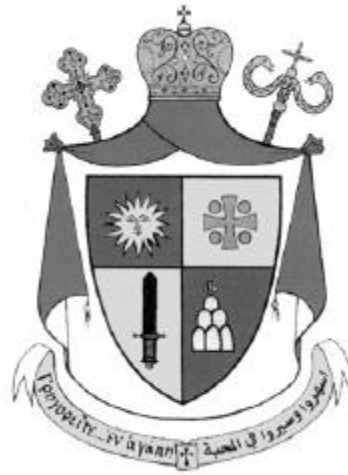


His Beatitude

GREGORY III LAHAM

Melkite-Greek Catholic Patriarch
of Antioch and All the east,
of Alexandria and of Jerusalem



The Situation of the Christians in the Middle East

NADEO

(National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical officers)

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Cleveland, OH

The Situation of the Christians in the Middle East

Brothers and Sisters:

I greet you on behalf of the Greek Melkite Catholic Church in the United States of America and on behalf of all the Greek Melkite Catholics living abroad wherever members of the Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch may be found, namely Canada, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina, Australia and Oceania.

I greet you too from the three sees of the Greek Melkite Catholic Patriarchate, Antioch (Damascus), Alexandria (Cairo) and Jerusalem (all the Arab Countries) where the Greek Melkite Catholics reside.

In a very special way I greet you from Jerusalem (where I served 26 years as the Patriarchal Vicar before my election a Patriarch on November 2000). I greet you from Jerusalem, the Capital City of our faith before its becoming a political capital for any person or any state; Jerusalem which is in need of your support and your consideration.

City of Peace, as its name signifies or City of Light...Alas! Jerusalem does not know peace. Gloom and hatred are wrapping her heart. She pines and suffers with all her children, the children of Abraham, the Father of fathers. She grieves for all her children who are seeking the ways to peace and peace within her and her walls (as the author of the psalm 78 assures every person is born in Jerusalem).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Jerusalem peace means World peace. If the contestants in Jerusalem attain peace between the Israelis and the Arabs, between Muslims, Christians and Jews, their effort would mean an international victory for the values of justice, truth, common life, human dialogue, civilization and religion. Jerusalem peace is true universal peace: a peace for every human being and an effective answer to fear, to hatred and to terror in all its forms. Jerusalem is really the symbol of the world peace. Peace in Jerusalem means peace for the whole world.

For the sake of the Jerusalem Peace, all the efforts should be joined, from East and West and from all religions and beliefs. I call upon you to join all our sons and daughters who belong to our communities and churches and rites in accelerating our

march toward peace. We all are heirs to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Despite the sad, difficult and distressing situation of our Arab countries and especially of Palestine, I take the pleasure to relate to you the news of our life and of the uniqueness of our co-existence.

A Brief history of our Church and its role:

The history of our Greek-Melkite Catholic Church is the common history of the One Orthodox Church until 1724. On that year, due to a unifying movement of one hundred years within the Patriarchate of Antioch, an elected Patriarch declared his union and communion with the Church of Rome. Immediately thereafter, those who were opposed to the union with Rome elected another Greek patriarch nominated by the Church of Constantinople. Thus, a schism within the Patriarchate of Antioch began due to the presence of two patriarchs, one Catholic and the other Orthodox.

Strange as it may appear, after that date, everything remained common within the two churches with the exception of the communion with Rome. We continued to be Greek Catholics preserving our common heritage with the Greek Orthodox while completely and firmly in communion to the Roman Church that reigns in Love.

It is under such circumstances that our distinct, yet difficult worldwide ecumenical and unifying role began: how can we harmonize our union with Rome and our complete observance of our inheritance; and how can we accommodate our relations with our brothers, the Latins, on one hand and with our brothers, the Orthodox, on the other.

The Latin Church is Latin in its traditions, its system and its legislation... It is difficult for her to renounce them or to rule us (others) with traditions, system and legislation different from hers. In communion with her, the Christian Eastern Catholics became subsequently Latinized in various manifestations and situations... On our part, we have not accepted that "Latinization". In various circumstances we have tried to convince our Latin brothers of our point of view concerning rites, theology, legislation, moral theology and especially the Church, its theology, its administration and its system.

We have lived the three past centuries of our union with Rome in an ambiguous relationship with her. We continue to insist upon the rights of our Church. Rome is lavishing us with promises, letters and declarations.... Thus far, a gap remains evident within various theological, ecclesial, legislative and administrative concepts despite the excellent relations between our Church and Rome. As a matter of fact, our relations are most amiable and fraternal. The contention concerns ecclesial principles and points of view.

The main points in this ecclesial controversy between our two churches are: the First Vatican Council and the standpoints of the Patriarch Gregory II and those of Patriarch Maximos IV along with his bishops in the Second Vatican Council. Those

positions are well known. They have been discussed and defended by Western theologians. They have even influenced the various decrees and documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The 1996 initiative ranks among our major ecumenical endeavors. It is a great worldwide adventure with respect to Rome and the Orthodox Church. Had it succeeded, it would have benefited our relations with both Rome and the Orthodox Church. We do not believe that it has been defeated. It is taking a temporary halt. We are determined to pursue it through new ways. The ecumenical movement was the companion of my life and my priestly ministry since 1962 when I founded the publication “Al wahdat Fil Iman” (The Unity in the Faith). It continued to be my companion in Jerusalem during my 26 years of service there and it will be the distinctive characteristic of my patriarchal program. I will sacrifice my life and every thing to advance the cause of the Church Unity. At the example of the great Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, I say: ‘I do not fear anything anymore.’

We are accepting our situation and our role. Rather we are accepting our ecumenical cross. We have confidence that the way of the Cross will be consummated by the Resurrection for our Churches.

The Role of our Church, however, is not only ecumenical, ecclesial and Christian. It is also Arabic, Christian and Islamic. We do not want to restrict the role of our Church within the limits of our churches, our liturgical rites, our Christianity and our Gospel. Our role is ecumenical in the full meaning of the word. It reaches the universe and the whole world because approximately 2 million Greek Melkite Catholics live in the world. As Patriarch, this is where is the mission of my Church and my mission in it is as father, leader, head and superior.

The role of our Church is hereditary: our inheritance is spiritual, ecclesial and ritual. We need to publicize it, to make it known to our Western brothers, the Latins and others. How we long for the assistance of the local churches in the Diaspora to establish ‘Eastern Christian Centers’ in many places for the divulgement of the general and various patrimony of the Eastern Churches. We need to make public the light of the East to illuminate the whole world.

The ecumenical role of our Church is very important locally and universally for the benefit of our Orthodox brothers in the East and abroad and for the benefit of the Latins and the other ecclesial communities.

The efforts toward Christian Unity can have their importance in the Arab world and in the whole universe. Let me limit myself to the importance of the presence of our Church in the Arab world. Obviously, that importance can be attributed to the Christian presence in general because notwithstanding the diversity of our churches, our rites and traditions, we are still one Church. Our destiny is one and our history in general is common.

At present, there are 12 Eastern Churches (Catholic and Orthodox). In each Church there is a Catholic and an Orthodox branch, namely the Church of the Greek Catholics and the Church of the Greek Orthodox; the Maronite Church, the Syriac Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church; the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Orthodox Church; the Copt Catholics and the Copt Orthodox; the Ethiopian Catholic and the Orthodox; the Chaldean Catholics and the Assyrian (Orthodox). This is all in addition to the Latin Church and the Evangelical Church. (Maronites do not have an orthodox branch)

At present, 250 million people occupy the Arab World, of whom only 15 million are Christians and belong to the above mentioned churches. The Christians are scattered in the countries of the Middle East: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and a small minority in North Africa. The majority is in Egypt. They are the Copt Orthodox. The population of Lebanon is 40% Christian (one and a half million). In Syria, Christians represent 12 % of the population, or one and a half million out of 17 million. In Palestine, the Holy Land and Israel, there are about 150,000 out of 8 million Jews and Arabs.

Historically, Christians were the majority in the Middle East until the 13th century when they started to diminish and decrease. The number had relatively increased during the long Ottoman Empire that reigned for 400 years. It helped to stabilize the Christian presence despite the dark periods of the Turkish and other dominations.

What is important for consideration is that the Christian presence in those countries goes back to the time of Our Lord and the Apostles. All the Churches of the East are Apostolic Churches in the very strict sense of the word. Their origin is Jerusalem and the cities of Antioch, of Alexandria and Damascus. In my first visit to Syria as the new Patriarch, I was deeply impressed by the churches within the small towns that date from the 6th and 5th century. The Christians have maintained their presence here for 2000 years!

To be sure, their presence was not easy during all the periods of war and the successive outgoings and incomings of various rulers, governments and nations. In spite of such problems, it is well known that the Christians participated in the building up of the culture, the civilization, the prosperity, the language and the government of the country in which God has planted them.

In this connection, I would like to mention the words of the President of Syria, Bashir El Asad, which he recited as a welcome to His Holiness Pope John Paul II in his visit to Syria. He said: "Palestine is indeed the birthplace of Christ; but Syria is the birthplace of the Christians and Christianity."

Father Corbon, a French Greek Catholic priest, who lived in Lebanon and died in 2001, wrote a book with the title "The Church of the Arabs" (L'Eglise des Arabes). The title expresses perfectly the meaning of the presence of the Christian Arabs in the Arab World and the Arab countries where the majority are Muslims. To that title

which makes the Christian Church known in the Middle East, I would add my personal comment. The Church of the Arabs is the Church of Islam or The Church in the heart of Arabism. It is the Church of Islam with the Muslims and for the Muslims in their history, their civilization, their culture, their struggle, their wars, their calamities, their suffering and their hopes.

We are called to bring Jesus, 'Issa' to this Arab and Muslim world and in this Arab and Muslim world. We are called to bring Him, His Gospel and His teaching to our brothers, our fellow-citizens, the Arab Muslims. For Jesus, 'Issa' belongs to them as he belongs to us. It is their obligation (according to the teaching of Q'uran) to follow (the used word is to 'elevate') the Gospel as they should follow the Torah. "You (the verse is addressed to the Muslims) are nothing if you do not elevate the Torah and the Gospel."

It is undeniable that the Q'uran is based on the teachings of the Torah and the Gospel. How wonderful would it not be if we Christians of East and West would understand it! And how wonderful would it not be if also the Muslims would do the same! The Muslims know it; but it is of prime necessity that both the Christians and the Muslims consider the great and important consequences of such a close relationship between the Gospel, the Q'uran and the Torah.

Furthermore, the reality is that the Christians in the Eastern Arab world are the Church of Arab, Islam. The reality of the closeness between the Gospel, the Q'uran and the Torah establish a common bond in language, history, religious tendency, morality, mysticism, heritage, prayer, fasting and almsgiving...and the religious and civil traditions in the many cases of Muslims and Christians. The reality of these common bonds represents the solid and stable foundations on which was built, is built and will be built the Christian-Muslim relations in the Eastern Arab world. It's also (at the same time) the greatest sign of a call and the mission of the Christians and their role in the Arab society. It is also the main and greatest assurance to the continuation of their presence, its growth and prosperity and not its fading or deterioration. This same reality obliges us: the Shepherds in the East and our brothers Christians in the West. The obligations urge us all together to do our best and utmost, sacrificing everything in order to preserve this Christian existence of great historical importance in our Arab East.

There are six Eastern Catholic Patriarchs: the Patriarchs of the Greek Catholics, of the Maronites, of the Syrian Catholics, of the Copt Catholics, of the Armenian Catholics and of the Chaldeans. The Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem also joins them. All these Patriarchs have issued many statements concerning the Christian presence in the Middle East. The subject of their 1994 statement can be summed up in the following sentence: The Christian presence in the East: Presence and Testimony.

As responsible shepherds of our Churches, our main concern is the preservation of the Christian presence. Stated differently, a joint, visible corporate Christian presence

within our Arab and Muslim society is our ecumenical work for the evangelization of the world.

Three salient features should be considered for this Christian presence: 1st: the meaning of the Christian presence, 2nd: the importance of the Christian presence and 3rd: the means for the preservation of the Christian presence which call for a word on emigration and its causes.

The meaning (reason) of the Christian presence:

It is extremely important for us as pastors, to understand the meaning of the Christian presence and to explain it to our faithful.

The presence of the Christian in the East is the presence of Christ himself. It is a living testimony that Christ was born and lived in the Holy Land; that he suffered, was buried and rose there; that he preached the Gospel in its surroundings. In 1964 Pope Paul VI said that without the Christian presence the Holy Land would only be a museum. The Christian presence in the East is the theological, historical, geographical, and spiritual proof of Christ and Christianity.

The Christian presence is exactly like the presence of Christ himself: Christ Emmanuel means God with us. The Christian is a human being living with others and for others. Jesus said: “ I came that they may have life and have it in abundance.” Similarly, the meaning of the presence of the Christian is directly connected to the presence of the other, to know him, to serve him, to live with him, to build up, to develop and to defend a nation with him.

The Christian presence obliges the Christian to be interested in the potentialities of the Holy Land and of his Arab countries in which God placed him and in which he wants to live. It is normal that the Christian considers himself an integral member of the Arab and Oriental world.

The importance of the Christian Presence:

The importance of the Christian presence is only a corollary of what I just presented. We should, however, explain it to our people. I personally have had great difficulty in convincing the Christians of the importance of their presence in the Arab world. It was even more difficult to convince them of the danger that the emigration may cause for the future of this East that is both Christian, Arab and Muslim....

The Arab Eastern Christian is responsible for the manifestation of the Christ in his land and country. Without His presence, it will be difficult for the Muslim to hear anything about Christ or to understand Christ’s mission and the Gospel’s values. The Christian is the one who can best inform the Muslim about Christ; who can make the Christians known to Muslims and the Muslims known to Christians, Islam to Christianity and Christianity to Islam through daily common life, through co-existence and co-living in school, work, trade, government, society, social life and especially

through the Christian-Muslim dialogue where it exists. In 1983 I founded a center called "Institute of the Encounter for the Heritage of Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land." I intend to establish a similar institute in Lebanon and another one in Syria and to publish a magazine about this encounter.

The Arab Eastern Christian is most qualified to undertake a dialogue with the Muslim and Arab world and with the Muslim religion.... He is their closest partner... he is the liaison between the Eastern Arab Muslim World and the Christian Western World; he is the responsible for the safe preservation of that liaison between East and West and for the removal of anything which may tarnish or diminish that connection....

The importance of the Christian presence has been proved throughout the years and even in our own times; for example, the Lebanese War, the Palestinian cause, the causes of justice and peace for the area, the explanation of the manifestation of fanaticism among some Islamic groups especially after the September 11 disaster, and the explanation of the situation of Christians in the Arab countries and their relationship with Muslims.

The Importance of the preservation of the Christian presence:

What I have presented until now leads to the importance of the preservation of the Christian presence in the Arab East and its diverse religious cultures. It is undeniable that the Christian presence is the strong guarantee for the pluralism that makes up the Arab World. It is the mutual duty of both the Christian and the Moslem to preserve that pluralism. On one hand, the Christian presence is entrusted and confided to the Muslim; on the other hand, the Muslim has the first distinct responsibility for the preservation of the Christian presence.

The preservation of the Christian presence is necessary for the West and for relations of the Arab countries with the West and especially Europe; for the relations between Islam and Christianity, between two civilizations: Christians and Muslims; for the Christian-Muslim dialogue; for the cultural relations between East and West; for the prevention of wars between Islam and Christianity and the refraining of the clash of civilizations.

The preservation of the Christian presence in the Arab World goes beyond religion, church and faith. It is a national, political, social, economical and cultural necessity for the present time and the future. It strongly to the advantage of the West to preserve the Christian presence in the East, as it is to the benefit of the Muslim Society, locally and globally, to preserve the Christian presence.

These are the reasons why we should, all of us, strive to maintain the Christian presence in the Arab East and to halt the flow of Christian emigration from the Arab countries.

The Causes of Emigration:

The causes of emigration are too many to enumerate. They are political, economic, social and governmental. To these we may add the problems (religious, societal, cultural) of the pluralism and in particular the impression of insecurity and instability, the war and various crises, the high cost of living, the scarcity of employment, the lack of educational facilities for the youth, etc. etc....

During the 26 years of my presence in the Holy Land I labored in various ways toward the preservation of the Christian presence. Besides the Institute for the Christian-Muslim encounter which I mentioned, I founded schools, clinics, social actions and especially housing projects which I consider as the major factor for the preservation of the Christian presence in the Arab countries. In Jerusalem I proposed the idea of a Christian international bank for housing to advocate the Christian presence as a measure to counteract the increasing emigration caused by the disastrous and dramatic situation of the Holy Land.

I am grateful to our brothers in Europe and in the United States for their support of these and other similar projects.

I take the opportunity of my presence here to call for help in sustaining the projects of the Christian presence which, in reality, are for the service of humanity regardless of origin, religion or belief...

These institutions and projects are in a crisis of survival or death. Similarly the Christian presence in the Holy Land is in a crisis of survival or death...

Assuredly, the greatest factor for the preservation of the Christian presence is Peace and the end of the Israeli Arab conflict. Every move of violence or war is followed by a move of emigration. That is what we learned from the Arab-Israeli wars, from the war in Iraq, from the first Intifada, from the second Intifada and from the present bloody disastrous events...

On this occasion we address our call to the United States of America to act effectively for the cause of justice and peace in Palestine.

Enough wars! Enough bloodshed! Enough killing!

That is the supplication of a pastor who lives the sufferings of his children: A supplication I am addressing to you who are attending this convention.

Out of the depth of our pain we still like to renew our hope, our expectation and our optimism...because the City of Jerusalem is the City of the Resurrection, because the Church of Jerusalem is the Church of the Resurrection and because through history we are called the Children of the Resurrection. We shall remain in the Holy Land, in the Arab World, witnesses of the Resurrection, servants of the One who is the Life and the resurrection.

Indeed the whole world is in need of the pledges of the Resurrection! We are living in a frightened, lost fractured world in dire need for the call of The Resurrection and The Life. We shall not desist from pursuing our service to The Resurrection and The Life. Together in this third millennium we shall persevere in our 2000 years old mission. Together we shall keep on the dialogue of civilizations and religions. Together we shall build in our Arab world the civilization of love.

+ Gregory III Laham