



CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

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SYMPOSIUM “10 YEARS AFTER ECCLESIA IN MEDIA ORIENTE”

General Introduction

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Introduction

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Media Oriente* (EMO) of H.H. Benedict XVI (9/14/2012), fruit of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops (Rome, 10-24/10/2010) entitled *The Church in the Middle East: communion and witness, "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul"* (Acts 4:32), is still, after more than a decade, of extraordinary relevance. It constitutes a pressing appeal, addressed to all of us, to persevere in the implementation of its directions.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that it is the last great magisterial document of Pope Benedict – whom we cannot fail to remember and celebrate here! – before his resignation as Pontiff, which he announced a few months after the document’s release, in February 2013. Today more than ever, it appears as a kind of “testament” delivered to the Churches of the Middle East: we are gathered here to reread it, in the face of the new challenges and signs of the times that God places before us.

To this end, I will divide my introduction into three parts: first, I will summarize the main themes addressed in EMO; second, I will attempt to outline the major events that have characterized the ten years following the publication of the Exhortation, as well as the new ecclesial challenges that are emerging today; and third, in light of the first two parts, I will propose for your reflection some possible directions and paths to take in our immediate future, as Church in the Middle East.

1. Main themes of *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*

I do not intend here to provide a summary of the document, but rather to recall its key themes and points. EMO is divided into three main parts, summarized in the incipit, which sets forth the firm conviction that animates the entire Exhortation: “The Church in the Middle East, which from the dawn of Christian faith has made her pilgrim way in those holy lands, today courageously continues her witness, the fruit of a life of communion with God and neighbour. *Communion and Witness!*” (EMO 1). In other words, in the complex social and ecclesial context that characterizes the Middle East (*The Church in the Middle East, Part one*), the Catholic Church is called to live interiorly the communion of all its members (*Communion, Part two*), from which flows her witness, in all its pluriformity, and her mission of evangelization and charity (*Witness, Part three*).

1.1. First part of the Exhortation: the Church in the Middle East

Right from the introduction, the “unity of the faith” amid the “diversity of the traditions” of the six venerable Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris*, the Church of the Latin Rite and the various faithful from the Eastern and Latin Churches of Asia, Eastern Europe, Ethiopia and Eritrea are emphasized (EMO 2). The need to revive *ad intra* such communion, which has a universal reach *ad extra*, towards all,

especially Muslims and Jews, is also highlighted (EMO 3). It is the first community of Jerusalem (Acts 2:24) that is designated as the privileged model of renewal, as it is united in Word (“teaching of the apostles”), Liturgy (“breaking of the bread”) and Community (“fraternal communion”) – all three being, with prayer, foundations of communion and witness (EMO 4-5).

The first part of the document, after providing basic outlines about the Middle East context, focuses mainly on the following issues:

Ecumenism, whose center and fruit is faith: the situation in the Middle East is “a pressing summons to holiness of life” and to the strengthening of communion (EMO 11), to “spiritual ecumenism” (EMO 11-13) and to “ecumenism of service” in “the fields of charity and education” (EMO 14). Although ecumenical unity does not mean “uniformity of traditions and celebrations”, it calls for the intensification of *communicatio in sacris*, of arrangements for “joint ecumenical pastoral effort”, especially with regard to marriages between Catholics and Orthodox, and a common translation of the Lord’s Prayer, which in Arabic is recited differently even among Catholic Churches! (EMO 16-18)

Interreligious dialogue, which is required by the very nature of the Church and its universal vocation. In the Middle East, such dialogue, “based on the spiritual and historical bonds uniting Christians to Jews and Muslims”, far from being merely pragmatic or strategic, rests instead on “theological concerns” (EMO 19). Jews and Muslims, without, of course, excluding other religious minorities, are in the Middle East privileged interlocutors and thus the object of special attention and esteem in the document (EMO 20-23), although of course the special historical and social bonds with Muslims must not be forgotten (EMO 24), in whose countries Christians “should enjoy full citizenship” – all through a necessary shift from mere tolerance to true religious freedom, and the intensification of trilateral dialogue (EMO 26-28).

The two opposing realities of *extreme secularism* and *religious fundamentalism* (EMO 29-30), which are both to be rejected, although it should be pointed out that there is a “healthy secularity”, which consists of a “necessary distance” between religion and politics, and a “clear distinction” and “indispensable collaboration between the two spheres” (EMO 29).

The issue of *migrants* (EMO 31-36), which includes two increasingly dramatic phenomena, and increasingly call for a renewed “pastoral care for emigrants”: first, the exodus of Christians from the Middle East, which demands that they maintain contact with their Churches and their faith and religious identity (EMO 31-32); second, the arrival “of workers coming from Africa, the Far East and the Indian sub-continent” (EMO 33-34). Both phenomena pose a new and urgent pastoral challenge (EMO 35-36).

1.2. Second part of the Exhortation: communion

The second part of the document emphasizes the call to ecclesial *koinonia* as the first witness that should be given by all its members (EMO 37-38): *Patriarchs* (EMO 39-40), *bishops* (EMO 41-44), *presbyters*, *deacons*, and *seminarians* (EMO 45-50), *religious* (EMO 51-54), and *laity* (EMO 55-57). Special attention is given to *families*, pointing out the dangers to which they are exposed today and the identity crisis they are going through (EMO 58-60), as well as to the *role of women* (EMO 61), and to *young people* and *children* (EMO 62-65), highlighting the importance of their formation and how they must be transmitters of faith within their family and the Church.

1.3. Third part of the Exhortation: witness

The third part of the Exhortation provides the ideas central to a revival of evangelization in the Middle East. It highlights the centrality of Christian witness as the primary form of mission (EMO 66-67), since “before all else, the Christian is a witness” (EMO 67). Christian witness finds its soul and its source in the Word of God (EMO 68-74), since it will be by “rediscovering its original inspiration and following in the

footsteps of those first disciples” that the Christian presence in the Middle East “will take on new vitality” (EMO 71).

Communion and witness find – and this applies to the whole Church, but, as it is well known, especially to the Oriental Christian – an essential element in the *liturgy* and *sacramental life* of the Church (EMO 75-81). Liturgical renewal (EMO 75), “an ecumenical agreement on the mutual recognition of Baptism” (EMO 78), perseverance on the path to full communion in the celebration of the Eucharist (EMO 79), and intensification of the practice of the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation (EMO 81) are particularly desired.

The efficacy of the mission also lies in *personal and communal prayer* (EMO 82) and *pilgrimage*, of which the Middle East has been a “major goal” (EMO 83) since the earliest days of the Church. It is urged to recover its essence as a “penitential journey”, expressing “an authentic thirst for God”, and “an authentic path of discipleship (*sequela Christi*)” (EMO 83). Although Christians’ worship is not limited to one place, the importance of pilgrimage to deepen one’s history and geography of salvation and to “return to the sources” is emphasized: it is encouraged not only for the non-Eastern faithful, so that they discover the treasures of the Eastern Churches, but also for the Eastern ones (EMO 84).

This third part, and thus the entire document, culminates with the *Church’s mission: evangelization and charity*. The Church in the Middle East is called, together with the whole Church – by its missionary essence – to a “new self-evangelization” and to evangelize (EMO 85-86). In the first four paragraphs of that part (EMO 85-88), the term “new evangelization” is used four times – an expression that for the Middle East still sounds like a kind of novelty! Such work of new evangelization is helped by the “successful integration” of church movements and new communities, which are a “gift of the Spirit” that must not be extinguished, as it expresses “communion in diversity” (EMO 87). Therefore, an “authentic missionary spirit” is hoped for (EMO 88). The Church’s missionary work is also implemented in the network of the various educational, social and charitable institutions that have long been present in the Middle East and that, open to men and women of all religions and foreign to proselytism, give a commendable witness, not only from the religious but also from the social and human point of view, contributing greatly to peace (EMO 89-91). Finally, the importance of engaging in catechesis and Christian initiation and formation is affirmed (EMO 92-94).

I will not summarize here the conclusion of the document (EMO 95-100), as it is an authentic jewel that should be reread in its entirety and which, for Christians in the Middle East – called “little flock” by Christ, and told to “fear not” (Lk. 12:32) – is a great encouragement “to courageously keep alive the flame of divine love both in the Church and in all those places where they live and work” (EMO 95).

2. Events of the last decade and new ecclesial challenges

In one of his recent speeches, Pope Francis succinctly expressed the ups and downs of the last decade in the Middle East, saying that “many things have happened in ten years: let us think of the sad events that involved Iraq and Syria, the turmoil in the Land of Cedars. There have also been some lights of hope such as the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity in Abu Dhabi.” (*Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the participants in the Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches (ROACO)*, 6/23/22). He then urged “to verify the fruits of the Synod for the Middle East, in the field” and “to find updated tools and methods that are suitable to expressing closeness to the Churches in the region,” hoping, among other things, “that the work of the coordination committee on Syria and Iraq, which began a few years ago, may be resumed, including Lebanon in the shared reflection.” (*Ibid.*)

2.1. Recent highlights

Within the framework of these words offered by the Holy Father, I now propose to outline the important events that have taken place in the years that followed the publication of the Exhortation, mentioning first of all, given the complexity of the subject – it is never easy to summarize and give a historical interpretation of events that are close to us or still happening – only the facts, and limiting myself to providing, from time to time, some very brief comments.

Since the Exhortation was issued, the past ten years in the Middle East have been marked by tragic historical events including, first and foremost, the explosion and then the decline of the “Arab Spring”, which was followed by the “Arab Winter” and the resurgence of authoritarianism and Islamic extremism. The “Arab Spring”, which had seemed to mark the beginning of a renaissance of the Arab world, turned out to be the beginning of a tragedy affecting the entire Fertile Crescent, from North Africa, particularly Egypt, to Syria. The Islamic fundamentalism that mainly characterized these countries during this period was not only nurtured and developed in the political and social vacuum that followed the Arab Spring, but also fed on biased interests and influences within the international community.

Notable events in recent years include: the Egyptian crisis and General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s coup (2013); the civil wars in Syria (2011 to present, also encroaching from 2012-2014 on Turkey), with the rapid rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), later halted by the intervention of various foreign nations; and the Iraqi (2014-2018), Libyan (second civil war, 2014 to present) and Yemeni (2015 to present) civil wars. The political and military instability caused by these wars and other local outbreaks has caused at least 250,000 deaths, including the massacres perpetrated by ISIS, and several million refugees, with predictable economic and social consequences and with no certain prospect of either duration or result, as well as the exacerbation of fundamentalism and the proliferation of Islam-based terrorist organizations. In terms of human lives and tragedies, Iraq, Yemen and Syria are the countries that have paid the highest price.

Other events should also not be overlooked, such as the very serious political, social and economic crisis in Lebanon (2019), aggravated by the explosion of the port of Beirut (2020), or the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the tragic situation of Gaza and the recurring wars and episodes of violence experienced in the country, especially from 2014 until today. The current situation is made more dramatic by other circumstances, such as the recent pandemic (2019 to date) and the resulting economic crisis in various countries; the “Abraham Accords” between the UAE, Israel and the U.S., which, while presented as a peace agreement in the region, could be a cause of political tension between various rival Arab countries, and is perceived by Palestinians as a betrayal by Arab countries; Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with the ensuing ongoing war (2022 to date), which has sharpened the contrast between the U.S.-Europe-Israel and Russia-Iran-China blocs, further polarizing tensions between Arab countries that, more or less openly, support one faction or another; the exacerbation of the clash, within the Islamic world, between Sunnis and Shiites, which is, again, also a power war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and their respective allies in the region; the recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria, which has worsened the already desperate situation in both countries, especially in Syria. Internationally, there are also interests related to energy issues and the ever profitable arms trade. Turkey’s role has been and remains decisive, both for the Kurdish question and for ties to the Sunni world, but not only.

Based on the recent events, it is becoming increasingly clear – in case it was not already – how the fate of entire populations in the Middle East is subservient to the interests of a few, causing wars and violence that are functional to models of development created and supported largely by the West. Christian communities have paid a very high price in these tragedies. While it is true, on the one hand, that they have been neither the primary nor the sole target of sectarian persecution, there is no denying, on the other hand, the very heavy cost paid in terms of human lives and the general impoverishment of the life of the Churches. We all still have before our eyes – something that will remain in the collective memory for many generations – the tragedy in Nineveh plain during the summer of 2014, as well as the misfortunes of

the Syrian people, which involved not only the martyrdom of so many brothers and sisters, but also the uprooting of entire communities from some regions of Syria and Iraq.

In the midst of such serious upheavals, there is yet no lack of signs of hope, true “lights” shining in the night: for example the witness of so many brothers and sisters who, in recent years, have crowned their lives with martyrdom, with their Christian blood – the seed of a new life (Tertullian) – or with “white” martyrdom, that is, by having suffered the consequences of persecution or by having wished to remain – like so many bishops, priests, religious and lay people – in their lands, preserving their faith and seeking to forgive their enemies with the help of grace; the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, also known as the *Abu Dhabi declaration*, signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, on February 4th, 2019; the increasing openness of some of the civil and religious authorities of Middle Eastern and Gulf countries to dialogue with Christians and the Catholic Church (although there are obviously still many steps to be taken in this direction), as evidenced, among other things, by Pope Francis’ historic trips, with related visits to Islamic civil and religious authorities and/or various ecumenical meetings to the Holy Land (Jordan, Palestine, Israel, 2014), Greece and Armenia (2016), Turkey (2014), Egypt (2017), the United Arab Emirates (2019, the first visit of a pope in history), Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan (2021), Cyprus and Greece (2021), and lastly Bahrain (2022), where the king allowed and gave land for the construction of a cathedral, named “Our Lady of Arabia”, which is the first in the history of the Arabian Peninsula.

One fact emerges clearly here: Pope Francis cares about the Middle East, the Eastern Churches, ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox, and interreligious dialogue, especially brotherhood and peace with Muslims (the Pontiff’s name is prophetic in this sense!) and with Jews.

2.2. New ecclesial challenges

It is now necessary to focus on the influences these events had on our Churches, and the challenges they pose to us. We should ask ourselves what has changed in our Churches over the past decade. The world around us is transforming very rapidly, politically, economically and socially, and what is emerging – we must admit this very clearly and sincerely – is an increasingly **secularized and de-Christianized** world. We should therefore ask ourselves: how are our Churches preparing for the new times that are coming? What has changed in them in the last ten years? Epochal changes are taking place in the world, what about us? **Have we remained where we were?**

A) Emigration

In terms of Christian presence, some of our Churches – I am thinking especially of Iraq and Syria, but also of our Palestine – have been decimated in recent years. This has resulted in the need to **reorganize** our Churches, since most of their faithful are now far from their original territories. **The arrival of many foreigners** also makes us part of the phenomenon of globalization and **multiethnicity** – to a lesser extent than other Churches in the West, but still not negligible.

B) Crisis of Catholic institutions

The political and economic crisis, together with an ever-increasing secularization, desacralization, de-Christianization and crisis of faith among our faithful, especially our youth, has caused **the crisis of many religious institutions**, the most obvious case being that of Catholic schools. This crisis, exacerbated by the dark and difficult years of the pandemic, has been a catalyst that has shown the fragility of our system and of several of our institutions, our inability to “network”, and our lack of

coordination – not only in financial matters, but also and especially in the area of the formation of our Christians.

C) Christian formation

In our Churches, **traditional religious formation is clearly and particularly in trouble**: until recently, the village, clan, society, family, etc., protected and encouraged religious and traditional faith. Today this is no longer the case: the walls of our castle – I say this in a positive sense, meaning everything that was a shield for our faith – have broken through. The mentality of the new world, “emancipated” from tradition and faith, technological, “free”, and **highly critical** of – or perhaps indifferent to – religious institutions, is growing more and more quickly and aggressively, while traditional faith – more of a simple habit than true faith or, at least, not developing and maturing – **no longer has the strength to oppose it**. We fail to undertake paths of initiation and formation of our Christians that are true itineraries of faith and not just individual initiatives or social or charitable activities.

D) The formation of clergy

The very formation of clergy is, in many cases, **inadequate** to these new challenges: based on “conversational” or **traditional pastoral care**, centered solely on the parish – that is, primarily on the parish priest, religious men and women, and a small group of committed laity – it is often reduced to **sacramental pastoral care**, still far from being the “Church on the move” invoked by Pope Francis, that is, a Church of *parrhesia*, a Church that is not afraid to **put herself on the line**, capable of moving to a pastoral ministry of evangelization, which implies a “new evangelization”, and even a re-evangelization of our Christians who are far from the practice of the faith.

Sometimes we try to self-convince ourselves that the lost sheep among our Christians are actually not lost, but still in the sheepfold, often pointing the finger only at political, social, economic circumstances, and consoling ourselves with the fact that in the West the situation is far more serious. We will never be able to go in search of our lost sheep, however, if we do not consider them lost; and we will never be able to truly move from **a pastoral care of mere preservation to a pastoral care of evangelization** of our faithful if we persist in thinking that, after all, they are still Christians, that they “do what they can” in the Middle Eastern context, and that it is already a miracle that they have not yet migrated elsewhere.

In this regard, I would like to say – first of all with regard to our diocese – that we need, concerning the faithful in our parishes, **new statistics**, more up-to-date and honest. There is often a tendency to “inflate” the numbers in order to “get by” and not to get discouraged, as we delude ourselves into believing that, after all, things are not so bad. To give just one example, our statistics are often reduced to the number of families present, without seriously assessing that today, even among our Christians, **the low birth rate** is an increasingly dramatic problem and that the number of family members is decreasing considerably.

The ecclesial crisis exposed above emerges in all its clarity when we consider **the decline in vocations to the priesthood and the impoverishment of religious presence, especially female**. The fragility of the Christian presence and its diminution in the new Middle Eastern context are also manifested by **the diminishing presence of Christians (and true Christians!) in political life** or, as in Lebanon, by **an internal division** that causes scandal and takes the whole country hostage.

To highlight this is not to fall back into pessimism. The phenomena briefly outlined above are widespread throughout the world, and far more dramatically in many places. It is just that here in our country they have surfaced clearly and peremptorily only in more recent years. To analyze the situation truthfully and calmly does not mean we will become prophets of doom. All is not lost. Jesus Christ is with us. The Holy Spirit, who still gives rise to saints and martyrs, as I said earlier, even and especially here in the Middle East, is working and animating our Churches, giving rise to gifts, charisms and responses. Only, in order

to receive them, we must be **open to the reality** and to the action of the Spirit who speaks to the Churches, we must listen to Him with docility and be ready to **leave our islands**, to be courageous, to welcome His new inspirations, which can help especially in forming our laity and our families: because if the Church saves the family, **the family also saves the Church**, as Christians, religious, priests, etc., come from it. It is a virtuous circle.

In short, we find ourselves at the crossroads of an “epochal change” – as Pope Francis called it – which will continue for a long time to cause tragedies and difficulties of all kinds for everyone, including our communities. Today, therefore, we must reread all these events in the light of faith, with discernment, with a present and future vision of our identity and mission, as well as of our pastoral priorities. Undoubtedly, at the time of the publication of the EMO, there was a more positive vision of growth, perspective and change in the Middle East: one only has to think of the “Arab Spring”.

Today we are understandably more **disillusioned**, although there is no shortage, as mentioned, of signs of light and hope. Talking about interreligious dialogue in Syria and Iraq, with its ups and downs, after ISIS and Abu Dhabi, forces us to make a true and concrete synthesis of what we have experienced, something that has not yet been done thoroughly and is our task. One of the objectives of this Symposium is to reread the Exhortation in relation to what has happened in the meantime at the political, social and ecclesial levels; a dramatic path, which nevertheless calls us to **conversion and trust in God**.

3. Possible future directions for the Church in the Middle East

Having outlined the context of the events of the last decade and the new emerging ecclesial challenges, it is now necessary to try to **indicate some orientations and paths for the future**. I will try to do so in this last part of my introduction, in as concrete a manner as possible, without claiming to be exhaustive or to provide “magic” solutions, but only in order to stimulate your inspiration and reflection, and as a service I have been asked to render. I hope that the presentations of the next few days, shown on the program you have in your hands, will help us to deepen and develop certain central themes in the life of our Churches. I imagine that some of the proposals will be the object of consensus, others less so, while still others will perhaps be contested. But the intention is precisely to stimulate and provoke as much reflection as possible, in order to help us and define some guidelines for our pastoral work in the Middle East in the years to come. I will develop these directions by grouping them into three main underlying themes: *formation, communion, and mission*.

3.1. Directions regarding formation

By “formation”, I mean here not only **catechesis**, which is certainly necessary and to be rethought and renewed, but also, more generally speaking, **the recovery of an authentic Christian identity** that is not only social and cultural in nature. In an increasingly secularized world, the contribution that the Churches in the Middle East can make is precisely a rebirth from **the heart of faith**. We are historically the heart and cradle of the Gospel, and it is from here that the call to the beauty of the Gospel and, why not, to a “redemption” for the entire Universal Church, in the face of the difficult crises and scandals she is going through, can still be born.

In such torn contexts as the Middle East’s, marked by local tragedies and global upheavals, we must always be accompanied by **hope, the child of faith**. Faith is, among other things, a way being in life, of reading it, a way of being sentinels in the night, standing firm on our watchtower, waiting for dawn and reading the signs of our times.

The first crucial challenge to be accepted is therefore to **recover our central relationship with faith**, so that it becomes a new way of being inside a Middle East that has changed a great deal in ten years. Being Church in the Middle East is certainly for us a peculiar grace, but it also constitutes an invitation to

accept, to **welcome the reality in which we are**, with its particularities, its difficulties, its conflicts. Being Church in the Middle East by avoiding or fleeing conflicts or by trying to resolve them with non-evangelical logics might preserve our structures, but it **will not nourish the faith and hope of our Christians**. If we look at the great ecclesial institutions in the Middle East, we see, as in other parts of the world, elements of crisis. However, if we turn our gaze to the territory, the field, to the ecclesial realities that are less numerous here in this region than before, we observe much commitment and passion (which often also becomes incomprehension towards institutions), and a true desire to get involved. It is the pastors' duty to orient such presence.

The **synodal journey** undertaken by the Church of the Middle East, together with the whole Church, is highlighting among her faithful a desire for a new "breath of the Spirit". We are called more than ever to return to, as EMO invited us, and to be inspired by the very **first apostolic model**, which, from the East, illuminated the West like a sun and peacefully conquered the whole world. This means, first of all, working thoroughly on the initiation and formation of our Christians, searching "where the Spirit blows", and opening ourselves with enthusiasm to a new evangelization, as St. John Paul II already suggested to the bishops of a Europe that was becoming de-Christianized, not without a certain bewilderment on their part: "To carry out an effective work of evangelization, we must return to the inspiration of the very *first apostolic model* (...). We must therefore begin evangelization by invoking the Spirit and searching where the Spirit blows (cf. Jn 3:8)". (*Address to the participants in the VI Symposium of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences*, 11/10/1985, #18, trans. ours).

As a first concrete orientation for the future, I think it is important to encourage **paths toward a Christian formation for all**, a formation that cannot be reduced only to the celebration of the Sacraments and the Divine Liturgy, but that must focus on the *kèrygma*, on catechesis, and that must be adapted to our times. It is not only a matter of developing new formation texts, but also new **methodologies**, new dynamics of religious education, both in schools (where Christian formation is often lacking, to say the least) and in other ecclesial contexts. A catechesis that is centered on the Word of God and the Fathers, but also **existential and current, corresponding to our times**.

All of this implies renewing and pursuing, with renewed effort, a serious catechesis for children and adults, and finding new catechumenal paths for families, as called for recently by Pope Francis and shown by the *Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life* in the recent document *Catechumenal Itineraries for Married Life* (2022).

As mentioned above, we also need to be well aware and honest with ourselves in admitting that our Christians, when confronted with the new globalized and secularized world, are experiencing a major **identity crisis**. Their Christianity, in many cases, as far as initiation and formation are concerned, no longer has deep roots. It is often a **Christianity of identity, of tradition**, or based on a natural religiosity or a faith that still has to mature. We can no longer be satisfied with **the Sunday presence of our faithful. It no longer has the strength** to counter the *tsunami* of globalized secularism, which enters, through the Internet or other forms, even in the Bedouin tents or in the most remote villages most faithful to Christian practice. On the one hand, our faithful have, when compared to Europe, where Christian identity is much more fragile and in crisis, a strong sense of belonging. On the other hand, we can no longer rest on this fact and just say: "Well at least it's not like Europe!" The albeit strong Christian identity and belonging of our faithful must be further formed and in some cases **re-evangelized**. Faith can no longer be taken for granted, and we must admit this without shame, because, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we know very well that this is also true for some of us and for various members of our clergy (scandals are not an "accident" that happens only to others, but a warning for everyone!). We should always be aware that we are all experiencing **constant conversion**, growth and ongoing faith formation.

In particular, as advocated by EMO, **a pastoral care that focuses more on the Word of God**, studied, meditated upon and proclaimed, seems **indispensable**. The difficulties, and even the prohibitions, that the

explicit proclamation of the Gospel encounters in our lands should not lead us only to preserve what already exists, to remain in the *status quo*, but require of us, as individuals and as communities, to be creative, capable of **eloquent and incisive witness**.

Apart from rare cases such as, for example, in Lebanon, the Church in the Middle East has always been a minority. Being a minority is part of our identity and we must accept that. This condition reminds us that we are not and do not exist for ourselves, but to enter into relationship with those who encounter us. It forces us to be proactive, as has been the case in the past. Being a minority, however, should not prevent us from giving vibrant **witness of faith and belonging, from elaborating attentive and strong cultural proposals**, the only possible space for confrontation in our Land. In conclusion, it should not close us off, but open us to **new forms of creativity**, which are not only allowed, but sometimes even expected by our brothers and sisters of other faiths.

All this implies another crucial mission for the future, which is **the formation of clergy and religious**. We have a duty to improve such a formation. People need to find authoritative references in the clergy, both spiritually and culturally. They must know that taking their car and driving hours to go to Mass is worth it, because they will find nourishment in the liturgy and in the proclamation of a serious and well-researched Word.

3.2. Directions regarding communion and synodal journey.

Choosing Christ brings us together as a community. We **need to form communities** – not communities made for themselves or self-referential, but **communities for the Kingdom**. Communities that know how to live in the light of the Lamb (Rev 21-22), in the Paschal light, obedient to the logic of the Lamb, which is that of giving one's life out of love (Gn 22). Again referring back to Rev 21-22, the Jerusalem that descends from heaven – an image and prefiguration of the Church – has beautiful walls and doors that are always wide open to the four cardinal points, always open to all. It has walls, yet not to defend, but to define. One can choose two positions in this Jerusalem: the one inside the walls, in the light of the Lamb and obedient to His voice, and the one outside. The Christian community, the Church, in the Middle East, must be the voice of those who have decided to stand within the walls of the Holy City, within the Church, and to live in the light of the Lamb, to be a reflection of this Paschal light.

A unique *chance* for communion, in this sense, is **the synodal journey** we have undertaken, both as local and Middle Eastern Churches and as a universal Church. Although we should not necessarily expect epochal changes from it, this synodal journey is a kind of “**sowing**” and “**ploughing the soil**”. We have lived through dramatic years, during which everything came to a standstill, at least for some of our countries, as in the time of the pandemic or the wars. This synodal journey is an opportunity to **strengthen communion among us**: not to live as islands in the many “islands” of the Middle East, but, on the contrary, to *sentire cum Ecclesia* and with all the Churches of the Middle East, sharing sufferings, but also inspirations of the Spirit. I believe strengthening communion and cooperation among the Churches must become a priority. And even if the borders are closed, technology and political changes are still making collaboration much easier. Pope Francis has repeatedly reminded us that “No one is saved alone”. This is true for our Churches as well. Collaboration must be the result not only of a necessary strategy imposed by circumstances, but because it is **a witness expected by our faithful and the foundation of our ecclesial vocation, based on the Gospel**.

The synodal journey must be a time to take note of what is “simmering in the pot” of the new generations, but also a time to look in all directions, to see **who we can work with**, to know the issues and to know “where we are”. In this journey, we should be comforted, as mentioned above, by the pride of faith of Christians in the Middle East. Yes, our Churches have recently been decimated in terms of numbers and have remained, in some cases, “a little flock”. Yet as they gradually become Churches no longer concerned with occupying or defending spaces of power, they can rediscover **the essentials of faith and**

Christian witness, and can grow in communion with one another. These are communities that, even in the face of significant difficulties and even persecutions, have remained faithful to Christ.

A concrete and vast field for the exercise of communion can be the **Gulf**, where our Churches are all present and some in great numbers, through the numerous faithful who live there. Such a multiform presence must not become a cause of **confusion, division or friction in matters of jurisdiction**, thus falling within the logic of power or even economics, but must instead become **an occasion for communion among us and for mutual acquaintance** among our faithful, finding, beyond canonical solutions, new forms of collaboration among the bishops and among the priests who work there.

This communion must be our first “aesthetic” before the world in which we find ourselves. Only a new aesthetic will save the world and the Middle East, the one of Christ, the communion of our communities, which attract those who are far away. “See how they love one another!” (Tertullian, *Apolog.* 39), exclaimed the nations before Christians. This is our first aesthetic, which attracts everyone, even if we cannot always explicitly proclaim the Gospel to them.

A renewal of faith and communion among us, without losing ourselves in quarrels and factions – we can no longer afford this luxury when we are in a boat increasingly smaller on the turbulent sea of the world – could be the most powerful and eloquent announcement.

Our Christian East has always been distinguished in **the beauty of liturgical forms and icons**, expressions of the beauty of Christ and the Holy Trinity, the Church, the communion and the faith that unites us. **Rooted in the tradition and each one in their own liturgical identity**, it is necessary to find and propose a new aesthetic, a Christianity that is truly attractive to the world around us, a world in which churches have less and less interest, except for tourism or to take some selfies to share with friends.

EMO called for **liturgical renewal**, as we mentioned at the beginning (EMO 75). Each Church will certainly have made her own considerations in this regard. I know that some Churches have had major reforms. Whatever response each Church gives, it is necessary that **our liturgies still know how to speak, especially to the younger generation**.

We may not be able to sit at international tables beside the powerful, we may not be able to change their decisions. We can, however, intervene where our communities are, to **build** in our small contexts of life **different, alternative ways of peace, development and growth**. If current models of development subjugate mankind to consumption and violence, we will continue to build communities and relationships that place human beings at the heart of all the contexts of what is our work: in parishes, in schools, in hospitals, and in the countless peace and solidarity initiatives that, if they do not change the world, nonetheless contribute to creating contexts of peace and respect and are a witness to our **Christian way of being** within these difficult realities. No matter how small and fatigued, our communities will not give up taking charge of the fate of the many last and poor ones in their territory.

On this issue the Catholic Church can rightly **be proud**. A large part of **the world of care** in our territories is entrusted to the many institutions of the Catholic Church: hospitals, schools, homes for the disabled, support for various poverties. I am thinking of Caritas, but not only. There are countless ways through which the Church, the Christian and especially the Catholic community have always manifested their way of being, their way to be Church in the Middle East. A Church that is not closed in on herself but, even with all her limitations, is and remains **an extroverted presence**.

However, many of these institutions **today are in crisis**, for various reasons. I believe this offers us an opportunity; we should think not only of how to save them, but also of how to restore – where necessary – **their original motivation**. We must ask ourselves if these institutions are still **servicing the Church and the poor** according to their original vocation, or if they have become such that **they must be served themselves**, by the few religious who run them, or by the few resources that remain. But the ROACO speaker will tell us about it.

3.3. Directions regarding our mission

As we have said, our institutions, although in crisis, are also our mission and have become our **visible witness**. We cannot only rethink our works from an economic, structural or other point of view. Rather, they must make visible what **our way of being in this society is today**. Rethinking the structures, therefore, not only to maintain their current status (which is probably not possible), but **to align them with our desire to proclaim in our societies**.

Without denying the difficulties of explicitly evangelizing people of other religious confessions present on our territory and the renunciation of proselytism, if our Churches do not soon recover their **missionary dimension**, both *ad intra* (in the Middle East) and *ad extra* (throughout the world, where Arabic is now one of the most widely spoken languages!), they will implode. The health of a Church is measured by its missionary impulse, since mission is her essence: **the Church is either missionary or, simply, does not exist**. Such renewed missionary zeal and influx will enable us to avoid falling back into **victimhood** and “feeling sorry for ourselves”; it will restore **the true meaning of our sufferings and our being in the Middle East and the world**. We have many sores, yes. But such sores, transfigured in Christ who showed His glorious wounds as the most eloquent sign of His resurrection, can be a witness that cries out to the world, that announces peace to all, to those near and far: “Peace be with you!”

Besides evangelization, **dialogue** is the other fundamental form of expression in our ecclesial life. It is constitutive of the life of the Church and intrinsic to her very nature. More than dialogue, we should speak of “conviviality”, since, in fact, we live together. Through ecumenical dialogue or conviviality among the Churches, we should not only permanently organize common prayers for peace, but also set up, where they do not exist, **interreligious committees, especially with Muslim believers**, in order to come together to carry out works of solidarity and sharing, to make fraternity and human solidarity grow and be experienced.

In the ecumenical field, EMO recommended the intensification of *communicatio in sacris*, arrangements for “ecumenical pastoral care as a whole”, and a common translation of the Lord’s Prayer, which is recited differently in Arabic even among Catholic Churches. I don’t know if we will be able to have a single translation of the Lord’s Prayer among all Christian Churches. **But will we at least be able to get a commitment from the Catholic Churches to a single version of the Lord's Prayer?**

Taking on and making one’s own the situation of the poor and the little ones also entails *parrhesia*: that is, to frankly denounce the evil, the sin, the injustices that cause poverty and create injustice. Sent to be witnesses of “another” way and world, we have the duty to proclaim, with our lives but also with our words, **the Gospel of justice and peace** that was delivered to us on the day of our consecration. For this reason, we often find ourselves at a **crossroads**, called to choose between the necessary denunciation of violence and abuse, always perpetrated to the detriment of the weakest, and the risk of **reducing the Church** to a “political agent” or even to a party or faction, forgetting her true nature and exposing her to easy and superficial instrumentalization. Being Church in the Middle East will increasingly be, for us and for all, martyrdom and prophecy: “Behold, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves” (Mt 10:16). We cannot and must not turn into wolves, nor imitate them or even ally ourselves with them, but persevere in the **Gospel way** of the Incarnation and Easter. Our commitment to the lives and peace of the men and women of our lands **lives in the knowledge** that not as the world gives it does Christ give peace to us (cf. Jn. 14:27). This does not mean, as we have said, **remaining silent in the face of injustice** or inviting Christians to quietness and disengagement.

In this context, I think it is important to point out **an ever-present temptation in our Middle East: that of allying ourselves with or becoming the instrument of the political power of this or that time and place**. It is and will be increasingly difficult to preserve, as Churches, a prophetic role in our communities and in society more generally, as long as populations, Christian and non-Christian, see us as **allied with the powerful of the moment**, both in terms of politics and economics. To be prophets, we must be free

of all conditioning. **The alliance between throne and altar** has never been good for either the throne or the altar. On this point, I think a reflection is necessary.

We cannot, moreover, conceive of our being in the Middle East merely and simply as a right, as it would fatally make us a fragile part of a conflict and war. To be and to remain in the territory of our Churches, torn by violence and conflict, will increasingly be for us **a vocation and a choice**, like the free and loving choice of Christ, who came to dwell among us and to give His life for all. In short, our reflection must start not so much from the situation of our Churches and communities, which can sometimes be worrying, but from **the vocation our Churches have in this difficult context**. We will increasingly have to move away from the preoccupation of occupying land, or physical and institutional structures, and instead focus more on the beautiful and good dynamics of life that, as believers, we can initiate. More faith and fewer structures (which, while necessary, are now more fragile) seems to be the way forward.

The many sufferings of these last years, with the consequent economic crisis we are experiencing, can actually be a great opportunity for us, our clergy and our faithful, so that we become a “poor Church for the poor”, as Pope Francis advocates. This means – above all for us and our clergy – to free ourselves from **the idolization of money**, from **the search for privileges** at different levels of civil and ecclesial life, from the status of leaders, from the continual search for aid, from **paternalism** and **clericalism**; it means being capable of **transparency** in our ecclesial relations, with everyone and in our institutions. It means correcting the forms of **corruption** that are – let’s face it – rampant among us. To be credible, we must address this issue with courage! Too many accusations are made at various levels by our people.

This means, in a word, getting out of **the world’s logic of power**, into which religious authorities belonging to faiths other than our own fall much more easily. We know well how in the Middle East politics envelops ordinary life in all its aspects. Pope Francis recently reminded us that “the Church’s task is not to change governments, but to bring the logic of the Gospel into the thinking and actions of rulers” (<https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2018/05/24/news/the-terrorism-islam-equation-a-foolish-lie-1.34019283/>).

Always opting for the poor and the weak does not make the Church a political party. Taking a stand, as we are often asked to do, cannot mean engaging in confrontation, but rather must always translate into words and actions in favor of those who suffer and weep, and not into invective and condemnation of anyone. The Church, like Christ, always condemns the sin, never the sinner. It may be easy and convenient at times to join the chorus of criticism and recrimination, and perhaps even to gain applause and approval by doing so, but the temptation can be worldly, even diabolical, to assert the Kingdom in such a violent and worldly way. For Christians, the only possible position is that of Christ, at the service of the lives of all. A mute lamb before the butchers, **He did not renounce affirming the truth before those who condemned Him, but He refused to condemn and judge. The Church loves and serves the polis** and shares with the civil authorities the concern and action for the common good, in the general interest of all and especially of the poor, always raising her voice to defend the rights of God and man, but **does not enter into the logic of competition and division.**

Conclusion

We need to be able to look beyond our small worlds and even beyond the Middle East. Globalization can be a positive phenomenon. We should not fear it, but **prepare ourselves and our faithful to meet its challenges**. Indeed, it can be problematic when it places the global interest or, worse, the interest of a few elites, instead of the human person, at the center of its attention, or when it wants to impose a global order, which implies ideas and practices foreign to Christian faith and morals. **Today, faith touches new frontiers and sees new positive opportunities opening up**, but it must also confront external attacks and ever more numerous and complex problems, such as those concerning the progress of science and technology, the economy, the defense of the family, the sanctity of human life and its dignity, the affirmation of justice, peace, freedom, the protection of human rights, and the safeguarding of creation – issues which have ethical implications of great complexity.

In an increasingly globalized and rapidly changing world, it is time not for restoration, but **to start anew, from the ground up**, as Pope St. Paul VI told the whole Church: “All the work done in the centuries that have gone before us does not exempt us from collaborating with the divine builder; on the contrary, He calls us, not only to a faithful task of conservation, nor even to a passive traditionalism or a hostile rejection of the perennial innovation of human life; He calls us *to begin again*, mindful, yes, and jealous guardians of what the authentic history of the Church has accumulated for this and future generations, but aware also that the edifice, until the last day of time, requires new work, demands a laborious, fresh, ingenious construction, as if the Church, the divine edifice, was beginning today her adventurous challenge toward the heights of heaven” (*General Audience, 7/7/1976, italics added, trans. ours*). We must, in the East as in the West, find again the path between **traditionalism**, which invites us to ghettoize ourselves for fear of modernity, and **liberalism**, which *sic et simpliciter* “espouses” it without discernment, abandoning Tradition and the deposit of faith.

It is not about rebuilding walls that separate, recreating a distance between us and the world; it is about being *salt, light, and leaven* to this world. The Church is a sacrament of salvation for the world and thus for the Middle East. The mission of being salt, light and leaven implies that it does not matter how great the darkness is outside, how tasteless the world around us is, how little ferment there is in the nihilism that surrounds us. The really important thing is not this, but that the light, however small, is truly light and enlightens, that the salt does not lose its taste – since it only takes a few pinches of real salt to give flavor – and that the leaven, however small, contains the ferment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Such is our mission, and we alone can fulfill it. Jesus Christ says, “You are the salt of the earth (...). You are the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-14). He does not say “be!” but “you are”, as if to say that, unless we are the ones to enlighten and salt the Middle East with Christ, Salt of the earth and Light of the world, it will remain dark and tasteless.

It is not and will not be so. We know. We know that, in spite of everything, we will leave here with a renewed commitment to enlighten and give flavor to the entire Middle East, where our roots lie and where we will not cease to remain to give our beautiful witness of faith.

