid waste to various extents:

- Eparchy of Homs: the bishop's palace, the majority of churches and church institutions in the city of Homs, Qusair, Dmeineh Sharqieh, Rableh, the St. Elijah Sanctuary, Jousi, Yabroud, Krak des Chevaliers, Christian Valley.
- Eparchy of Aleppo: the bishop's palace, churches, institutions, the (Christian) Salibi district.
- Damascus and environs: Zabadani, Harasta, Daraya (my hometown), Douma, Ain Terma, Qassaa (in Damascus) and other localities.

Churches to the rescue

All churches have been mobilised to come to the aid of citizens, including our own parishioners. We have knocked on every door, both locally, in the East and in the West, everywhere, to gather together the wherewithal to be able to continue our service and duty to our faithful, and indeed to all those who turn to us without distinguishing between one or other Muslim and Christian denomination. We renew our thanks to all who have helped us, whether within or outside Syria.

We don't know how we shall be able to continue the various aid programmes: equipment, food, heat, rent, school fees, medicines, etc...

That is why we are writing this letter at the beginning of Great Lent, to point out some aspects of the tragedy of our homeland, especially our parishes, and to make aware the sons and daughters of our Melkite Greek Catholic Church throughout the world and enable them to share in this concern and these heavy responsibilities incumbent upon us as Patriarch and on our brothers, especially the Pastors of our Eparchies in Syria.

Appeal for solidarity

For Christmas 2012, we launched an appeal for solidarity, of which this is the main part:

As Christmas draws near, given the present situation of our faithful in Syria, I address my brother Bishops in our Eparchies in Arab countries and worldwide, our male and female religious congregations, priests, monks, and nuns and lay-persons, especially businessmen and women who have global relations at various levels!

I call upon them to show solidarity with our faithful in Syria, to help us meet the immediate, urgent needs, especially of internally displaced persons in the country.

We ought to think also of the future, when we shall have to cope with more serious problems, such as

- *Rebuilding or repairing damage to our churches (especially in the Eparchy of Homs)*
- *Rebuilding or repairing damage to many institutions, presbyteries, old people's homes...*
- *Rebuilding or repairing the homes of thousands of our faithful, in co-operation with the state and other organisations.*
- *Coping with problems such as rent, costs of education, health care.*

Your aid can be given as monetary donation, advice, a word to persons able to help, NGOs, associations, institutions...

Your help is valuable! Your solidarity is vital! We put great trust in you!

Help us to help and serve, to console and support our Christians in their land, homeland and homes, in this country which is rightly called the cradle of Christianity.

Solidarity Committee

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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 a committee also in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan, among others, 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 finds its source in the faith 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.

The Holy Father calls for that in his letter for Lent this year entitled, "Believing in love arouses charity."

We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. (cf. 1 John 4: 16)

Faith without love is like a barren tree: both virtues require one another.

Lent invites us to grow in charity, in love of God and neighbour, through practical directions for fasting, prayer and charitable giving.

Today solidarity is more needful than ever: hence our appeal to all Christians of the Middle East, in all countries and denominations. We have to unite in solidarity in order to cope with the challenges of current situations of our sons and daughters, and to preserve the Christian presence, and to cope with emigration that is likely to empty the Christian East of Arab Christians.

The great problem of today is "to be or not to be"! Our appeal to form a committee of solidarity in our eparchies in Arab countries is a matter intimately linked to the future of Christians in the Middle East: a matter of life or death!

We are determined to be optimistic! Our solidarity everywhere is the real remedy against pessimism, fear, discouragement, frustration, despair, doubt... Solidarity is the real proof to show that we are a "strong, coherent Church," capable of coping with difficulties, however great, because it is trained in faith and charity, and in trust in Divine Providence that assures us, "But there shall not an hair of your head perish." (Luke 21: 18)

St Paul's Experience of Calamities

St Paul experienced many dramatic situations, similar to what we are experiencing in Syria and perhaps even more so, as he described in his letters. In spite of that he remained steadfast in his convictions based on his faith in the Gospel and his love for Jesus, as we read in this passage:

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. (2 Corinthians 4:6-11)

Let us stay in contact

Brothers and sisters! It is to this that I am calling you at the beginning of this Lent. We shall inform you through our website and means of contact about the results of our efforts to form the central solidarity committee; for it will be the lifeline for our presence, witness, communion and service in this East, the cradle of Christianity.

Solidarity for Communion and Witness

Through this letter, we call upon the efforts of everyone everywhere together to find all the means to cope with the challenges. We appeal too to our Muslim brothers to support our efforts to preserve the Christian presence with them and for them. They well know how important and effectual this Christian presence has been and still is in the history of the Arab world at every level.

They know how much our educational, cultural, health, religious, social and intellectual institutions, are in the service of all citizens without distinction. That is all threatened with disappearing if the Christian presence were to vanish from the region.

Christian solidarity should then be Muslim-Christian solidarity, as the aim is to serve our society, our Arab homelands without distinction, as was the case throughout history. We Muslims and Christians should be in solidarity for a better future for our rising generations.

It was said of the early Christians, especially in Antioch, where they were first called Christian: "See! How they love one another." We need this witness today. This love is indeed the lifeline for the Church in the Middle East to enable it to be "communion and witness."

This was the topic of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation and the synthesis of the Synod for the Middle East that we held in Rome in October 2010, on the eve of the outbreak of crises in the Middle East.

Watch and walk in love

Dear friends! I'd like to remind you of my patriarchal and priestly motto: "Watch and walk in love." Now we are all called to make this patriarchal motto, the motto of our Melkite Greek Catholic Church. Scripture tells us: "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith," (1 John 5: 4) to which I add, "Our love is the victory."

That is my appeal at the beginning of this blessed Great Lent, on our arduous road, the way of the cross of our country, Syria, and of our Arab countries, the cross of our faithful, towards the joys and hopes of the Resurrection, of the springtime of the Resurrection.

In conclusion, we call upon everyone, as we usually do, to practise fasting, abstinence, prayers, self-denial, asceticism, good works, and to grow in virtue, compassion, forgiveness, perseverance and love. (See the Appendix below)

Solidarity in Lenten prayers

We renew our call to fast and pray as we did in our Christmas Letter, 2012, especially to hold daily prayers in all our churches for **reconciliation, dialogue, peace and security** in Syria and all our Arab countries.

Our conviction is firm: reconciliation is the lifeline. The real victory for us all will come when we reject weapons and halt the flow of arms, from wherever they come. This will be the preliminary to reconciliation.

Once more, we should like to hear the voice of our holy Fathers, the voice of piety, of faith, hope and charity:

Let us joyfully begin the all-hallowed season of abstinence; and let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments of Christ our God, with the brightness of love and the splendour of prayer, with the purity of holiness and the strength of good courage. So, clothed in raiment of light, let us hasten to the Holy Resurrection on the third day, that shines upon the world with the glory of eternal life.

(Monday of the First Week of Lent: Sessional Hymn Tone 2)

Holy Lent to each and all.
With my blessing, affection and prayer!



+ Gregorios III
Patriarch

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