

REMARKS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
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As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I want to welcome you to this House of the Pope. I greet you in the name of Pope Francis and express His Holiness' spiritual closeness to you and his gratitude for your prayers and sacrifices in support of the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land. I thank Father Peter Vasko for his invitation to offer some remarks this evening.

I too want to thank all of you for your support of the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land. By supporting the foundation, you are supporting your brothers and sisters in the Holy Land who are persecuted for their faith, whether they are suffering the martyrdom of blood or the white martyrdom of daily persecution. In supporting them with your prayers and gifts, you are exercising the virtue of solidarity and offering hope.

Secondly, by supporting the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land and its educational programs, you are giving the small Christian flock there a reason to remain there as a sign of hope and as ambassadors of peace. In large part this occurs through the housing projects the Foundation helps fund; through humanitarian programs, like the Bethlehem Boys Home and Children Without Borders, and above all through education, providing scholarships and funding for many to live and study in the land where Christ Himself *grew in wisdom, age, and grace before God and men*.

Martyrdom and Solidarity

Sadly, we know that the situation of our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land is one of great suffering. Last November, the Holy Father said:

“Before the entire world – which too often averts its gaze – lies the tragic situation of Christians who are persecuted and killed in ever increasing numbers. In addition to their martyrdom of blood, there is also their ‘white martyrdom’, such as that which occurs in democratic countries where freedom of religion is limited. And this is the everyday white martyrdom of the Church in those places.” (ADDRESS TO THE CONSULTA OF THE EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM, 16 NOVEMBER 2018)

This is not a new theme for the Holy Father. In 2013, Pope Francis sent a message to Pope Tawadros of the Coptic Church, writing:

“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26). This is a law of the Christian life, and in this sense, we can say that there is also an ecumenism of suffering; just as the blood of the martyrs was a seed of strength and fertility for the Church, so too the sharing of daily

sufferings can become an effective instrument of unity” (POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE TO POPE TAWADROS II, 10 MAY 2013).

Yes, God can bring good even from the most-dire situations. Countering the “hatred of the worldly spirit”, the Spirit of God leads Christians, through their sufferings, to greater unity and solidarity. The Holy Father is convinced that the “ecumenism of suffering and of the martyrdom of blood are a powerful summons to walk the long path of reconciliation between the Churches, by courageously and decisively abandoning ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit” (cf. POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO PATRIARCH KAREKIN II, 14 MAY 2014). The *communio martyrum* is a great sign of Christians journeying together.

The Holy Father stands in solidarity with all who witness to Christ, and he never ceases to remind us that “Peace triumphs through solidarity.” (ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS TO THE MEMBERS OF THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS ACCREDITED TO THE HOLY SEE, 9 JANUARY 2017). For our part, each person must commit himself or herself to showing solidarity with our persecuted brothers and sisters – those who spill their blood *and* those who “in the name of some badly interpreted principle of tolerance” are prevented from “freely expressing and practicing their own religious convictions in a peaceful and legitimate way” (cf. ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE OF THE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES, 7 MAY 2015).

What is presently happening to Catholics and Christians, especially in the Holy Land, demands our attention, prayers, and action. Indifference is not an option. One year ago, at a Wednesday audience, commenting on the fifth commandment, the Holy Father reminded us forcefully, “To annihilate a man, it suffices to ignore him. Indifference kills. It is like telling the other person: ‘you are dead to me’...” (POPE FRANCIS, GENERAL AUDIENCE, 17 OCTOBER 2018)

Our prayers and sacrifices are signs of our solidarity and our refusal to be indifferent. Support for the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land is a means, not only to support peace and reconciliation among Christians, but it is also a sign that we refuse to remain indifferent in the face of another person’s suffering. There are no easy solutions to relieving the sufferings of persecuted Christians, especially in the Holy Land; however, I encourage each person here to continue to raise his or her prophetic voice in calling for a cessation of violence, in standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, and in actively building peace through non-violence, as the Holy Father called for in his 2017 World Day of Peace Message and as Jesus Himself called for in the Beatitudes when He said: “*Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you, when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely utter every kind of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...*” (Matthew 5:9-12)

Migration and the Value of Education

No, there are no easy solutions to the crisis in the Holy Land. Even when people do raise their prophetic voices, still many flee. Of course, the problem of migration is not exclusive to the Holy Land. In his recent exhortation, following the Synod on Youth, the Holy Father wrote:

“Migration, considered globally, is a structural phenomenon, and not a passing emergency. It may occur within one country or between different countries. The Church’s concern is focused especially on those fleeing from war, violence, political or religious persecution, from natural disasters including those caused by climate change, and from extreme poverty. Many of them are young. In general, they are seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future and they want to create the conditions for achieving it...” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *CHRISTUS VIVIT*, 25 MARCH 2019, 91)

Some of my local collaborators will remind me that America is “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Many people freely come to this country with dreams of a better life, because of the opportunities this country offers. While we must receive Christians from the Middle East who come here with hospitality, we must seriously examine why they are leaving? What has forced them to flee?

There are many reasons for emigration, many of which are beyond the direct control of the Church: reunification with family members; political and religious strife; lack of economic opportunities. As Mons. Gregoire Pierre Melki, Patriarchal Exarch of the Patriarchate of Antioch of the Syrians noted at the last Synod on the Middle East:

“Though beneficial in some regards to the countries that welcome emigrants, emigration significantly diminishes the Christian presence and witness in the Holy Land. It also has a negative impact on the socio-political life in general, since it deprives the homeland of persons with potential that could accelerate progress and development.”

Education, and fostering an educated lay, Christian presence in the Holy Land, is essential to helping preserve the richness of culture, as well as of Christian faith, in the Holy Land. As such, it can be a means for rightly ordering society to be more just and peaceful. The educated Christian will bring a Christian perspective to many different fields, not merely the religious sphere, which will benefit the Christians in the Holy Land (as well as others).

Several years ago, Professor Agostino Borromeo outlined some areas in which Christians can make a difference: the construction of adequate housing; the creation of medical clinics; working for the development of micro-credit for financing activities that create new sources of capital; developing systems of insurance, especially health insurance; and, contacting Western companies to seek investment in the Middle East.

None of these areas are specifically Christian, but it is the one who acquires these skills at a university who can create new opportunities for their fellow Christians in the Holy Land and who will be grateful and appreciative to the Church as my family was and still is. Your generosity helps create these opportunities, but these opportunities and strong social networks contribute to an authentic freedom that strengthens the rights of Christians, to freely worship, not just on paper, but through the social, economic and political structures of Middle Eastern society.

Still, there is something more than technical “know how” provided by education and specifically Christian education: (that is) formation – specifically, formation in the virtues. The

cardinal virtues are particularly important for society in the Middle East. The virtue of **prudence** helps a person to choose the best means for achieving an end. While others might resort to violence to achieve their goals, the person trained in the university is trained to weigh options, benefits and harms. The virtue of prudence, which works especially on the conscience, helps meld faith and reason, preventing a fundamentalism that ends in violence. It is rightly called the “charioteer of the virtues” because it guides the others by setting rule and measure.

The virtue of **temperance** is similarly important. It is not simply referring to our appetites with respect to food and drink, nor does it refer only to chastity and moderating the sexual appetite. At a Catholic or Christian university, one discovers how to rightly order the passions and to find a balance in the use of created goods. No one person or race should be so selfish as to claim everything; rather, the virtue of temperance reminds us of the need for limits for our own good and for the *common good*. It does not take too much to see how this is relevant to the situation in the Middle East.

While the Christian seeks the common good by making moderate use of God’s gifts and sharing with one’s neighbor, the university also provides the setting for the discovery of and practice of **justice**, which means giving God and our neighbor their due. In the university, one learns how to peacefully coexist – even with those of other faiths – while maintaining one’s religious identity. Justice disposes a person to respect the rights of each person and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and the common good in our “common home.” It is the fundamental lack of justice – both religious and economic – which is responsible for the flight of many Christians.

Finally, **fortitude** is necessary. The Christian must learn to endure persecution and attack rather than flee. A Catholic university or school seeks to instill this strength of character which ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in pursuit of the good. Where these virtues are lacking, societal collapse is imminent.

The *Catechism* teaches (1810) that human virtues “are acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts”. Your support of the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land and its initiatives helps young people acquire these virtues. Further, these human virtues are ennobled by divine grace, enabling the Christian to give a prophetic witness in the midst of strife *and* to purify the culture with the Gospel.

Beyond the cardinal virtues are the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The disciple of Christ must not only keep the **faith**, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it. Nine years ago, in his homily closing the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Benedict XVI said:

“The words of the Lord Jesus may be applied to Christians in the Middle East: ‘*There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom*’ (Lk 12:32). Indeed, even if they are few, they are bearers of the Good News of the love of God for man, love which revealed itself in the Holy Land in the person of Jesus Christ. This Word of salvation, strengthened with the grace

of the Sacraments, resounds with particular potency in the places in which, by Divine Providence, it was written, and it is the only Word which is able to break that vicious circle of vengeance, hate, and violence.” (BENEDICT XVI, HOMILY, CONCLUSION OF SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, 24 OCTOBER 2010)

In addition to the virtue of faith, there is the virtue of **hope** by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness. The virtue of hope orders the aspirations of men and women, not to the domination and control of others or the pursuit of worldly goods, but to the pursuit of the Kingdom of heaven. The virtue of hope sustains the little flock in the Middle East, even during times of abandonment and discouragement.

People look for leaders to give them hope, and that is why forming Christian leaders is so necessary in the Middle East. Just as Abraham once “*hoped against hope and so became the father of many nations*” so too do the people of the Middle East look for leaders to direct them to the One who is the “*hope that does not disappoint*”. This is why your support for the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land is essential: you provide for the next generation of leaders who will encourage those who feel isolated and alone. You and those whom you help educate become ambassadors of hope.

From hope is born the greatest virtue – love. In his Easter homily, Archbishop Pizzaballa said:

“In the tragic situation we are living, it is this hope that comes to the rescue of a faith that is at odds every day with such great violence, it really seems to us that Evil is victorious. It is this hope that every day drives us to perform charity, even if we clearly see that it is a drop in the ocean. It is the hope of a different world, according to the heart of God, which helps us to walk towards a future that, for us, is unpredictable. Hope is not awaiting an unlikely future, but the awareness of a gift that accompanies the present. It is the good soil on which faith is founded, on which charity becomes testimony; without hope, faith dies, and charity finds no strength to act.” (ARCHBISHOP PIERBATTISTA PIZZABALLA, HOMILY FOR EASTER, 21 APRIL 2019)

Our world and the Christians in the Holy Land cannot afford a weak and powerless charity; rather, they need a robust charity, which becomes testimony to those around them. Our world needs love. The whole of the law and the prophets find its fulfillment in love. Love is that virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. Charity is the *form* of the virtues and the source and goal of their practice. Your support for the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land and your charity towards it, helps a young Christian to be educated and formed. In turn, he or she can give testimony to the God who is love.

The Christian presence in the Holy Land, sustained by your prayers, solidarity, and an adequate formation through education is a response to God’s love for us and is a true force for peace and reconciliation and the building of a more just and peaceful society. I thank you for your support and your generosity.