

**THE MAGI INITIATIVE:
EAST \Leftrightarrow WEST**

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WORD OF WELCOME

Dr. Mike Bassous

General Secretary and CEO,
Bible Society – Lebanon

- Your Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church,
- Your Beatitude Catholicos Patriarch Krikor Bedros XX of the Armenian Catholic Church,
- Your Eminence Archbishop Paul Sayah, Patriarchal Vicar and representative of the Patriarch of the Maronite Church, His Beatitude Cardinal Bechara Rai,
- Your Excellency Archbishop Monsignor Joseph Spiteri, Apostolic Nuncio to Lebanon (and representing His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches)
- Your Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, General Bishop in the United Kingdom of the Coptic Orthodox Church and President of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS),
- Dr. Souraya Bechalany, Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches,
- Mr. Amine Khoury, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Bible Society, Board members, and General Assembly members,

- Your Eminences, fathers, pastors, sister Bible Societies colleagues, brothers and sisters from Lebanon and around the world –

WELCOME TO LEBANON!

It was about 15 months ago that I was chatting in Istanbul with my colleague from the UK, Dr. Paul Williams, who is the CEO of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), about establishing a platform whereby we could conduct an honest, transparent dialogue among church leaders from various parts of the world, in an attempt to foster better understanding, and a support system for one another, based on God's Word. Because of our conviction that the Scriptures – the Bible – bring churches together, we pursued this initiative to close the gap between various perceptions, using the following five principles:

1. **We are all under pressure.** The entire Body of Christ is facing unprecedented pressure—whether this be persecution, secularism, disinterest in the Gospel message, disinterest in the Church, post-modernism's 'relative truth', materialism, etc. No active Christian community can claim to be pressure-free! Hence mutual support and partnership, as one body, is encouraged and advocated.
2. **We are here to listen to each other.** There is no right or wrong approach, presentation, speech, reflection, and/or discussion. We all agree that the Church has traditionally been an important 'peace builder' in society, and an advocate for education, equality, human rights and democracy. Therefore, listening to one another requires active engagement with our brothers and sisters, better understanding of their context, and continued uplifting of them in prayers, to achieve effective social change.
3. **We are here to learn from each other.** Experiences of how our communities under pressure have flourished are important lessons. The World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission issued the Bad Urach Call in 2009, which states: 'Persecuted Christians have learned truths about God that



Christians under less pressure need to hear in order to experience the fullness of God.’ Learning from one another requires humility, respect, and mutual insight.

4. **We are bound in unity through God’s Word.** What does the Bible message –transmitted orally, written, and compiled throughout generations in ‘the East’, and today a ‘global book’ comprising 97% of the world’s languages– what message can we, in unity, take back to our Christian communities under pressure? There is a message of hope and perseverance in faith that we can share together in unity.
5. **We are gathered to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit.** Despite the pressures we are all experiencing, our different contexts, the listening and learning from each other, and the unity around the Word of God, the most important requirement for our dialogue conference is to be ready to be led by the Holy Spirit. In the apocalyptic words of the Book of Revelation, “let us hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Having regard to these principles, the Bible Societies started exploring the platforms by which we could hold this dialogue conference. And here surfaced the concept of the ‘Magi Initiative’: Wise men coming from the East to ‘the West’ (at that time) in pursuit of the Star of Bethlehem, to encounter the Messiah, and to carry the Good News back to their own territories. Therefore, the ‘Magi Initiative’ is an invitation to each one of us to pursue the ‘Truth’ through this East ↔ West dialogue and take a message of hope back to our Christian communities under pressure.

The three most important initial objectives of the initiative included:

- A better East-West understanding of the state-religion relationship;
- Building bilateral and mutual support for communities under pressure; and
- A common understanding about reading and venerating the Holy Bible.

The invitation for collaboration with the Middle East Council of Churches came as a natural step in fulfilling our mandates as inter-confessional ecumenical bodies in the service of the Church, and we jointly thank the World Council of Churches for sending an observer, Mrs. Carla Khijoyan, to this conference. We hope and pray that, throughout the deliberations of this dialogue conference, we can pursue the attainment of the objectives set forth. The expected outcome of the conference is two-fold:

In the short term, we hope to publish a document that describes the joint stand regarding how we should read the Bible during these difficult times for the Church. This will include all the papers submitted on various topics by Eastern and Western scholars after presenting them during the workshops, drafted into one document that combines the views from both perspectives into a common declaration. We will also present a communique, or a joint statement of intent, that will be declared at the end of the conference.

In the longer term, we plan to form a 'think-tank' or reference group, arising from this dialogue conference, to address these and future related issues, particularly those relevant to this region – 'the Cradle of Christianity'. As an Eastern Christian I recognise that, in spite of the decreasing number of Christians in the region, the Middle East remains a fertile base for any re-evaluation of Christianity. We hope and pray that this initiative, and its continued reference group, will create a long-standing mutual support programme for all Christian communities under pressure.

Again, we thank you for joining us today from various parts of the world, and we look forward to a fruitful dialogue throughout these conference proceedings.

INTRODUCTORY WORD

Dr. Souraya Bechealany

Secretary General of
The Middle East Council
of Churches

Your Holiness, Beatitude,
Eminence, Reverend fathers and pastors,
dear brothers and sisters

Allow me first to welcome you on behalf of the Middle East Council of Churches, and thank you for accepting our invitation to participate in this meeting organised jointly with the esteemed Bible Society, whom I would like to thank for all their efforts in this regard.

I consider this meeting, which brings together Churches from the East and West, as a token of the ecclesial communion (*koinônia*) and an embodiment of the One, Holy, Apostolic Church. This meeting represents an opportunity to meet, pray, think about and work together on the meaning of the Christian presence in the East, in the light of God's Word. The Word of God is capable of inspiring us to do that which is of God, if we are willing to listen to it and act accordingly.

HONOURABLE GATHERING

Let us, like the Magi, place ourselves in a state of listening to the Holy Spirit, in anticipation of the star that shall guide us to where Christ is born, so that we may worship Him. Yes, in this East, and despite all the darkness surrounding us, we are walking towards Christ in the light of His Word and the glory of His resurrection; and we believe that He is born every day in every corner of 'our' East, and in the secrets of silent believing souls. Come, let us walk together to the place where Christ is born, in those corners and souls, and let us worship and glorify Him.

HONOURABLE GATHERING

Allow me finally, on my own behalf and that of the Bible Society, to thank the lecturers for accepting our invitation and for honouring us with their presence and valuable contributions. I wish every success to this meeting.

Thank you.

INTRODUCTORY WORD

**His Eminence
Archbishop Angaelos**

Coptic Orthodox
Archbishop of London and
President of The British and
Foreign Bible Society

OUR INTENTIONAL JOURNEY TOGETHER

Your Holiness, Your Excellency, Your Eminences,
Your Graces, Dear Fathers, Sisters, And Brothers

It is an immense privilege to be here, and standing before you I think I represent the enormous complexity of our Church around the world. I was born in Egypt; my parents migrated to Australia when I was five; I went back to Egypt and served as private secretary to the late Pope Shenouda III; I have served in England for almost 25 years; and now I stand here before you as the President of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Now if that is not confusing, I am not sure what is!

We can look at this in two ways. It is either confusion because it goes against all the norms that we have known, it breaks all the moulds that we have been accustomed to, it contravenes the rules and regulations of engagement and sometimes disengagement that we have followed; or we can look at it as the challenge that it is – the reality of the world we live in.

Only 50 years ago, I am sure that someone could quite possibly have been born, lived, and died in the same village, not knowing anyone or anything else, except for his or her own family, community, faith, religious community, and ethnicity; and yet that is no longer the reality – whether internal or external – for many millions of people around the world. Our Churches and church organisations, as pastoral entities, are now faced with the challenge of serving in this new paradigm, with this new complexity.

I was speaking with someone earlier, saying that it is wonderful being a Coptic Orthodox clergyman in the UK because it actually exemplifies the challenge and tension that is not only within our Church, but within all our churches and our communities. We have a 2000 year old Church in Egypt, and churches outside of Egypt for the past 50 years. To encapsulate 2000 years of heritage, identity, culture, and belief within a new context that not only has to deal with generational challenges, but also ethnic, linguistic and cultural factors – that is indeed a challenge. It is a challenge that I take very seriously because – with of course a great sense of difference – it is the same challenge to which our Incarnate Lord called us, when He dealt with the farmers, the fishermen, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Gentiles, the lepers, and the tax collectors. All of these people were ‘different’ from ‘the norm’, and yet they became the bedrock, core, and foundation of the Church.

In the Gospel of St. Mark (16: 15), our Lord instructed His disciples to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” There are three points to consider here. The first is that it is active and decisive: “Go.” Do not merely think about it, ponder it, form a committee, have a consultation, or hold a symposium – “just go!”

Secondly, to preach the Gospel is very clear. It is our mandate. We do other things that are connected, whether these concern religious freedom, human rights, peace-building, or reconciliation. All this must be done because the message of our Lord is not a singular isolated message; it is a holistic message addressing the salvation of the world. All of these concepts are important and essential, but all are rooted in preaching the Gospel; and so, if our encounter leads to us acting in a way that does not preach



the Gospel, then we are not doing what we are called to do. If our encounter does not shine the light of Christ into His world, we are not doing what we are instructed to do. If our encounter does not, firstly, bring us together, and then reach out to the world around us, we are not doing what we are told – and so that is our mandate.

The third instruction we receive is to “preach...to every creature” indiscriminately. This is evident in the parable of the sower. It is not up to us to determine growth or even effectiveness. It is for us to be faithful in what we do and how we do it, and so that is why this gathering is so important. I accepted the appointment as President of the Bible Society because I wanted to make a difference, and one of my very first conditions was that I was not going to be an ‘honorary’ president. It was not going to be about just having a name or a title. I wanted to be a part of what is happening because I am excited by it, inspired by it, and because I am hopeful in it; because what we have been given is the life-giving message that we can present to the whole world, as God’s gift through us. We are but a channel, we are an avenue, we are a conduit. There are two things to consider: first of all, we must be free-flowing – we cannot hold back the Word of God. Secondly, we cannot distort it in any way. It must be given as it was received, without our own occasional tribalism.

St. Augustine said, “The commandment to the apostles to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and even to the utmost part of the world, is not addressed exclusively to those to whom it was immediately spoken.” This commandment is also given to us. In our Churches, and with our tradition of apostolic succession, we believe that we are the disciples of those men who were the disciples of the Saviour, and so that is our calling.

In the second Epistle to Timothy, he is instructed, “Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Timothy 4: 2). Whatever it takes, do it. The world has always lived through conflict and war, through famine and persecution. The world has always lived through challenges, and so has the Church – and what I always love to tell people is, “we are still here!” Our

continuity makes no sense logically or logistically, or even in terms of ethnicity and population; it makes no sense, but we are still here because we were very clearly promised that “the gates of hell shall not overcome”, and that is our testimony.

Our message is going to be counter-cultural, so our direction must be counter-cultural. It cannot be politically driven, it cannot be tribal, it cannot be sectarian. The Word of God is a Word that gathers, it does not divide. In speaking with my colleagues from the British and Foreign Bible Society yesterday, I thought it important to first clarify what this meeting is not meant to be. This is not an attempt at control; it is not an attempt at manipulation. This is not an attempt to monopolise. This is not an attempt to be patronising. This is not an attempt to be prescriptive. What it is, is a journey of fellowship – genuine fellowship – and I am so honoured to be sharing this platform with both Mike and Souraya, who are very dear friends, not just colleagues, and I have the utmost respect for them. We meet numerous times a year in various capacities, doing similar things, and it is such collaboration that we must work for. I am glad there is going to be a communique, I am glad there is going to be a statement – but let us ensure that it is not just a communique and not just a statement, because we do not need more of those. We have volumes of them, and yet people continue to suffer; and more tragically, even looking at the news this morning, people continue to die.

The global model of Church that we now have inspires us today to come together. It is no longer possible for any of our Churches to present a monochromatic vision of Christianity or the Church as a whole, because we are all both individually and collectively now mosaics. Our Churches are global individually, but they are also global collectively, and we must hold that tension.

Of course, I stand before you as President of the Bible Society, but I cannot deny, nor will I ever try, that I am also a clergyman in the Coptic Orthodox Church, and representing my Church. We are honoured by the witness of our people in the Middle East – mine in Egypt and yours in every place that you represent. We have seen struggles, we have seen resilience, we have seen power, we have seen overcoming, we have seen victory in what was supposed to



be a hopeless situation. That is the picture of the living, thriving, witnessing Church that we gift to the world.

I also want to tell you something, as someone who has lived and served in the West for most of my life. We are not forgotten, although it feels like that sometimes, but I assure you we are not. We had a gathering only two nights ago in London to celebrate the beginning of the Coptic New Year and we had 250 non-Egyptian, non-Coptic, sometimes non-Christian, friends and colleagues, along with our own 200 Copts who were present. We are not forgotten, but we need to learn to speak well and correctly. We have a great message to share. We sometimes just do not communicate it well, and that is where the collaborative efforts of the Church come together. Now, I do not want to use the terms 'East' and 'West' because there is no east and west in the Church. There is one Christ, one Body, one Church – fragmented, different, and often quite dysfunctional, but undeniably one Body of the one Christ. So, when we come together for this initiative, it is from that perspective.

The Scripture that binds us, that brings us together to present a complementary image of what the Church is today, is the reality of our ministry, and the truth of our message. Yes, we will differ on translations in some cases, but no one can differ on the core. No one can differ on the timeless message that is given to all humanity by the Incarnate Word. I have made it very clear in my role in England that we cannot look at numerous Churches anymore. The Church is the one Body of Christ, yet to be fully reconciled. I may never see it in my lifetime, but that does not mean we cannot continue to work towards it.

That is why we are here today, and that is why I have come to share this time with you, and that is why I plead with you. Let us work in the spirit of this oneness; let us all work together. In the spirit of ecumenism, in the spirit of the Scriptures, and in bringing those together – that God may truly be glorified.

I want to conclude with a quote from St. Cyril of Alexandria. He says, 'The Lord wishes the disciples to be kept in a state of unity by maintaining like-mindedness and an identity of will, being mingled together as it were, in soul and spirit and in the law of peace and

love for one another.’ He goes on to say that ‘He wishes them to be bound together tightly with an unbreakable bond of love, that they may advance to such a degree of unity that their freely chosen association might even become an image of the natural unity that is conceived to exist between the Father and the Son.’

What this means is this: first, that we are bound, and bound tightly, even when it is uncomfortable, even when it seems implausible. Secondly, we are bound with an unbreakable bond of love, regardless of what we go through. Like any family, we will have our skirmishes, our struggles, and our annoyances, but it must be an unbreakable bond of love. Finally, we must freely choose to journey together. There is no compulsion in any of this. We need to journey together with our own will, with our conviction, and with a commitment that looks to the visible presence of the Incarnate Word through our witness, through our lives, and through the Scripture that not only binds us, but the Scripture that has been given to us to share with the world.

Thank you.

MESSAGE

**His Eminence Cardinal
Leonardo Sandri**

Prefect of the Congregation
for the Oriental Churches

CONGREGATIO
PRO ECCLESIIS ORIENTALIBUS

Prot. N° 47/2013


I am pleased to greet you, distinguished guests and dear participants of this inter-confessional, ecumenical dialogue conference, on the theme “Bringing the Church together to support its communities under pressure based on God’s Word”, organized by the Bible Society in Lebanon, Syria & Iraq and the British & Foreign Bible Society in collaboration with the Middle East Council of Churches. I am grateful to H.E Archbishop Joseph Spiteri, the Papal Representative in Lebanon, who kindly agreed to share with you my greetings.

Pope Francis, with his recently published *Motu Proprio Aperuit Illis* has established the “Sunday of the Word of God”. In the document, the Holy Father declares that “the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time is to be devoted to the celebration, study and dissemination of the Word of God”. This is more than a temporal coincidence, he explains: the celebration has “ecumenical value, since the Scriptures point out, for those who listen, the path to authentic and firm unity” (art. 3).

Veneration of the scriptures is a fundamental bond of unity between Christians. If Christians read the word of God, and do so together, it will strengthen this bond of unity and enable them to be more open to the unifying action of God. Pope Francis continues in *Aperuit Illis*, “The Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few”. ... “The Bible is the book of the Lord’s people, who, in listening to it, move from dispersion and division towards unity. The word of God unites believers and makes them one people” (art.4). In the context of the Middle East, where Christians including Catholics, non-Catholics and various Christian communities live together, every effort to intensify unity is to be encouraged.

I sincerely hope that your reflections in the coming two days will help you understand the methods to strengthen the Christian communities, especially those who are in need of your presence and support. Assuring you of my prayers, I invoke the Lord’s blessings upon you.

10 ottobre 2019


* Leonardo Card. Sandri
Prefetto

ADDRESS

**His Excellency Archbishop
Joseph Spiteri**

Apostolic Nuncio to Lebanon

- Your Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia,
- Your Excellency Mgr. Paul Nabil El-Sayah, representing His Beatitude Mar Bechara Boutros Raï, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch,
- Your Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, President of the British and Foreign Bible Society,
- Dr. Souraya Bechealany, Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches,
- Mr. Amine Khoury, Chairman of the Bible Society, Lebanon,
- Dr. Mike Bassous, General Secretary of the Bible Society, Lebanon,
- Dear Members of the Bible Society, Distinguished Guests –

I am sincerely grateful for your kind invitation to join you for the opening session of your conference – a privileged moment of dialogue in the light of the Word of God, the source of life, wisdom and strength for all of us.

You are all aware of the profound love and esteem that His Holiness Pope Francis, whom I have the honour and the privilege to represent here in Lebanon, has for Christians in the Middle East,



and indeed for all the inhabitants of this region of the world. He has already declared publicly his intention to visit Iraq next year, while he continues to follow very closely the life and challenges of our Christian communities. May God bless his voyage to the land of Abraham, so that it will produce abundant fruit of peace and reconciliation.

The Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, has just published a *Motu Proprio* (an Apostolic Letter giving specific guidelines), called *Aperuit Illis*, in which he established the 'Sunday of the Word of God', to be held on every Third Sunday in Ordinary Time of the Latin Liturgical Year. The Letter was specifically published on 30 September 2019, the liturgical memorial of the great biblical scholar Saint Jerome, on the inauguration of the 1600th anniversary of his death. Furthermore, the 'Third Sunday' will normally coincide with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and is intended to underline the importance of the Word of God on the path towards the fullness of communion in Christ.

The opening words of the Apostolic Letter, in fact, are taken from the Gospel of Luke (24: 45) when the Risen Lord appeared to the disciples after His resurrection: 'Aperuit: He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.' This is the action of the Spirit of the Risen Lord, who is always present in the midst of the faithful. Even today, the same Holy Spirit continues to enlighten us and to strengthen our resolve as we walk together, so that we may live according to the words of Christ, along the path of dialogue and reconciliation, notwithstanding all the difficulties and hardships that we face.

His Eminence, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, refers to the Pope's *Motu Proprio* in the message of good wishes that he addresses to your Conference. I have the honour to read his message.

MESSAGE OF CARDINAL SANDRI

Your Holiness, Eminences, Excellencies and dear friends, the aim of this conference is to offer support to Christian communities during critical times, by bringing them together through God's

Word. We usually speak of all other kinds of aid, and these are certainly necessary, but we often forget the Holy Scriptures. It is the Word of God that gives us the necessary strength amid situations of social, ideological or armed conflict. It is the Word of God that helps us to maintain our faith in God's mercy and in His providence and saving help.

The Risen Lord, before appearing to the disciples, walked with the two disciples heading towards Emmaus, who were sad because they had still not understood the meaning of His passion and death, and 'he interpreted to them the things about Himself in all the Scriptures' (Luke 24: 27). The Word of God does not allow us to avoid conflict or to run away from difficulties. Rather, it strengthens us to grow in love and mercy in every situation. Our mission, therefore, is to serve our brothers and sisters by offering the Word to them, helping them to know Christ, to love Christ and to serve Christ.

The Word of God, as Pope Francis reminds us in the *Aperuit Illis*, 'proves both sweet and sour' (cf. Ezekiel 3: 3, Revelation 10: 10). We need prophets to proclaim it to us as they did to the people of God in the most difficult of times. We must assume a more prophetic role to communicate the Word to our brothers and sisters, to offer them concrete examples of living according to the Word of God; of choosing mercy over revenge, dialogue over conflict, fraternity instead of division. The Holy Spirit will surely guide us to defend our communities and to bring them closer together in the spirit of reconciliation. Let us not forget that the Scriptures reflect the experience of faith, trust, hope and love of living communities who were often facing grave challenges. In a similar way, the Word of God can be fully understood only in a community animated and gathered in communion by the same virtues.

May the heavenly Father, in His infinite love, bless your conference with abundant fruit, through the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the disciples of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEECH

**His Holiness Aram I
Keshishian,**

Catholicos of the Armenian
Church Holy See of Cilicia

OUR RESPONSE TO THE CALL OF GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE

At the outset of my talk I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Middle East Council of Churches and the Bible Society for this important initiative, at this critical juncture of the history of Christianity in the Middle East.

I will try to elaborate my reflections around the following theme: Our response to the call of God through the Bible. The core of any reflection or action that claims to be Christian, in the authentic sense of the word, is the Bible. Christianity, in all its aspects, spheres and manifestations, is Bible-based, Bible-driven, Bible-oriented, Bible-guided.

1. The Pivotal Importance of the Bible

According to estimates, the Bible is the most printed, the most translated, the most read, the most distributed, and the best-selling book of all time. Are the values, principles, and teachings of the Bible, too, the most spread and the most implemented of all time? This critical question needs to be addressed seriously and realistically by the churches.

In order to have an accurate perception of the Bible and its centrality to Christian life and witness, one has to understand the very nature and the purpose of God's revelation. According to the Christian faith, God has revealed Himself in history through particular persons and specific events, to liberate human beings from the bondage of sin and establish His Kingdom. Revelation is not knowledge about God – it is God Himself. The revealer and the revealed are God Himself; revelation is the self-unfolding and self-communication of God.

It is vitally important to underscore the following points:

- a) The Bible is not a book of teachings and narratives; it is the source of God's revelation. As a book the Bible is not itself the revelation of God, but it contains God's revelation. The author of its content is God, and it takes the form of writings by human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- b) Through the Bible not only do we know about God, but we *know* God; we encounter God and enter in communion with Him. Through the Bible the human being discovers God, and by discovering God he discovers himself.
- c) The Bible, with its transforming power, as well as its moral and spiritual values and teachings, comprises a powerful message advocating a theocentric life, and a credible guide to salvation.
- d) The Bible must not be interpreted in isolation, but within the context of the apostolic tradition which is preserved through the Church. Separating the Bible from the Church, and drawing a line of demarcation between believing in God through the Bible and belonging to the Church –which is a growing tendency affecting Western Christianity– may jeopardise the credibility and integrity of the Bible.
- e) The Bible must be located at the centre of the Church's liturgy, spirituality, theology, evangelism and mission. It embraces the totality of the life and witness of the community of faith – namely, its self-understanding and self-articulation. The Bible sustains, nurtures and guides the Christian life, both individually and as a community.



- f) Not only does the Bible tell the story of God's revelation, but it also teaches, guides, challenges and reminds the Christian about how to understand himself, his vocation, the way he should live his life; and it informs his relationships with fellow human beings, with the creation, and with God.
- g) We may have different perspectives pertaining to the authority and infallibility of the Bible; however, we all agree that the Bible is the core of what it means to be a Christian.

2. Four Major Calls of the Bible

a) the bible-based call to be together

the Bible brings Christians together irrespective of dogmatic diversities, theological divergences, geographical distances, and gender, age or colour differences. The Bible is the source of unity; it makes us an integral and inseparable part of the community of faith. In situations of division, alienation or isolation, it reminds us of our common belonging and identity in Christ. In situations of distress and hopelessness, it binds Christians together through the message of hope and love. In situations of tension and conflict, it leads to reconciliation. In fact, God's statement in the Old Testament of 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity' (Psalm 133: 1) acquired powerful emphasis in the New Testament, when our Lord prayed that His followers would be one (John 17: 23). Paul the Apostle, in his turn, assured the Christian believers that we are one in Christ (Galatians 3: 28). Indeed, love is the foundation of unity, and Christ's call for unity is based on His call to love one another (John 13: 34).

b) the bible-based call to reach out

The Bible is also a call to mission: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28: 19). The Bible not only unfolds God's revelation, but also reveals 'the will of the Lord' (Ephesians 5: 17), namely God's plan and purpose for the whole of humanity and the creation. Christ was incarnated for this mission (Luke 4: 18-19), and He gave Himself on the cross for the fulfilment of God's will. The Church has no mission of its own; its mission is God's mission

(‘missio Dei’). Christians are sent by Jesus Christ, in the power of Holy Spirit, to proclaim God’s will and His reconciling, redeeming, liberating, renewing and transforming love.

c) the bible-based call to engage in service

The Bible is life-promoting, sustaining and protecting. God-given life was distorted because of human sin. God’s mission in Christ was to give to the world a quality of life that destroys all forms of evil (John 10: 10). Giving life implies the restoring of God’s likeness and God-given vocation to human beings. Christ embarked on his mission by describing it as one of service to the poor, liberation of the oppressed and marginalised (Luke 4: 18). In fact, the call for unity and mission is also a call for *diakonia*; they are interconnected in the Bible. Unity implies carrying one other’s burdens (Galatians 6: 2); this reminds us that when one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers (1 Corinthians 12: 26). The Apostle John says: ‘Let us not love with words or speech, but with actions and in truth’ (1 John 3: 18). The Bible commands us not only to help the poor, but also to speak on their behalf – to be the voice of the voiceless, the hope of the hopeless (Proverbs 31: 8-9). Christ identified Himself with the poor and oppressed; He served and defended them, and called His followers to do the same.

d) the bible-based call to love one’s neighbour

The ‘pan-human’ and cosmic nature and scope of biblical values, principles, and teachings constitute significant and salient features of the Bible. God’s mission in Christ embraces the entirety of humanity and the creation. The Bible presents Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the whole world. Hence, showing mercy and compassion to others is a fundamental biblical principle. Christ commands his followers to love their neighbour, and even their enemy (Matthew 5: 44, Mark 12: 31). Openness, hospitality, and care towards others are concrete expressions of God’s love for all human beings, including sinners: ‘No one should seek their own good, but the good of others’ (1 Corinthians 10: 24) affirms the Apostle Paul.



3. The Church's Response to the Biblical Call in the Middle East

Printing and distributing the Bible is undoubtedly important. Reading and interpreting the Bible is pivotal. Yet living the Bible, its values and imperatives, and responding to its call and challenges, is essential. The Church's response to the call of God takes place in a concrete environment and in a specific time. What is the Church's response to the call of God in our part of the world today?

- a) Christian unity is an existential challenge and is more urgent in the Middle East than in any other part of the world. The survival of Christianity has become precarious due to the growing migration of Christians away from the region. This sad reality is strongly affecting the quality of the Christian presence and the efficacy of its witness. We must therefore give a renewed urgency to Christian unity. In fact, emphasising the vital importance of MECC, initiating joint programmes, acting together in the face of common concerns impacting the life of Christian communities and society at large, and celebrating Easter together, can significantly help to deepen Christian unity. It is sometimes said that doctrine divides, but that the Bible unites. We must constantly emphasise the unifying role of the Bible, particularly in view of the divisive trends, tendencies, factors and practices that often surround us in this globalised and secularised world.
- b) Engaging in mission is an inseparable dimension of Christian life. 'Being church' means being in mission. The church is essentially a missionary reality. The coerced conversion of non-Christians, as well as proselytism, have no place on the Church's agenda. Our mission in our region is to be a witness to Biblical values; it is the 're-Christianisation' of nominal Christians, and the renewal of Christian life. Mission involves healing the brokenness of creation, and transforming humanity through the power of the Holy Spirit. The growing penetration into our communities of distorted values and ways of life requires the churches to assume their crucial role in the sphere of Christian education and formation.

c) Expanding the Church's *diakonia* – serving the people – has been a major area of the churches' missionary outreach and pastoral engagement. Our churches have played a remarkable role in initiating people-oriented diaconal programmes, and founding humanitarian, medical and social institutions. Most of these institutions and centres, with a high quality of service and exceptional organisational efficiency, have been established and run by churches. It is significant to note that the churches' diaconal action continues to embrace all needy families and individuals, without any confessional or religious discrimination. I believe that renewed attention needs to be given to the churches' *diakonia* in view of the prevailing socio-economic crises.

d) The command of our Lord to "Love your neighbour" has been taken seriously by the churches of the Middle East. Christian-Muslim cohabitation on the basis of mutual acceptance is a concrete manifestation of the spirit of tolerance that has marked the life and witness of our churches for centuries. The growing violence, extremism and conflicts in modern societies, including in our region, make the biblical message to love one another even more urgent.

In conclusion, the history of Christianity in the Middle East has been one of living martyrria. Suffering, oppression, persecution, even massacres have been permanent features of Christian life. We have endured suffering, rejected oppression, faced persecution, and survived massacres. The Bible is the source of our faith and hope, courage and commitment.

PROGRAMME

**BETTER
UNDERSTANDING
OF RESPECTIVE
CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITIES**

OVERVIEW OF PRESSURES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Archbishop
Dr. Youssef Touma
Chaldean Catholic
Archeparchy of Kirkuk

DID WE ALL BECOME THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF WAR?

We are in need today of an in-depth analysis of the psychological state of our peoples in general and of 'our East' in particular, as we need to acknowledge the reality in order to truly understand ourselves – and not only in the way depicted by the media, which generally remains 'off topic'. We also need psychological, social, and even political human science methods to realise what 'death drive' or rather 'death experience' has done to some of our countries' contemporaries, especially given that, when compared with the Japanese kamikaze during World War II, we find their experience very different from what has happened, and is still happening, in our own countries. I consider this to be a basis for reflection and action in the face of the pressures to which Christian communities are subjected – being denied the ability to influence their circumstances due to their decreasing numbers, weakened effectiveness and lack of opportunities available to them to work against the prevailing trends – amid an atmosphere charged with



'sectarian' ideologies that have infiltrated Islamic communities in an unprecedented way. These 'sects and creeds' (*al-Milal wa al-Nihal*), as analysed by Abu al-Fath al-Shahrastani (1086 – 1153 AD), are in fact phenomena that occur in every time and place, and spread because of weak policies or the exploitation of religion.

This kind of analysis is therefore greatly needed in order to find a way to break the chain of negative factors that has crippled us for decades and that ignites in every generation the desire for war. It is essential to get rid of this ongoing turmoil, in which it appears that the whole world takes pleasure in arming these sick combat-loving persons, before then punishing them with siege, starvation and the death of children with no access to medicine.

For decades, and especially since 2003, we have been witnessing, throughout the Middle East, generations that know nothing but war or warmongering through the breeding of hostility among their people. War has become normal for people – it is embedded in their souls, bodies, hearts and minds. Some began implicating God in this crooked logic, and instead of promoting His true image as the God of peace, they called for wars in His name. Ordinary uneducated people follow these harmful types of community leaders, and they all catch this infection – as if this is the only thing that unites them, as if this 'death drive' is the only course open to the whole of society. War has become part of them, and this is what the people of Mosul told me when I visited them in April 2017: "We lost our minds, we kicked you out of here, and now you are bringing us food and medicine. We have paid a heavy price for this madness!"

In this context I remember a man, who used to beat his wife, who once told me: "She couldn't understand me, because she didn't participate in the war. War has slipped into our home, and is sleeping with us in bed!" This is a heavy burden, which is weighing down the children of an entire generation that has fallen victim to this destructive mentality.

We must therefore identify the pressures faced by Christian communities, which derive from a cycle of violence that got out of our control; everyone around us suffers from their own problems and is also affected by others' problems. There is no one to help

these people or to talk to them about their concerns; they may feel ashamed, they may not have friends, or may feel that no one cares about their welfare. For them, 'difference' becomes a source of friction between Muslims and Christians, or even among Christians or Muslims themselves; this circle of negativity then tightens and begins revolving around the differences between men and women, causing everyone else to suffer. A simple search on the internet shows us that the word 'death' is more prevalent than 'life', and 'problems' or 'bitterness' recur more than 'positivity', 'joy' or 'sweetness of life'.

Many suffer, in fact, from hereditary disorders, such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, which are transmitted by some groups in their genes. I asked psychiatrists about this and they told me that it is one of the legacies of the wars, our generations in the East having witnessed many wars throughout the years 1948 to 1967, 1973, 1980 to 1988, 1991, 2013 and so on. The hardships of these wars were felt everywhere, and as a result children had to endure living with a violent father or mother. The greatest problems emanate firstly from pressures endured in the family and on the street, resulting from economic hardship, lack of services and harsh living conditions.

The biblical prophet Jeremiah wrote about the ideals prevalent in his time: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jeremiah 31: 29); he predicted that a day would come when the newer generation would no longer be forced to inherit the evil legacies of previous generations. Against this backdrop, many people in more recent times started to rid themselves of their societies' pressures. They first adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen during the French Revolution (1789), and then the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) – declarations which would previously have been considered inconceivable.

Many human beings are now no longer willing to be subject to all these fluctuations, fears and shame. They now dare to speak out about their position regarding traditions that glorify sadness, bitterness and death – and even if no one listens to them, they can still see light at the end of the tunnel. They do not need to



flee from their society and migrate to other societies, but they are called to resist through culture and knowledge only, and not to fall backwards and become immersed in imposed ideas. On the contrary, people have the right to dream of a healthy society, of peace rather than war for their children – unlike the kamikazes of our time who repeat Samson's prayer "May I revenge myself on my enemies", knowing that 'the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life' (Judges 16: 28-30). He was blind and had lost hope!

The collective Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, from which some of our societies suffer, drives us to understand and diagnose it in everyone. To help create a new form of society, we ought to understand the true meaning of the biblical word 'repentance' (*metanoia* = change of mindset). God speaks to us through these words, to help us understand who He is and how we can see Him in others who are different. If we fail to understand that we will pay a heavy price, and this is what Jesus meant when He said: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13: 3). The individual therefore comes first, and then the group.

Psychological sciences succeeded in diagnosing Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder in individuals a century ago, but things got out of control in our own times when this disorder became a collective disease affecting political, religious, literary and media figures. These propagated an image of God that resembled themselves: frightening, condemning, governing, almighty... We are accustomed, especially in the East, to confusing our own thoughts with God's thoughts – hence the crises that people have been exposed to, which made them for a long time buckle under the weight of suffering, spreading fatigue and contagion.

The first step on the road towards finding a solution is to recognise the burdensome legacy of the past and not to regard it also as the inevitable future. History is simply a lesson that we should not forget, since lost trust can often be restored only through truth. Today, we have the means of dealing seriously with painful memories. Recovery is possible, despite the horrors of wars that Yezidis, Christians and other refugees have experienced. This is the resilience mentioned by senior specialists such as Boris

Cyrulnik (born in 1937), who had lost both his parents at the age of six at the hands of the Nazis, and who later became one of the most famous psychologists in France to study this issue.

In conclusion, if the people of this region are unable to perceive the meaning of what has happened to them, namely the common death that has not spared anyone, they will be unable to join forces and work together to build their common future, and fight against the ideas that caused all these tragedies decades ago. We have fought civil wars and wars with neighbours, which at times have almost wiped us out. However, the wisdom of local groups has spared us that fate. This must now be considered as a collective memory, and as a common historical reason to work together to overcome the death drive and silence all those beating the drums of wars. It is true that we have all become daughters and sons of some form of war, but only one path can lead us to the future: working together to break the chains of war, their causes, and the wounds and memories in our bodies and minds. The first thing we can start doing as Muslims, Christians and Yezidis is praying together and for each other, individually and collectively, and repeating the prayer that we recite in the Chaldean Mass: "Divide, O Lord, the divided peoples who love war!"

OVERVIEW OF PRESSURES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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THE CHURCH IN TENSION

THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN HISTORY, VIEWED FROM THE THEOLOGY OF SCRIPTURE

Introduction

The famous statement by Alfred Loisy,¹ 'Jesus came preaching the Kingdom, and what arrived was the Church' in a sense sums up the distance from the Church taken by the academics who approached the New Testament – and indeed the whole Bible – with the 'tools' and in the 'spirit' of the historical critical method.² That method attempted to differentiate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. This differentiation would lead to a separation between the man from Nazareth, who died on a cross in Jerusalem, and the community of his followers, who believe that the crucified

1) A. Loisy, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Paris, 1902, p. 111.

2) The quest for the historical Jesus began with Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) and has gone through three phases, with ups and downs, the last of which is still continuing. The ecclesiology of the 20th century is strongly influenced by the results of the so called 'first quest'.

One is risen and that his death has achieved redemption for all mankind. This belief – always according to the results of this historical critical research – led to the ‘preaching’ about the Christ of faith, thus justifying the existence of the Church.³

In the light of this research the following questions arise: Is it possible to separate Jesus Christ from the Church? How does the Church understand herself in relation to Jesus Christ and to her mission to be His witness in the world, according to Christ’s mandate: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1: 8)? Is there a tension in the Church as a constitutive dimension of her being? If the answer to these questions is ‘yes’, how can we articulate this tension?

Obviously, the first source for an analytical investigation of the tension paradigm of ecclesiology is the New Testament. The canonical books containing the written and normative memory of Christ’s preaching (the Gospels) and the preaching about Christ by the early community of his followers (the rest of the New Testament writings) introduce other questions: Is the Church’s preaching Christ’s own preaching, by virtue of his identification with his own community, as stated in Matthew 28: 20: “And, behold, I am with you always, till the end (completion) of time”? If the answer is ‘yes’, does the expression ‘with you’ eliminate any ‘tension’ between Christ and his Church, or does it allow for some possibility of the Church’s growing understanding of the mystery of Christ, without excluding the possibility of some misunderstandings?

The second source is history. The Church’s understanding or misunderstanding of the mystery of Christ unfolds in history. Jesus’ followers, just like their Lord, are ‘in the world’ (John 17: 11), but not ‘from (of) the world’ (John 17: 14). The tension between Christ and the world is particularly stressed in the Gospel

3) A masterpiece of a critical approach to the historical critical method is to be found in Martin Kähler, *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, Leipzig, 1892. From the same author: *Besteht der Wert der Bibel für den Christen hauptsächlich darin, dass sie geschichtliche Urkunden enthält?*, Leipzig, 1896.



and in the letters of John. If the Church is the body of Christ – as Paul says: ‘You are the body of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 12: 27) – the Church lives with the same tension. When the Church loosens this tension, does it mean that the tension between her and Christ becomes stronger? The self-consciousness of the Church develops in history and is analysed through theology.

The third source, therefore, of the tension-nature investigation of the Church is theology. Theology reflects on the Church’s understanding of itself in time and space as a ‘body’ situated between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. The Kingdom of God is announced as being already here, but is not yet manifested to everyone. The eschatological tension of the community of the believers consists in the hopeful awaiting of the accomplishment of the Kingdom, while already joyfully celebrating its presence, despite the pressures from worldly powers. The short reflections that follow are based on a choice of New Testament passages and are presented from the theological perspective of the historical development of the New Testament.

1. The Church in the Scripture

The fact that the word *ekklesia* is mentioned only three times in the Gospels (in contrast with the phrase ‘kingdom of God/heaven’, which is mentioned about 100 times), and only by Matthew, has raised many questions about a Gospel-based foundation of a systematic theology of the Church.⁴ The only time the word *ekklesia* is used to refer to a community explicitly founded by Jesus is in Matthew 16: 18 – “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...” There is no agreement amongst exegetes on the possibility of tracing this phrase back to the historical Jesus.⁵ Since the aforementioned ‘problem’ of the

4) A typical provocative approach can be found in the very first chapter of Hans Küng, *Die Kirche*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1969.

5) ‘Difficulty with tracing v. 18 in any form back to the historical Jesus has focused on the phrase ‘my church’. It is doubtful whether Jesus anticipated the emergence of the church as an entity separate from Israel. He is also unlikely to have identified with the separatist mind-set that appears to have characterized the Qumran community’ (John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Michigan, 2005).

historical Jesus should not jeopardise the validity of the Gospels as the most authoritative witness about His earthly life, it would be possible to see in this passage of Matthew an inchoative ecclesiology of the early community, which obviously remains far from the successive developments of systematic ecclesiology.⁶ Nevertheless, a deeper look at Jesus' preaching in the Gospels, that has as a central topic the kingdom of God/heaven, allows us to peer into the elementary shape of the Church. In the first part of this section we will take into consideration the tension model of the Church in the Gospels.

We find the word *ekklesia* 110 times in the rest of the New Testament, much more than the word *basileia*, that occurs around 30 times. After the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, the Church becomes the herald of the Kingdom in the world; meanwhile the Church herself strives to understand her own nature, vocation and identity by keeping alive the memory of Christ, and by listening to the suggestions of the Holy Spirit, in order to better serve the Kingdom. According to some 20th century theologians, such as Teilhard de Chardin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the service to the Kingdom cannot be yielded by the claim of possessing exclusively the truths of revelation, whilst ignoring the needs and the achievements of the world. That is why 'the Church's mission in the perspective of (their) theology, is not primarily to gain new recruits for its own ranks, but rather to be of help to all men, wherever they are. The special competence of the Church is to keep alive the hope and aspiration of men for the Kingdom of God and its values. In the light of this hope the Church is able to discern the signs of the times and to offer guidance and prophetic criticism. In this way the Church promotes the mutual reconciliation of men and initiates them in various ways into the Kingdom of God.'⁷ In the second part of this section we will try to investigate the tension nature of the Church in the New Testament beyond the Gospels.

6) For a more inclusive approach to this issue, see: Joakim Gnilka, *Das Mattheusevangelium*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1988, pp. 62-80.

7) Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, NY, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland, Doubleday, 1978, pp. 97-98.



1.1. The Tension Model of the Church in the Synoptic Gospels and in John's Gospel

a) In the synoptic Gospels

All New Testament scholars agree that the heart of Jesus' announcement is the Kingdom of God. During the proclamation of the Kingdom's breakthrough in the world, Jesus continuously addresses His apostles and disciples, preparing them for the continuation of His very same mission. He himself witnesses the presence of the Kingdom in his own person, taking practical actions to inaugurate the incipient Kingdom. Some examples of these actions are found in His solemn affirmations, such as: "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7: 48); "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... get up, pick up your mat, and go home" (Matthew 9: 6); "The kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17: 21); "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23: 43). Even His contemporaries recognise God's power being exercised by Him: "What is this? A new teaching, with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1: 27).

If the objective of Jesus' preaching and actions is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God,⁸ then the instrument of His perpetuation in history of the announcement of the Kingdom is the community that He intentionally builds.⁹ This community is a community in tension.

8) For a more detailed analysis, see Charles Harold Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Herts, 1961.

9) Adolf von Harnack thinks that the kingdom of God is a matter of an individual experience. This is how he understands the kingdom: "Das Reich Gottes kommt, indem es zu den *einzelnen* kommt, Einzug in ihre Seele hält, und sie es ergreifen. Das Reich Gottes ist Gottes*herrschaft*, gewiß – aber es ist die Herrschaft des heiligen Gottes in den einzelnen Herzen, *es ist Gott selbst mit seiner Kraft*. Alles Drammatische im äußeren, weltgeschichtlichen Sinn ist hier verschwunden, versunken ist auch die ganze äußerliche Zukunftshoffnung." Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Gütersloh, 1977, p. 43. Gerhard Lohfink has criticised Adolf Harnack's understanding of the 'kingdom of God' concept as an individual experience. This is how he reacts to Harnack's assertion: "Nun ist Harnack allerdings ein viel zu guter Kenner des Neuen Testaments, als daß er den *Gemeinschaftsgedanken*, der dort mit dem Evangelium vom Gottesreich gegeben ist, übersehen hätte. Er weiß, daß sich die christliche Bewegung seit dem Bruch mit der jüdischen Volksgemeinschaft als 'Kirche' und das heißt: als das wahre Israel betrachtete. Er weiß, daß sich die junge Kirche als ein *neues Volk* aus Juden und Griechen, aus Griechen und Barbaren verstand. Und er weiß auch, daß es die Urkirche als ihre vornehmste Aufgabe ansah, den Willen Gottes vollständig zu erfüllen und sich gerade dadurch ,als eine heilige

The first instructions that Jesus gives to His disciples in Matthew chapter 5 evidence the tension paradigm of his community. The plural 'you' that he uses in addressing His disciples denotes His will to constitute a group that would live with the same vicissitudes. This group/community/church is called to have a new approach to human realities. They are called to be free from worldly aspirations and to see the poor, the afflicted and the meek as blessed. The fact that His disciples would distance themselves from worldly aspirations puts them under pressure from the world: "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matthew 5: 11).

The emphasis on the plural 'you' becomes more and more relevant throughout the whole of Matthew chapters 5 and 6: "You are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5: 13); "You are the light of the world" (5: 14).¹⁰ If the world puts pressure on the community of Jesus, and from this pressure arises tension, the community of the disciples and of the servants of the Kingdom overcomes pressure and tension not through a choice of closure and self-protection, but in a leap of self-denial, that allows them to become 'lost', in order to be 'salt and light'. The tension paradigm of self-denial instead of self-preservation is not a choice of annihilation, but a possibility (the only possibility) of 'being with' (the Master, and the world that the Master has conquered), that is a new communal being. The denial of self does not create a void, but a bond: "If anyone wants to become *my follower*, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For he who wants to save his own life will lose it, and he who loses his own life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16: 24-25). The

Gemeinde darzustellen'. Harnack steht also keineswegs auf der Seite derer, die für die Kirche ihrem Wesen nach rein innerlich und deshalb unsichtbar sein muß." Gerhard Lohfink, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1982, p. 12.

10) "The opening "*ymeis*," here and in v. 14, makes emphatic the "you are" introduced at v. 11. It is not immediately clear whether the emphasis is to underline the privilege of discipleship, to stress that it is the disciples who carry forward the historic role of Israel, or to establish a contrast with the inappropriate evaluation implied in the attitude of the persecutors of vv. 11-12. Perhaps a combination of the first and the third is most likely. If so, the qualities valued in the beatitudes and the comparison with the prophets in v. 12 offer a starting point of the use made of the imagery of salt." Nolland, p. 212.



persecution becomes a motive of beatitude because it is an opportunity for witness.

Furthermore, the community of Jesus is constituted in the permanent tension that comes from two sources of listening: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5: 21-22). The expression “you have heard that it was said to those of old times... but I say to you” is repeated six times in the same chapter of Matthew,¹¹ reinforcing this positive tension between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ that the Church is always called to live out. Christ is a ‘permanent newness’ to which to adhere in a continuous passage from the old to the new.

The pressure that the community of believers feels (such as getting a slap on the right cheek, being sued for a coat and forced to go an extra mile) generates a tension between the ‘old way’ of self-preservation and the ‘new way’ of self-denial: turning the other cheek, giving even the cloak, going an extra mile (Matthew 5: 38-42). This tension reaches its peak in Jesus’ invitation to his followers to love their enemy. The tension of the community of the disciples is not an unhealthy, consuming negative energy, but a dynamic power leading to the accomplishment of the kingdom of God model. It is a tension within the community rather than against the law; ‘Matthew clearly saw no tension between the behaviour recommended here by Jesus and the place in the Law for “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. The substance of the Law never intended to leave no place for pardon or for generosity. In his Gospel account, he chose his examples carefully from a restricted range in order to be able to highlight the contrast

11) For a detailed exposition: Joachim Gnllka, *Das Mattheusevangelium*, Herder theologisches Kommentar zum Neuen Testament I/1, Freiburg-Basel Wien 1986, pp. 151-200. With regard to our topic of ‘Church in tension’ Gnllka states that: ‘Wenn Mt die antithetischen Einkleidungen vermehrt, zieht er die Linie Jesu aus. Sein hauptinteresse ruht auf der Stellungnahme zum Gesetz, die in der Auseinandersetzung seiner Gemeinde mit dem Judentum hiniengehört’ (p.200). This would suggest a reflection about the tension between the ‘New Israel’ and the ‘Old Israel’, but we will not touch this topic in the present reflection.

(I would say the tension) between a generous-spiritedness, not narrowly committed to the interests of the self, and an aggressive protection of one's own interests that would reflexively retaliate when aggrieved."¹²

Another triple tension for the group constituted by Jesus can be noted in the beginning of Matthew 6: 1: "Take care not to practice your righteousness before others, in order to be seen by them. Otherwise you will have no reward with your Father in heaven." After describing three practices of righteousness, Jesus refers three times to "...your Father, who sees in secret..."¹³ (6: 4; 6: 6; 6: 18).

In Matthew 6: 1-18 the first tension is between being seen by men and being seen by God; being seen from outside and being seen from within. The second tension is between the individual and the community; the personal consciousness and the general common rule of the community. The itinerary of the disciple consists in progressing towards a conscious passage from a human way of (not) seeing to a godly way of seeing; from a community that is bound together by an external rule, to a community that is gathered by virtue of a free inner conviction of the singular members. The third tension is between being seen and unseen as individuals and a group of believers. Which should be the 'visibility' of the Church in the world? Isn't she meant to be the 'city on the rock' and the 'lamp on a lampstand' (Matthew 5: 14)?

During the public ministry of Jesus, the disciples experience another tension: that between being an 'open street church' and a 'home church'. We find Jesus very often either walking towards precise goals (Jerusalem, Bethany, the Mount of Olives etc.) or wandering around (*peripatein*). But we find Him also 'at home', even though he states that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8: 20). In Mark 2: 1 we read that 'when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home'; in Mark 7: 17 we read that 'when he had left the

12) Nolland, p. 261.

13) I personally disagree with the very interesting and alluring translation of Nolland: "And your Father who sees [it] will reward you in secret." (Nolland pp. 271-299).



crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.’ The tension between Jesus being alone and Him being with the ordinary people in their daily lives is a constant topic in the gospel accounts. Commenting on Mark 7: 17, R. T. France writes: ‘After the public proclamation of the *parabolé* comes the private explanation to his disciples, and the double phrase *eis oikon, apo tou ochlou* emphasises the change of audience, just as *kata monas* did in 4: 10 and *kata idian* in 4: 34.’¹⁴ For a healthy tension between the Church as seen from *within* and as seen from *without*, it is necessary to cultivate intimacy with Jesus in the community of the disciples and to proclaim the word in the social community.

b) In John’s Gospel

A whole world opens with regard to this topic on reading John chapters 13 to 17.¹⁵ The first tension that appears visibly in this section of the Gospel of John is that between Christ and Peter: “You will never wash my feet...”; “If I don’t wash you, you will not have a part with me” (John 13: 8). Leadership within the community of Jesus is a service, and the hierarchical tension is reversed in this form of service. The second tension is that within the community of the disciples on Jesus’ announcement of his betrayal: ‘The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking’ (John 13: 22). Human frailty is always present in the Church, because the presence of the Holy Spirit does not eliminate human nature, but simply guarantees its healing and rebirth if we ‘fall’. Consciousness of their own frailty, and their faith in the restoring work of the Holy Spirit, informs the way disciples view each other. This is the interpersonal tension in the community.

The third tension is between the world and the disciples; “The world will not see me...but you will see me” (John 14: 19) and “If the world hates you, know that the world hated me before” (John 15: 18). The relationship between the world and the Church is constantly present in John’s writings. It is important to observe

14) R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, Cambridge, 2002, p. 290.

15) Rodolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, IV/3, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1975, pp. 7-245.

that even in John's view this clash should not result in the victory of the Church, because Christ's victory has already occurred – for the benefit of both the world and the Church: "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world" (John 16: 33).

Having regard to the relationship between the Church and the world, Jürgen Moltmann writes: 'The Christian Church has not to serve mankind in order that the world may remain what it is, or may be preserved in the state in which it is, but in order that it may transform itself and become what it is promised to be. For this reason, "Church for the world" can mean nothing else but "Church for the Kingdom of God" and the renewing of the world... The whole body of Christians is engaged in the apostolate of hope for the world and finds therein its essence – namely that that makes it the Church of God. It is not in itself the salvation of the world, so that the "Churchifying" of the world would mean the latter's salvation, but it serves the coming salvation of the world and is like an arrow sent out into the world to point to the future.'¹⁶ The serving role of the Church is pictured wonderfully by the image of Jesus washing His disciples' feet, and this service is the way to convert the inevitable contrast with the world, in a Christlike type of friendship that should not remain restricted only to the community of the disciples, but should be extended to the rest of humanity.

The fourth tension is between the time of the Last Supper and the time of the giving of the Holy Spirit: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16: 12-13). In the Book of Revelation this becomes an eschatological tension. The community of people that have received the Word often presumes to have the permanent company of the Holy Spirit. The presumption of *having* the Spirit compromises the necessary attitude of *waiting* for the Spirit.

16) Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 327-328.



The fifth tension is between the crisis of faith and the re-found faith: “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me” (John 16: 16). This affirmation cannot be restricted solely to the mystery of death-resurrection-ascension. Losing sight of Christ is a permanent risk, whilst finding him again is a permanent possibility. All these tensions, that interconnect with each other throughout the whole of John chapters 13 to 16, are presented to the Father in Jesus’ prayer in John 17. Jesus bears in prayer the burden of what the Church will have to face in history (including growth, maturation, awareness of misunderstandings, falls into worldly temptations and collusions) and in theology. In this prayer Jesus includes the tension between the oneness of the Church and her multiplicity. The fact that Jesus’ prayer for the oneness of His followers is a kind of a testament prior to His death and resurrection would suggest that this tension between the unity and the multiplicity of the Church should be understood and lived in prayer (John 17: 21).¹⁷

3. Paul and the Church in Tension

Whilst in the Gospels the Church is explicitly mentioned only three times, in the rest of the New Testament the word *ecclesia* suddenly appears frequently. It is not within the scope of this presentation to provide an overview of the Church in the rest of the New Testament,¹⁸ but merely to give an example of the tension model that runs through the whole reflection on the community

17) Christian Duquoc sees the lack of visible unity in the Church as a means of self-protection, when he writes: ‘The church is a broken mirror; she reflects only in fragments that for which she is called to bear witness: Jesus Christ. The ecumenical movement was born from the desire to overcome this brokenness. Because the brake is still present and manifests itself in the pluralism of the Church in a polycentric way’ C. Duquoc, *Jesus Christus, Mittelpunkt des Europa von morgen*, in P. Hünemann (Hg) *Das Neue Europa, Herausforderungen für Kirche und Theologie*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1993, p. 105. According to Duquoc, the division of the Church ‘Is somehow a means of self-protection: none of the churches can insist that she replaces Christ in the world. The guidance and leadership of the Risen Christ through the mediation of the Holy Spirit cannot be identified with the politics of the churches. It is outside of our realm. The mediation role of the churches is biased and partial at the same time.’ *Ibid.*, p 108 as reported in John Fuellenbach, *Church, Community for the Kingdom*, Manila, 2000, pp. 68-69..

18) For this purpose, see: Kevin J. Connor, *The Church in the New Testament*, Kent, 1961.

of believers in the different stages of the formation of the New Testament. After Jesus' ascension the Church remains in the world, with the Spirit of the Risen Lord and with the Word for the world. Immediately, whilst the Church grows, though not even knowing how, she feels the need to understand her being. There is no doubt that Paul gives the most important information about the way in which the Church begins gaining self-knowledge and reflecting on her nature and role.

Giordano Frosini writes, 'Paul is the great theologian of the Church, the really first ecclesiologist'¹⁹ and 'The mystic nature of the Church is shown in its full light, in Paul's writings, in the original doctrine of the mystical body of Christ.'²⁰

It is not possible to give a broad view of Paul's theology of the Church in this contribution, so I will focus only on 1 Corinthians chapter 12.

It is very significant that, before introducing the image of the body in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of the diversity of the charisms and the unity of the Spirit: 'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone' (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6). And then: 'You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it' (12: 27). The Spirit and the body of the Christian community constitute the 'divine-human' reality of the Church. Thus, the Church is not a disorganised 'place' where spontaneity could lead to confusion as a result of the expression of the individual charisms; neither is it a rigidly structured organisation, in which individuals' gifts and weaknesses are ignored by the totality of the body. The unity of body and Spirit, as well as the harmonisation of the individual with the community, are achieved in a tensional dynamic, where the order is simply the result of a lively body within which the Spirit of the Risen Lord guarantees the ministry of the announcement of the Good News. When Paul states 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and

19) Giordano Frosini, *Una Chiesa possibile*, Bologna, 1995, p. 98.

20) Ibid., p. 99.



all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (12: 12), he lets the reader understand that Christ and the Church are one body. The importance of the same Spirit, of which he has spoken in vv. 4-11, is reiterated in v. 13. This Spirit turns every negative tension into a positive one: 'The eye cannot say to the hand: "I have no need of you." Nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another' (vv. 21-25). The categories of weakness and strength, honourable and less honourable, respectable and less respectable, lose their negative tension (*skisma*) in the oneness of the totality of the body. The oneness of the body in the diversity of the members is reflected in the oneness of the institution in the diversity of the services (vv. 28-31). Since Christ 'is the head of the body, the Church' (Colossians 1: 18), and when Paul writes that the head is already in glory, the historic body feels, in the Spirit, that it lives in a glory-bound tension.

CONCLUSION

All tensions that weigh upon a humanity that has not known the mystery of redemption in Christ are a cause of wariness and apprehension. The human way to overcome tensions is often through the suppression of diversities or the imposition of ideas. The Church has the power of the Spirit, that enables her to accept the pressures and the tensions both from within and from without, because she is the Body of Christ. 'He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Ephesians 2: 14); 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'

(Galatians 3: 28); 'In the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but everything comes from God' (1 Corinthians 11: 11-12).

A Church in tension is simultaneously a Church in distension, otherwise the Church would be just another worldly institution. She does not deny her human limitations and does not ignore the pressures of the world, but she relies on the faithfulness of her Lord and the assistance of the Holy Spirit, who banishes all fear, especially in times when pressure and tension intensify. Pressure and tension belong to the essential nature of the Church. As Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in a comment on the Song of Songs, '*Amaritudo ecclesiae sub tyrannis est amara, sub haereticis est amarior, sed in pace est amarissima.*'²¹

21) Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticatorum*, 33, 16.

READING EVENTS BASED ON GOD'S WORD

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible has always been considered as a book of prayer or glorification of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by His resurrection, brought to our lives a hopeful joy in our coming salvation. We can find an expression of this idea in one of the Bible's closing statements, namely towards the end of the Book of Revelation, when the Church implores Jesus the Saviour: 'Maranatha – Come, O Lord.' It is as if the Church is waiting impatiently for this corrupt and hopeless world to end, in order to transit to another world, in which dreams of complete peace and love are realised. Such an approach made the Bible, in the minds of the majority, a guarantee for the 'future' that comes after death, through which we enter the Kingdom of Heaven to escape this world, often described in medieval texts as 'the valley of tears'.

Through this reading, we will not find any bond between the Bible and our present physical world. The Bible is focused on the Kingdom of God, whilst 'real life' and political realities are the remit of world leaders whom no one can stop. We often hear a saying of

Jesus being repeated: '*Satan* is the prince of this world' (see John 12: 31 and 14: 30).

If believers listen to what I'm saying now, they will find it difficult to acknowledge it, but the truth is that, in the depths of our hearts, we all go through this experience and do not know how to read reality in the light of God's Word, and whether the Word of God has a role in or an influence on the course of daily ordinary life.

The first thing we must know is that the Bible was not written in an atmosphere of spiritual utopianism, seeking only the coming Kingdom. It is not a book of monks or hermits who decided to abandon this world for another world. In reality, those who live utopianism do not write because they live in a dream world, and are indifferent to anything else.

1. The Old Testament was Written During the Exile

When writing the Old Testament texts, the inspired writers' goal was not to write 'the Word of God' because no human could dare to make such a claim. Rather, they read their reality and were able to discern the salvation prepared, not only for them, but for the whole world. They conveyed this 'reading' to people, aware that together they make up the 'secret body of Jesus Christ', and are therefore related to the state and fate of each member of the community of believers. We now understand why Paul the Apostle addressed all of those to whom he wrote epistles with the greeting 'Dear brothers and sisters'.

Therefore, they presented us with an inspiring text, not to tell us about past events or the glories of ancient believers, nor to provide us with philosophical knowledge, but rather to tell us about the path they had discovered and that this is still open to all those who wish to take it. We can thus deeply understand the meaning of Jesus' words: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14: 6).

Experiencing joy in the depth of the crisis. There is no solution for 'the world', but rather a solution for 'me'. Therefore, I am more important to God than the whole world (Abraham's experience with God).



The Bible is the fathers' legacy to children. The period of Oral Tradition shows that faith is alive. This is the only legacy (Yossel Rakover).

2. The Period of Oral Tradition

What strikes us most is that Jesus did not write a single word of the New Testament. He, according to the texts of the Gospels themselves, spent His life travelling between the cities of the Holy Land, preaching, teaching and healing the sick.²² So, not only did Jesus not write a single word of the Gospels, but He never even instructed His disciples to write anything; rather He sent them into the world to preach to the people and tell them what they had seen and heard: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28: 19-20). There was therefore no instruction to write anything. The first apostolic act of the Church, after the Holy Spirit came down upon the Apostles, was that Peter came out of the room, addressed the crowds and started preaching about Jesus Christ.²³ The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the early Christian believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.²⁴

3. The Early Writings

Critical studies show that the earliest Christian writings were not the Gospels, but the Epistles of Paul, that tackle the problems of the Christian communities to which they were addressed.

22) According to the Book of John, only once did Jesus use His finger to write something on the ground, when the Pharisees were asking Him about stoning a woman caught in the act of adultery. We do not know what Jesus wrote; some believe that He wrote the sins of those who brought the woman to stone her. He then answered them: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8: 7). In any case, whatever Jesus wrote, He wrote it on the sand of the ground, and it was gone forever.

23) See Acts of the Apostles 2: 14.

24) See Acts of the Apostles 2: 42. We cannot but mention in this regard the young man who was sitting on the window sill when Paul was preaching and teaching. Since Paul continued speaking until midnight, the young man, who was sound asleep, fell to the ground from the third storey and was picked up dead. Paul went down and brought him back to life (see Acts of the Apostles 20: 7-12).

These epistles often came in response to letters sent by believers themselves to Paul, and in some cases Paul himself inquired about the situation of the churches and addressed letters to the believers, encouraging them in their faith. An example is in his epistle to the Ephesians: 'Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly' (Ephesians 1: 15-16).²⁵ We also see him expressing his sincere concern for the Thessalonians: 'We sent Timothy...to strengthen and encourage you in your faith...I sent to find out about your faith...but Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love' (1 Thessalonians 3: 2-6).

Paul would also write to the communities of believers to admonish them for their behaviour: 'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you' (1 Corinthians 1: 10-11). He would sometimes even reprimand them in the strongest terms, such as when he addressed the Galatians: 'I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!' (Galatians 1: 6-9).²⁶

We conclude from the aforementioned that the earliest writings in the New Testament were neither the products of mystical contemplations nor the result of a supernatural divine appearance. They rather stem from the sense of apostolic responsibility of

25) See also 1 Corinthians 1: 4 and Philippians 1: 4.

26) See also 1 Timothy 1: 3-7.



Paul, whose first concern was to encourage believers in their faith and to admonish them when they would divert from the right path. However, it is worth noting in this regard that Paul qualified these epistles as his own 'gospel',²⁷ while these texts were prepared before the writing of the four known Gospel accounts. Therefore, the word 'gospel' does not mean, for the Church, the words that came from Jesus' human lips, or stories about Him or His life. The Gospel is rather the teaching that leads believers to eternal salvation, which 'God has prepared for those who love Him' (1 Corinthians 2: 9).

The word 'gospel' itself carries precisely this meaning. This word, which is of Greek origin (εὐαγγέλιον – 'evangelium'), means the 'Good News'. It is good news that changes a person's life for the better. In Greek culture, this word was frequently used to announce the birth of a new child in the family. If the father was working in the field, for example, the boys would run to him shouting "Evangelium, evangelium", hoping that the father would give them some sweets or a coin as a reward for announcing this good news. Thus, in Christianity, the apostles and all the believers considered that their words about the 'Divine Child' Jesus – God's incarnation and His nativity to save us and change our past life – represent the best news and the best birth.

Although the apostles had completely lost hope because of Jesus' crucifixion and death, they lived through an experience that surpassed all expectations and logic with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostles saw in this victory over death a formidable new birth for them and for the whole world. They roamed the world carrying the one and only 'evangelium', a cry of joy emanating from their hearts and expressed by their proclamation: "Christ has died and is risen." This phrase, which the Church calls 'Apostolic Evangelism' ('Kerygma'), was for them 'the complete revelation'. Jesus triumphed over death, the greatest enemy of man, and trampled Satan's head through His resurrection. This revelation

27) See Romans 2: 16. I do not intend to discuss now what Paul the Apostle meant by using the word 'gospel' in this verse. It is however clear that Paul used this expression to refer to texts that are different from the four Gospel accounts. These Pauline letters do not tell 'the life of Jesus Christ'.

came neither from an angel nor from humans, but was witnessed with their own eyes, heard with their ears, touched, shared while eating.²⁸

This reality was sufficient to change the lives of the apostles and those who accompanied them. They told everyone about it and invited them to accept it, so that their lives would be changed through the experience of spiritual rebirth. This is how the early church communities arose. The apostles had to continue their mission to consolidate the faithful in their new lives, knowing that these early churches were not spared from difficulties, questions, and disputes.

Paul therefore considered that his words of encouragement and reprimand to Christians were an essential part of this gospel. Neither Christ's birth nor His death and resurrection alone are sufficient for salvation. A person has to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, accept Him as his personal Saviour, and associate this belief with good deeds and love for others. Thus, Paul regards these teachings to the churches as coming from God Himself, because they are inspired by his personal experience of the resurrection of Jesus, who promised His church that He would be with them always (Matthew 28: 20), and from the Holy Spirit with whom God filled them on the day of Pentecost, and will teach them all things and remind them of everything that Jesus said (John 14: 26).²⁹ Therefore, Paul considers that what he said to the Church was nothing other than the Word of God: 'And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe' (1 Thessalonians 2: 13).

The words of the Apostle are hence the Word of God. What Paul says in person, using his own words, out of responsibility towards the Church, and which appears to be 'a human word', is for the Apostle and those with him 'actually the word of God',

28) Jesus accompanied His church for 40 days after His resurrection and before His ascension.

29) See John 14: 26.



which Paul considers as divine light within him. It is the Holy Spirit who pours this light into the heart of the inspired writer, but the writer brings out this divine truth, using his own words. It is a divine truth expressed in a human form.

4. The Writing of the Gospels

The first texts of the New Testament were intended to consolidate the faith of the community of believers and address the Church's faith-related problems. Therefore, the Bible was not primarily aimed at conveying news related to Jesus, His life, or even His sayings. The Gospel is not a 'secretariat' that reports on Jesus' sayings and actions, but rather an extension of the Pauline epistles.

Paul the Apostle responded to every faith-related issue raised by believers with a letter in which he would properly treat that particular case. However, with the expansion of the Church and the increase in the number of Christian communities, more and more faith-related questions began to be raised. The Church and the Apostles became aware then that problems could no longer be solved in this individual way. Hence the idea was born to develop a general text that would lay the foundations of faith, and constitute a reference for the community to clarify what 'true faith' and the correct teachings were. Who would be the best reference point for such an education? Of course – the greatest Teacher, Jesus Christ Himself. Therefore, the Evangelists began to recount what Jesus had said and taught, how He acted, and how He addressed problems, with the aim of helping believers to follow His example, hold to the same morals as Him, act like Him, and follow His teachings.

The Evangelists did not 'tell Jesus' life', and their writings were not of a specifically historical nature. Rather, they wrote to help believers face the problems that they were experiencing. The purpose of the Gospels was not to 'memorialise' Jesus, but rather to help Christians live their faith soundly. John referred to this explicitly at the end of his Gospel when he wrote: 'Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples,

which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name' (John 20: 30-31). John chose therefore what he considered appropriate for the faith of the Christian community. He reiterated this point when he wrote: 'Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written' (John 21: 25). Luke the Evangelist begins his book with this similar statement (Luke 1: 1-4): 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us...' (this indicates that there were others who were writing the story of Jesus' life, but that Luke wished to do something else) '... just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.' This was the aim of Luke and the other Evangelists, who wanted to put in place a text that consolidates faith – so they wrote about Jesus the accounts that served their objective, omitting everything else. We therefore clearly understand why the Gospels did not tell the stories of Jesus' childhood or his life between the ages of 12 and 30. The Evangelists omitted this period because they would not find in it anything beneficial for their teachings.

Thus, we understand the differences that exist between the synoptic Gospels regarding certain events. In fact, the Evangelists typically do not care so much about the specific event itself, but rather about the theological teaching revealed by the text. The writers' attention was not directed to the details, but rather to education. Studies show that some of the educational texts in the Gospels do not relate Jesus' sayings, but rather are writings of the inspired writer himself. Why did the Evangelists do this? The writer is faced with a faith-related issue in the community to which he is directing his book, and he does not recall a direct teaching from Jesus on this particular topic. He therefore asks



himself: "What would Jesus Christ have said to the community if He had been in my place now?" He then draws his text from his awareness of Jesus' teaching. These texts are like summaries, inspired from the most beautiful evangelical texts. The famous parable of 'the Prodigal Son' (Luke 15: 11-32) was most likely authored by Luke, who included in it a summary of the teaching about love and forgiveness. The apostles did not consider this practice as being out of the ordinary. Paul's epistles, which, as we have seen, were authored by Paul himself, constitute a holy book and are 'actually the word of God' (1 Thessalonians 2: 13). The guarantor of these teachings' validity is Jesus Christ Himself, who remains with His Church until the end of time, and the Holy Spirit, who reminds the Christian community of, and helps them to understand, everything that Jesus has said and taught.

The Church understood that the Bible is not intended as a book that merely tells us about Jesus, His life, or His works. Indeed, it is a book for the believers and their lives. This concept changes the approach to understanding it. In our reading of the revealed texts, we are not looking for the historical Jesus, but for ourselves, and for the foundations of our faith and salvation. The Gospel is my book and talks about me, today! The Bible is therefore 'the Christians' code of life', which sets out the basic concepts and outlines that lead them to the Kingdom of Heaven.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel is a believer's code of life.

It is not the story of Jesus' life.

*The inspiring writer wrote the Gospel
while thinking about me.*

So when I read the Gospel I search for my picture.

Who am I in this text.

'I believe in the sun even when it is not shining, I believe in love even when feeling it not; I believe in God, even when He is silent.'

(Inscription on the wall of a cellar in Cologne, where a number of Jews hid for the entire duration of the war.)

In the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto,³⁰ among heaps of charred rubbish, there was found, packed tightly into a small bottle, the following testament, written during the ghetto's last hours by a Jew named Yossel Rakover:

Warsaw, 28 April 1943

By the dagger-sharp, unusual crimson rays of the sun that penetrate through the small, half-walled-up window of my room, through which we have been shooting at the enemy day and night, I see that it must now be late afternoon, just before sundown, and the sun probably has no idea how little I regret that I will not see it again.

Millions of people in the great wide world, who love the day, the sun and the light, do not know, do not have the slightest idea, how much darkness and unhappiness the sun has brought us. It has been turned into a tool in the hands of the evildoers, and they have used it as a searchlight, to track the footprints of those who are fleeing. When my wife, my six children, and I hid in the forest, it was night, and night alone, that concealed us in its bosom. Day turned us over to those who were seeking our lives.

After everything I have lived through, I cannot say that my relationship to God remains unchanged, but I can say with absolute certainty that my belief in Him has not changed a hair's breadth. In the past, when I was well and well off, my relation to God was as to one who kept on granting me favours for which I was always indebted; now my relationship to Him is as to one who owes me something, owes me much.

I believe in Israel's God even if He has done everything to stop me from believing in Him. I believe in His laws even if I cannot justify His actions. My relationship to Him is no longer the relationship of a slave to his master but rather that of a student to his teacher. I bow my head before His greatness, but will not kiss the rod with which He strikes me.

I want to tell You openly and clearly that now, more than in any previous period of our endless path of agony, do we have – we the

30) The Jewish neighbourhood.



tortured, the humiliated, the strangled, the buried alive and burned alive, we the insulted, the mocked, the ridiculed, the murdered by the millions – that now do we have the right to know *the limits of Your patience*.

I should like to tell You something else: Do not put the rope under too much strain, because, God forbid, it might snap. The test to which You have put us is so severe, so unbearably severe, that You should – You must – forgive those of Your people who, in their misery and rage, have turned away from You.

God of Israel, I have fled here in order to be able to serve You undisturbed, to follow Your commandments and sanctify Your name. You, however, do everything to make me stop believing in You. Now, lest it occur to You that by imposing these tribulations You will succeed in driving me from the right path, I notify You, my God and the God of my father, that it will not avail you in the least. You may insult me, You may strike me, You may take away all that I cherish and hold dear in the world, You may torture me to death – I will always believe in You, I will always love You! Yea, even in spite of You!

READING EVENTS BASED ON GOD'S WORD

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THRIVING UNDER PRESSURE: INSIGHTS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

In the immediate aftermath of the brutal death of Jesus of Nazareth, twelve fearful apostles met in an upper room in Jerusalem, convinced that the movement to which they had given their lives over the tumultuous previous three years was about to come to an end. If you had told them, on that occasion, that within 300 years their faith would be embraced by the Emperor and would be on the way to influencing the entire culture of Europe for the next two millennia and beyond, they would have found that impossible to believe.³¹

The Church in its early centuries was far from perfect. It experienced division, compromise and political deviousness, but when all is said and done, in the great battle between Christianity and paganism, Christianity eventually triumphed. There are no longer pagan temples on every street corner across Europe (both east and

31) Holland, T., *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, London, Little, Brown, 2019 is a recent re-telling of this story that highlights the huge impact of the Christian movement on western culture.



west), but there are churches. When we ask the question why the Church won this battle, the answer is often given – usually derived from Edward Gibbon’s famous version of the story³² – that it was due to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. Yet statistical analysis of the growth of the Church during this period shows that the rate of growth remained steady both before and after the conversion of Constantine at the start of the fourth century. The Church of course grew much larger after that date, but this was only because the *rate* of growth remained steady over that period.³³

The Churches of the West and the Middle East today both face pressures of different kinds. In the West, it is the pressure of a secularised society, increased marginalisation from public life, and the experience of decline. In the Middle East it may be more direct persecution, and the threat of losing its foothold in the traditional heartlands of Christianity. Both are churches under pressure. Yet both might have lessons to learn from the Early Church. The Church in those early years was, at least initially, marginal to wider social and political life. It also faced significant persecution. Whilst a short article like this cannot go into great detail, and will range ambitiously over several centuries, a broad overview of some of the factors that led to the survival and growth of the Church in those crucial years might help us learn approaches and priorities to help us face the challenges of today.

THE INSTABILITY OF EMPIRE

In the second century Christianity remained restricted to urban areas, and had all the appearances of a small, minority sect. A major change took place in the third century. As Adolf von Harnack pointed out in his celebrated study of the Early Church:

Between the second and the third centuries (the line may be drawn about 180) a vital change took place. In the former,

32) Gibbon, E. and D. Womersley, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, London, Penguin, 1995.

33) For this analysis see Stark, R., *The Triumph of Christianity*, New York, HarperOne, 2012, Chapter 9.

Christians for the most part had the appearance of a company of people who shunned the light and withdrew from public life; an immoral, nefarious sect who held aloof from actual life. In the third century, to its alarm, paganism discovered in Christianity a foe which openly and energetically challenged it in every sphere – political, social and religious.³⁴

The second century was generally a period of steadiness in the Empire, with a degree of security and stability. The third century, by contrast, was a period when a number of crises hit the Roman world. The Severan dynasty, founded by the emperor Septimius Severus, who had come to power in 193 AD, finally fell in 235. In 251 AD an epidemic spread across the empire, killing around a quarter of the population. Barbarian tribes – Goths and Vandals – attacked Rome, bringing in their wake military and economic collapse. Cities across the empire declined and with them the gods which had assured them of a sense of identity and security. Pagan religion was bound up with forms of entertainment which were astonishingly brutal, involving the deaths of gladiators, dramas in which slaves were murdered for dramatic effect on stage, and animals routinely killed for sport. It was a culture of cruelty and the enjoyment of death – at least the death of other people less fortunate than the observers!

During these early centuries, Christianity was beginning to show a great intellectual and moral vigour. Figures such as Clement and Origen in Alexandria and Cyprian in Carthage were exploring the relationship between the emerging Christian faith and the Greek philosophy of the time. As rich people had to leave towns and villages that were overtaken by barbarian tribes, the secret places and shrines of paganism fell into decline. It felt to many as if the gods had failed, and in their place Christianity offered a sense of security and hope. Christian temples, on the other hand, were much more mobile. The early Christians thought of their temples not so much as buildings, but as their own bodies – temples of the Holy Spirit, that could easily move from place to place. There was a disintegration of old ways and an openness to new ways –

34) Von Harnack, A., *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (Vol. 1), London, Williams and Norgate, 1908.



and not only Christian ones, as the popularity of the mystery religions shows.³⁵ Despite Gibbon's narrative, paganism did not die quickly. There is evidence of the continuation of pagan practices, and pagans being appointed to high office, well into the sixth century, and some even beyond that. It is not that Christians used political power to rid the world of pagan worship, but more that paganism slowly dwindled over time as it was seen to have fewer answers to the needs of the era than an emergent and confident Christianity.³⁶

The disruption of society can be an opportunity for the Christian Church. Both in the Middle East and in the West we are going through times of great instability and confusion. These can be times in which the hope and security brought through Jesus Christ can be spoken of in a compelling and attractive way, leading to effective witness to the Gospel of Christ. But this can happen only if the Church is able to demonstrate the power of the Gospel in human life, which leads to our next point.

THE PROMISE OF A TRANSFORMED LIFE

In the face of this culture of death, Christianity gained a reputation for moral and spiritual growth and transformation. The idea was common that if a person became a Christian, their life would change and that Christian faith could bring about a deep moral reorientation, both in the lives of individuals and in whole communities. The second century Christian theologian Origen, in his argument with the pagan Celsus, made this claim:

The critics of Christianity do not see in how many people the passions are suppressed and in how many the flood of evil is restrained, and in how many wild habits are tamed by the

35) There is genuine scholarly debate as to the influence this sense of crisis had on the shift from pagan to Christian, some emphasising it more (for example Dodds, E. R., *Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety: some aspects of religious experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990 and some downplaying it, such as Lane Fox, R., *Pagans and Christians*, London, Penguin, 1988.

36) See Stark, R., *The Triumph of Christianity*, New York, HarperOne, 2012, Chapter 11 ('The Demise of Paganism').

*reason of the gospel... the whole human world has evidence of the work of Jesus, since in it dwell the churches of God which consist of people converted through Jesus from countless evils... The name of Jesus still takes away mental distractions from men...and implants a wonderful meekness and tranquillity of character, and a love to mankind, and a kindness and gentleness...*³⁷

Stories of the desert mothers and fathers spread around the empire, through the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, stories of spiritual power, of miracles and deep personal and moral transformation through a life of discipline and devotion. It is perhaps significant that in Augustine's account of his own conversion, it is his encounter with the story of the great monastic hero Anthony that precipitates the crucial change.³⁸ Such stories promised radical change, self-control over the passions that neo-Platonic and other philosophers were so suspicious of, and a love towards the neighbour in a fractious and divided world.

One of the perennial fears of the ancient world was the fear of death. There were a number of answers available to the question of mortality, not least in the Epicurean philosophy that suggested that the basic elements of which the body is made would dissolve at death into nothingness, and so therefore it was not to be feared – a view not dissimilar to contemporary western secular views of death. This, however, simply serves to shine a light on the underlying obsession with death which pervaded that society. In the face of such fear, the promise of resurrection brought significant hope. Athanasius, for one, was not going to miss this opportunity to press home the point:

All the disciples of Christ despise death; they take the offensive against it, and instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as something dead. Before the divine sojourn of the Saviour, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead

37) Origen and H. Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, 1.67, pp. 59-62.

38) Augustine, *Confessions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 143, 153.



*as those who perish. But now that the Saviour has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing, and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection.*³⁹

In a time of uncertainty and fear, particularly when there seemed little hope for change, whether in wider society or in personal lives, a Christian faith that offered genuine transformation offered a profound sense of hope and attraction. The stories of the monks and the martyrs bear witness to the importance of simple testimony (the word *marturion* lies at the heart of witness, martyrdom and testimony). Enabling ordinary Christians to tell their own unique stories of the difference that faith in Christ makes to an individual life is perhaps one of the most effective and powerful ways to bear witness, at a time when people are hungry for change.

RADICAL INCLUSIVENESS

In a deeply divided world, the Christian faith brought a new sense of unity and community. The Roman Empire was a world in which cities were intense, crowded and suffocating. Rodney Stark points out that in Rome in the first century, approximately 200 people lived on each acre of land. By comparison, in the modern world, San Francisco has around 23 people per acre and Bombay 180. Disease was rampant. Epidemics, earthquakes and floods were common. In 600 years of Roman rule, the city of Antioch was taken by enemies 11 times, there were five major fires, six major episodes of rioting, hundreds of earthquakes (eight of them very significant), three major epidemics and five famines – in other words, about 40 major social catastrophes, one approximately every 15 years.

Life in Roman cities was often fragile, pressurised and oppressive. People lived in such close proximity to each other, and

39) Athanasius, *St Athanasius on the Incarnation: The Treatise De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, London, Mowbray, 1982, Section 57, p. 57.

with so many crises occurring to exacerbate social tensions, that racial and ethnic strife was common. This was a society with strict hierarchical barriers – between men and women, masters and slave, Roman citizens and foreigners, Jews and Gentiles. Judaism was racially and ethnically divided, whilst paganism maintained strict gender and class hierarchies. In such a context Christianity provided something radically new.

The primitive Christian churches offered forms of inclusive community which broke through social barriers. The vision that in the kingdom of God ‘there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all’ (Colossians 3: 11) was a powerfully counter-cultural message in a polarised world, yet one that was more than a message – it was fleshed out in local Christian communities, however difficult that sometimes proved to be.

The Christian church offered an intellectual inclusiveness. Christianity relatively quickly developed a highly sophisticated philosophical base, engaging with the thought of the philosophy of its time, through the work of the early fathers such as Ignatius, Irenaeus Cyprian and the early apologists such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras and others. Yet at the same time, the simplicity of the story of Christ as retold in the Gospels could attract the uneducated, such as slaves or manual workers, who might never have been attracted to the more complex philosophical apologetics of the Alexandrian school, or the complexities of the mystery religions. One of the charges against the Christian Church was that it attracted undesirable and simple people, but that is a charge in which the Church gloried rather than denied.

There was also a gender inclusiveness in the first Christian churches. Many of the early martyr stories are about women, such as Perpetua and Felicitas of Carthage, Poamiaena and Basilides in Alexandria, or Crispina in Tebessa, North Africa. In a world where many young baby girls were abandoned at birth, due to the preference for baby boys and the cost of raising girls who could not bring as much income to the family home, Christians banned infanticide and abortion in their communities. The result of this, as well as the attractiveness of a community which proclaimed



that 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3: 28), was that Christian communities tended to have a higher proportion of women than in wider society.

Unlike Judaism, which was racially exclusive, and paganism, which was dominated by class, Christianity had a broad-based appeal across ethnic and social divides. Graeco-Roman cities were often plagued by ethnic conflict, with groups of refugees or migrants, the displaced people of the Empire, coming into conflict in dense urban situations. In such a world the concept in the letter to the Colossians of all people – Jewish, Greek, barbarian, citizen, slave or free – being included and equal before Christ was a powerful vision of social harmony which could be found nowhere else. In times of deep social, ethnic and political division, the Christian eschatological vision of all tribes, nations and tongues still existing alongside each other, yet united in their worship of the Lamb of God, was a vital part of the apocalyptic vision of the Book of Revelation, the New Testament text which is perhaps the most explicitly critical of imperial power and pretension.

A Church which demonstrates, in its own life, unity across divisions, whether of ethnicity, gender or class, is a powerful and attractive witness during periods of instability and division, whether in the first century or the twenty-first.

RADICAL EXCLUSIVENESS

Although the early Christians developed a strong interaction with the various schools of Greek philosophy, both critiquing it at some points and yet building on it at on others, the Christian Church held an almost universal opposition to pagan religion. As St Paul put it: 'What agreement has the temple of God with idols?' (2 Corinthians 6: 16). Idolatry was, perhaps above all, the great sin of the early Church.

St Paul's conversations with the Corinthians, over whether Christians were permitted to eat meat on sale in the market that might have been offered to the gods in the local temples, or whether they should go to dinner parties hosted by pagan friends

in such temples, is a witness to the significance and sensitivity of this issue in these early days of the Church. Yet as the centuries proceeded it became clear that, however much the Christian Church might debate aspects of its relationship with its pagan environment, offering sacrifice to the pagan gods was tantamount to apostasy.

In a famous correspondence, Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia around 111 AD, writes to the Emperor Trajan, asking him what he should do with the Christians who had been brought before him, accused of various forms of sedition and the charge of disloyalty to the Emperor and the gods. He tells his imperial master that the Christian sect seems no worse than a stupid superstition and that Christians seem fairly peaceable, and do not appear to pose any threat. However, he is disturbed that at the same time they refuse to offer a sacrifice to the statue of the Emperor and curse the name of Christ. Tellingly, he goes on to say: 'these are things which, it is said, those who are really Christians cannot be made to do.'

'Real Christians' (to use Pliny's phrase) were marked by their refusal to participate in pagan religion, whether in the theatre, the games or in the other pervasive elements of social life of the period. As Adolf von Harnack wrote of Christianity in the mid-third century: 'The duty of keeping oneself free from all contamination with polytheism ranked as the supreme duty of the Christian... exclusiveness was the condition of her existence as a church. If she made terms with polytheism at a single point, it was all over with her distinctive character.'⁴⁰

Of course, there were many who gave up their faith during times of persecution, quietly going back to pagan ways, or retiring into the shadows. Yet re-admission to communion for *traditores* (those who had betrayed the faith) became a hugely divisive point in the early Church, as it surfaced after Constantine's accession and exploded in the debate between Augustine and the Donatists over the meaning and legacy of Cyprian's ecclesiology. These debates over the conditions on which lapsed Christians might be allowed

40) von Harnack, A., *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (Vol. 1), London, Williams and Norgate, 1908, p. 292.



back into fellowship ranged from the rigorist Donatist approach that refused re-entry, to the less severe approach taken by Saint Augustine and others. Yet it was quite clear that, on both sides of the debate, worshipping the gods was incompatible with Christian faith. This very fact of the vehemence of this debate indicates that going back to the worship of idols was a serious issue in the early Church. It could not be brushed over lightly.

Tertullian's famous statement that 'the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church' testifies to the significance of martyrdom during this period. The heroes of the faith were not primarily the theologians or even the bishops, but those who had witnessed to Christ in the ultimate manner – by their deaths, which testified that Jesus Christ was more important than anything else, even life itself. Martyrdom was a sign of the radical exclusiveness of the Church from compromise with the worship of any other god.

In the first three centuries, the catechumenate was a crucial factor. Before baptism, and formal entry into the Church, a rigorous process of Christian instruction was given. As seen in early texts such as *The Didache*, on into Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures* and St Augustine's *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, this process of entry was demanding.

The primitive first century Christian text *The Didache* shows how even at an early stage, initiation included specific moral teaching, practical instructions to avoid idolatry, which was outlawed for the Christian, including attendance at the games in the theatre. It offered training in forms of prayer, and instructions on what was and was not permitted for catechumens in preparing for their baptism.

Even much later, in Jerusalem in the fourth century, under Cyril of Jerusalem (for example as explained by the Spanish visitor Egeria), catechumens underwent a period of asceticism, involving a severe Lenten fast, hours of prayer, and giving to the poor. It involved extensive instruction, including detailed explanation of the creed, and prayers for exorcism of demons daily during Lent. After baptism, the mysteries of Baptism, Chrism and the Eucharist were explained.

In other words, Christian faith was not something that people took up at their leisure and were left free to make up for themselves. Nor was it merely a set of ideas, a philosophical framework that one could adopt by assenting to the tenets of the Creeds, leaving no real change to patterns of life. Instead, this was a rigorous training in the Christian way of living. Of course, the catechumenate changed character as Christianity grew in popularity. Once persecution began to fade as a possibility, admission to the Church became a little more relaxed and less austere. However, the refusal to compromise the total claim of Christ upon human and Christian life was a significant feature of this new faith. It was not content to be one of a range of options within the pagan smorgasbord of religious offerings in the first century panoply of pagan gods.

Perhaps one of the secrets of the early Church was its ability to identify the gods of the age and yet refuse to compromise with them. This formed a distinct *exclusiveness* to the Church, alongside the *inclusiveness* of social, racial and gender identities. Such exclusiveness gave the Church a radical edge and enabled it to appeal to people wanting a different version of life from that on offer in the pagan world.

In our contemporary world, the gods are perhaps less obviously identifiable. They may be different in East and West, although globalisation diminishes the differences between them. The point which Pliny recognised as the point of difference between true, devout Christians and those who would renounce their faith was that of worship and sacrifice – would they offer worship by sacrificing to the gods? The same may be true today. It is sometimes said that what we truly worship is indicated by what we would sacrifice most for – our family, our holidays, our income, careers, popularity, houses? Or our faith?

The gods of money, sex and power still roam the streets of contemporary societies in East and West, even if they are no longer embodied in pagan divinities, but rather in the lure of financial security, advertising, and political competition. The Christian Church of today needs the wisdom and courage to spot those ancient idols when they rear their heads, and to adopt radical



practices to demonstrate resistance to the gods that enslave, and the power of Christ who liberates.

These four factors – the instability of society, the promise of moral and spiritual transformation, a radical inclusiveness and a radical exclusiveness – were crucial to the success of the Early Church as it grew in the unfriendly and hostile environment of a world often intent on eliminating it. This hostility came to a climax during the rule of the emperor Diocletian at the start of the fourth century, when he announced the Festival of *Terminalia* – the termination of the Christian religion along with other forms of ‘superstition’ in a desperate attempt to hold a fragmenting empire together under the framework of paganism. It was not up to the task. Diocletian fell, and soon a Christian emperor was on the throne as Constantine took the radically different tack of seeking to meet the same challenges through the adoption of Christianity. Whether we view his adoption of the Christian faith as a triumph or a disaster for the future fortunes and purity of the Church is a separate question, yet the fact that the Church could not only survive such a trial – intense persecution and the attempt to marginalise it totally from social life – bears witness to its strength and the importance of these factors identified in this essay.

At the same time, in the context of the pressures or marginalisation in the West today, and persecution and harassment in the East, these factors may also provide clues to the potential growth of the Church in the modern world. They may provide part of the answer as to how the Church today is not just to survive but also to thrive under pressure in a period of rapid social change and opportunity.

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**BIBLICAL
PERSPECTIVES
ON CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITIES
UNDER PRESSURE**

EXILIC LITERATURE AS A MODEL FOR THE CHURCH UNDER PRESSURE

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INTRODUCTION

Brothers and sisters, I ask you to go back in time with me to Babylon after 587 BC, where a contradictory scene unravels: on the one hand, Babylonians, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, are delirious with exultation following their victory, after they were able to extend their influence over several regions, including Judea, in particular Jerusalem; while on the other hand, the desperation of exiled Jews is similar to the feeling of death.

What a catastrophe! Overnight, the people have awakened to a painful reality, like a horrific nightmare. Here they are, thousands of kilometres away from the land that the Lord had promised them; the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed, the Temple was wiped out, and the Ark of the Covenant was lost.

Thus, it is not surprising that existential questions started to arise: Were the Lord's promises to us a mere delusion? Was the Lord true to us? The Babylonians worship Marduk and they are doing just fine, while we, who worship the Lord, are going through all these sufferings, calamities and hardships; who is the strongest then, Marduk or the Lord?



The people had lost all hope in the future and the Lord, and needed salvation not only from exile in Babylon, but also from despair.

A TEXT FROM THE EXILIC LITERATURE

The paradox is that, from this oppressive atmosphere, the most comforting and hopeful literature was born, hoping it would quench the thirst of thirsty souls for 'living water'. From this I have chosen Ezekiel 37: 1-14.

We are before the horrific picture of a valley full of dry human bones; a sad and staggering view, which triggers people's disgust. What increases this aversion even more is that the Lord made the prophet pass by and around these dry bones, despite the possibility of him being defiled from contact with the dead.

Then comes the Lord's unexpected question to Ezekiel: "Can these bones live?"

The prophet, however, gives neither a positive nor a negative answer, because belief in the resurrection was not clear for the Jews at that time.

He 'throws the ball back to the Lord's court' to answer this question Himself – but the Lord returns the ball to him, as He asks him to personally participate in giving the answer: "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'" (Ezekiel 37: 4).

The Lord wants to do the impossible.

"This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life" (37: 5). This 'breath' represents the life-giving divine power, without which no life can exist. Only God, from whom all life springs, can revive these bones. "I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life" (37: 6). The process of revival passes through four stages: connecting bones to nerves, then covering the bones with flesh, then covering flesh with skin, then putting breath in the whole.

“You will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord” (37: 6). The purpose of reviving the bones is not only to revive biological life, but the Lord also wants to revive the spiritual life, in order to renew the relationship and the covenant with Him.

Ezekiel 37: 7-8: The prophet Ezekiel complied with the Lord’s will and performed his supernatural mission. When he started prophesying, things started settling down; in fact, the bones came together, bone to bone, forming skeletons, gradually transforming into bodies. In verse 8, the first part of the revival process was completed, but the bodies were still lacking the spirit that would give them new life.

Verse 9 recounts: ‘Then He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’”’ The Lord calls upon the wind from all parts of the world to direct all its energies towards the bodies placed in the valley. Although the wind usually moves from high pressure areas towards low pressure areas, strangely in this vision the wind seemed to be blowing from all directions at the same time.

The identity of these dead bodies began to be revealed. They were people ‘killed’ in one of the major battles. Ezekiel is entrusted with ordering the spirit to revive the dead. Although creation is God’s direct action, we see here that God made man a partner in the creation process. ‘So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army’ (37: 10).

The prophet continues to act as a proxy in the revival process. “Therefore prophecy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord...’” (37: 12-13). Living in exile is similar to being buried in a grave; hence, living again makes it imperative to return to the homeland.

In verse 12, the Lord promises that He will “...bring you back to the land of Israel.” The salvation speech includes a new departure,



but this return to the homeland is a symbol of a return to living under God's eyes and renewing the covenant with Him.

Finally, in verse 14, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord."

A CONTEMPORARY GLANCE AT THE CURRENT SITUATION

When contemplating Ezekiel chapter 37, I thought about counting the number of times that Christians of the East have witnessed a similar scene, but to no avail; so, I will limit myself to testifying to what I personally witnessed with my Iraqi brothers and sisters, who have become, by their forced displacement from their land, 'dry bones'. However, there is the sole difference that the exiles in the Book of Ezekiel went to Babylon, while the Christians of Iraq left 'Babylon'. I have seen them – living martyrs, abandoned, and neglected, with no jobs for breadwinners to support their children, no possibility of them even obtaining a work permit to practice their profession, no possibility of enrolling children in Lebanese schools that follow different curricula, and no free hospitalisation (even if their condition is critical), and thus the necessity of securing the required funds before entering hospital. Those people, who were previously leading lives of comfort and luxury, found themselves living in miserable conditions. One of them told me that he was living comfortably in his country, but his son's illness in Lebanon obliged him to spend all his money to save him, and he has now become a beggar. I was heartbroken when a mother asked me for money to buy milk for her infant, and also when I saw tears pouring down the cheeks of another man who was showing me his luxurious former home, of which he now has only a picture in his cell phone. When I tried to comfort them by telling them that at least they were still alive, and that 'Daesh' did not abduct their women and girls, they would agree with me, but add that they had been robbed of their life savings and of the meaning of their lives.

What is even more deplorable is that their forced displacement hasn't ended yet. In fact, when Qaraqosh was liberated from that terrorist organisation, one of its inhabitants who dared to return to his home town, hoping that perhaps he could repair his house, was told that he could not go back to his old work (knowing that he was a public servant), because he had left his land; but rather, he had to wait at least a year so that they could interrogate him to make sure he hadn't joined Daesh's ranks during this period. How ironic is that? His fellow countrymen are still pursuing, implicitly, the plan of displacing Christians. Even those who stayed in Iraq did not receive a penny from the State to help them rebuild their homes that were reduced to ashes.

CONCLUSION

Going back to Ezekiel's text, I am unable to define the situation of Christians in the East in relation to it, at this difficult time; but I hold on to my Christian faith, as I am confident that hope is born from despair, and that life emerges from death. Just as the Lord entrusted Ezekiel to take part in reviving the killed, He will choose those who will help Him in this rescue operation.

What gives us hope is that the Lord is true to Himself. As He breathed life into the scattered bones so that they would come together, His Holy Spirit descended upon the discouraged disciples following the crucifixion and death of their Lord. He Himself is still working to restore the ruins of our physical, moral and spiritual life, expecting each of us to be like Ezekiel and help Him put new breath in our brothers and sisters, whose only offence is to have been called by His name.

"Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18: 14); "Nothing is too hard for You" (Jeremiah 32: 17).

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

'Apocalyptic' is a category of literature under which can be listed some parts of the Book of Daniel from the Old Testament, some Jewish non-canonical writings (e.g. 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch and 1 Enoch), and the Book of Revelation from the New Testament. Due to the diverse historical backgrounds of these books, and on account of space limitations, I will restrict myself to the Book of Revelation. This presentation will be divided into two parts. The first part refreshes the memory about some of the content, the historical background, and the purposes of Revelation. The second offers a suggestion as to how Revelation can continue to inspire and speak to Christian communities living in today's world. This is by no means an exhaustive attempt at contextualising all aspects of Revelation, but I hope it will stimulate further reflection on this book and help us in finding ways in which it can speak to the Church today.

PART ONE: ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Apocalyptic literature is often identified as 'Crisis Literature', and its primary purpose is to unveil certain things. Underlying the Book of Revelation is a 'crisis' facing the Seven Churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) to whom the book is addressed. Internal evidence shows that members of these churches have become victims of harassment, either by the state or local authorities, leading to possible imprisonments (Revelation 2: 10), and in some cases martyrdom. Let me illustrate. To the church of Pergamum, the One who has the sharp two-edged sword says: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; you hold fast to my name, and you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells" (2: 13). During the vision of the fifth seal, we are told that John the Seer saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne (6: 9). Scholars believe that this crisis was most probably caused by the practice of emperor worship (the Emperor Cult); the refusal of Christians to participate in this cult may have led to harassment and martyrdoms.

This view is supported by Chapter 13 of Revelation, which depicts the emperor or empire as a 'beast' who was given a great throne and authority by the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the world (12: 9), whom people worshipped. The 'beast', we are told, utters all kinds of blasphemies against God and is allowed to make war against the saints and to conquer them. The author continues, 'If anyone has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone slays with the sword, with the sword he must be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints' (13: 10).

In addition to the imagery of the beast, the author uses other images to describe the empire. In Chapter 17 the empire is given the name 'Babylon, the Great Harlot', with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, who became 'drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus' (17: 6). Therefore, the crisis which the Book of Revelation deals with is



clear: the refusal of faithful Christians to participate in emperor worship has led to harassments and waves of martyrdoms.

But this is just one side of the crisis. The other side of the crisis has to do with internal tensions and conflicts. The author warns the Seven Churches of false teachers, or those who call themselves apostles, though they are not (2: 2). He names the Nicolaitans twice, and those who hold to the teaching of Balaam, a symbol of apostasy (2: 14). A certain 'Jezebel' (symbolic of idolatry and false prophecy) is mentioned in the message to the church of Thyatira, and is condemned by the author for teaching and deceiving God's servants through her practice of immorality and of eating food sacrificed to idols (2: 20). Scholars surmise that the author's attack on these groups within the Seven Churches has to do with their participation in imperial Rome's public life, whether through cultic practices honouring deities or through emperor worship, through the daily socio-economic activities of selling and buying, or through the enjoyment of the prosperity and economic seduction that the empire provided.⁴¹ From John's perspective, however, any participation in Rome's imperial structures, whether religious, social, political or economic, is simply idolatrous. Any attempt at assimilation by Christians into any aspect of Roman imperial public life is totally rejected. Revelation's call to those in the church of Thyatira – and this applies to the other churches – can be heard in the heavenly voice: "Come out of her, my people, lest you partake in her sins, lest you partake in her plagues" (18: 4). In response to this double crisis, John the Seer launches a comprehensive political, economic and ideological attack on the policies and practices of the Roman Empire, calling upon the members of the Seven Churches to disentangle themselves from every aspect of Rome's public life and to live faithfully in obedience to God and to the Lamb.

In its critique, Revelation unveils to God's faithful people not only the idolatrous character of the empire and the dangers of Christian assimilation into public life, but also an alternative reality.

41) Christians in Laodicea are thus characterised: "You say 'I am rich and I have prospered and I have need of nothing', and you don't know that you are wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked" (3: 17).

In Revelation, John reinterprets the world of his readers in the light of God's purposes in the world and for the world. Revelation's primary message is that God, and not Rome, is in control of human history. True worship is due to God and the Lamb – the Lord, the Saviour of the world, the Almighty, the Alpha and Omega – and not to the emperor and his representatives. In God's purposes for the world, Rome – the harlot, Babylon – will fall, along with the allure of its public life and its economic seduction. A new city – the New Jerusalem – will replace it. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, where God will dwell among His people. God will vindicate the martyrs of Jesus, and those who have been faithful by not bowing their knees to the emperor and by their refusal to participate in the wealth, seduction, and injustices of the empire. The gloominess of the present is not necessarily the destiny of God's people. There is a brighter future ahead for those who remain faithful.

Apocalyptic literature is not about an otherworldly reality or about the future, even though it has a predictive element to it. Rather it is about bringing an otherworldly perspective into the world we live in, so as to create a faithful response, and to offer guidance and encouragement. Therefore, Revelation is not about the annihilation of human history, but the renewal of the world.

PART TWO: REVELATION FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES TODAY

1. The Bestial-Monstrous Character of the Empire

One of the issues that the Book of Revelation unmasks (exposes, unveils, reveals) is the bestial, monstrous, whorish character of the empire ('the great harlot, Babylon the great, the mother of all harlots'). Through this set of images, Revelation's message is clear: imperialism, with its policies and practices, belongs to the bestial world and not to the world that God intended for humans. Imperialism simply dehumanises its subjects. To be sure, imperialism – and Revelation is well aware of this – introduces itself in seductive, alluring, and glamorous fashion, but that should



not distract the reader from its bestial character. In a manner typical of the genre of Apocalypse, Revelation not only unveils the bestial character and nature of the empire, but also identifies the empire without naming it.

Revelation's call to the Christian communities of today – those worldwide in general, and in the Middle East in particular – is to discern 'the beast(s)' of our culture, to denounce them, and to declare them as dehumanising. The beast does not have to be a certain political regime; it could be a dehumanising economic structure or an ideology. Revelation is a call to have the courage to name the beast in our contexts, regardless of the consequences. In this regard, Revelation warns us of the idolatrous temptation, to which many countries in our Middle Eastern context are vulnerable, of 'divinising' political leaderships, political regimes and structures. Political structures are human institutions, and they are vulnerable to sin's power.

2. The Empire of God: The Reign of God and the Lamb

As 'crisis literature', Revelation's purpose is to offer encouragement, to comfort, to instil hope, and to stimulate obedience to Christ among Christian communities that live under the blasphemous claims of a bestial-evil empire. This purpose can be heard through the loud voice from the throne of God as the New Jerusalem is coming down from heaven, saying: "Behold the dwelling place of God with mankind; He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (21: 3-4; cf. 7: 13-17).

Whilst it is true that the Book of Revelation unmask the bestial-evil nature of the empire, it also unmask an alternative reality: God's empire. Through a disproportionate dualism, which is typical of Apocalyptic literature, Revelation announces that though Rome (the beast, the empire) has power to rule, nevertheless it does not have ultimate power. Ultimate power belongs to God, who controls history in spite of the presence of the dragon and the beast, and in spite of the tears, the death, the mourning and

the pain which they inflict upon the people of God. If Rome can destroy, God has the power to offer life.

This alternative reality of God's reign in the face of a bestial-evil empire is not a futuristic illusion. Rather, it has already begun and it awaits its futuristic consummation ('the Already and the Not Yet' of Apocalyptic literature). How and when did it begin? It began with God's direct intervention in human history in the person of Jesus, the Lamb, who, through His death and resurrection, reigns now with God, is deemed worthy of worship with God, and will return to vindicate His faithful ones. This Lamb is depicted at the beginning of the narrative: 'Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth' (1: 5). His reign has already begun. God and the Lamb are already at work in the world. Satan, the devil, the dragon, the beast, and the serpent can no longer claim their monopoly over the world. The fact that God's reign and that of the Lamb have already begun becomes not only the grounds for encouragement and comfort in the Apocalypse, but also a source of hope – that God will expand His reign to ultimate victory over all structures of evil – and a driving force for obedience and faithfulness to God.

God's reign in the world is realised through faithful and obedient communities. John's message for Christian communities in general, and Middle Eastern ones in particular, is to free themselves from the 'minority complex' with which they live. It challenges Christians to see themselves as active agents in the realisation of God's present reign in the world, in the face of the policies and practices of bestial structures. In the unfathomable wisdom of God, He has, down the centuries, operated through minorities and remnants – even through one man on the island of Patmos – for the good of all of God's creation, and for bringing to fulfilment His purposes for the world.

3. Witnessing to Christ/Resisting the Empire

I hope it has become clear that the message of Revelation to Christian communities today is to invite them to examine all power structures in their contexts, and to discern what is whorish, Babylonish, satanic or bestial – and to have the courage to name



the beast, trusting that God and the Lamb are already at work in the world through their faithful ones. In other words, John's Revelation is an invitation to Christian communities in today's world to take the bestial-evil structure by the horns. It is an invitation to a fight, to a collision. When this collision happens, Revelation opens up a new possibility that transcends the submissive Judeo-Christian tradition towards power structures as represented in Romans chapter 13. Deep within, Revelation is not only crisis literature, but also resistance literature. Consider with me the 'Babylonian captivity' of the country of Lebanon, and the beast of corruption that seems to be beyond any possibility of redemption. Look at the moral failure on the level of political leaderships, look at the exploitation of the economic resources of the Lebanese people, and their dehumanisation. Look at the fornication of our political leaderships with regional and international bestial orders.

Against this background, the Book of Revelation has much to say. Beside its call for having the courage, the dignity, and the integrity to tell the truth about dragonish things in our society and to be able to name the beast, Revelation is an invitation for Christian communities to prophetic engagement and discernment, even to become resistance movements. The heavenly voice in Revelation remains relevant for today's Christian communities: "Come out of her, my people, lest you partake in her sins, lest you partake in her plagues..." (18: 4). Disentangle yourselves from the corruption and moral failures of the empire or any bestial structure!

Allow me here to re-address the Lebanese context one final time. Any association with corrupt political leadership under the excuse of 'connections' must be viewed as a source of shame and not pride. Creating 'connections' is a seductive thing in Lebanese society, because it yields favours. These favours numb our faithfulness to Christ and the values of the reign of God. They confiscate our freedom to name the beast and to properly call things by their names. Corruption and corrupt political leaderships should never be able to receive public ecclesial legitimacy. Revelation's call is clear: "Come out of her..." This form of resistance may lead to marginalisation and may expose one to danger. But this is precisely the resistance to which the Book of

Revelation invites us, through the paradigm of Christ's faithfulness and the faithful martyrs among His followers. We should be alert to not interpreting Revelation's invitation as though it promotes a culture of death. On the contrary, the purpose of resistance is to promote a culture of dignified human life as God intended it to be, under the values of His reign, and not life under a bestial and monstrous regime. If martyrdom is a price to be paid, then let it be.

We live in a world where forms of resistance have taken a militant and violent twist in the name, and for the sake, of God. There is no place in the Book of Revelation for violence as a means to achieve one's ends and goals. The judgment and the fall of Babylon, the empire, in the Book of Revelation is the business of God, regardless of how violently those scenes are depicted. Faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the reign of God in the public spheres of our societies and against the beast can take many forms, such as boycotting, demonstrating, acts of civil disobedience, et cetera – but not violence.

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APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES TODAY

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TAKING THIS WORLD SERIOUSLY: APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AS A PROPHETIC VOICE AND THE SIGN OF HOPE

Frank Kermode has commented that much of literature is centred around 'the sense of an ending'. Men enter the world *in medias res*, as 'men in the midst', as Martin Green would term it, and leave it *in medias res*. However, in this middle ground the main concern seems to be to connect what came before 'the middle' with what is to follow – a desire for harmony in what seems to be a chaotic present. Kermode would further argue that to fulfil this desire, people tell and retell stories. A classic example of this is the famous opening of Homer's Iliad:

*Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus,
Accursed, which brought countless pains upon the Achaeans,
Hurling to Hades many strong souls of heroes,
Serving them up as carrion for the dogs and all the birds -
The will of Zeus being fulfilled - since the son of Atreus, lord of
men,*

And godlike Achilles first feuded and quarrelled.

One example of such storytelling would be the genre of the Apocalypse. 'Apocalypse', etymologically speaking, means 'to uncover', or 'revelation', stemming from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις. Therefore, although the apocalyptic genre is often related to the end of the world in the near future, many apocalyptic texts focus more on the plight of man in the present time, including an elegy for things which have passed. They describe the past and present in the light of what is yet to be revealed. Much of the descriptive language in apocalyptic literature, however, may be traced back to the apocalyptic tradition of the New Testament. One may note three major recurring themes: first, the material of this world is to be destroyed; second, there will be a time of crisis for humanity between this destruction and the coming of Christ; and third, Christ will eventually return and all shall be renewed. In this way, the apocalyptic writers achieve temporal concord, intended to give meaning to man's existence in the present moment.

This point is brilliantly observed by Dorothy L. Sayers in her 'Introductory Papers on Dante': 'The widespread disinclination today to take Hell and Heaven seriously results, very largely, from a refusal to take this world seriously. If we are materialists, we look upon man's life as an event so trifling compared to the cosmic process that our acts and decisions have no importance... But Christianity says, "No. What you do and what you are matters, and matters intensely. It matters now and it matters eternally; it matters to you, and it matters so much to God that it was for Him literally a matter of life and death."'

[Dorothy L. Sayers (1954: 100), Introductory Papers on Dante]

In the 'little apocalypses' in three of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21), Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. It is described in the following way: The destruction of the temple is an indication of the transience of the material. He says to his disciples: "I say to you there shall not be left here a stone upon a stone that shall not be destroyed" (Matthew 24: 2). In Luke, he precedes this by remarking on the rich who 'cast their gifts into the treasury' (Luke 21: 1-4) and on His disciples' admiration of the temple 'adorned with goodly stones



and gifts' (21: 5). He insists that the temple will soon be destroyed and that the gathering or admiration of such earthly treasures is futile (21: 6).

When Jesus here speaks of the temple, however, he is not merely speaking of one earthly structure. In Jewish tradition, the temple is perceived as God's dwelling place, and as a symbol for the whole world. Moreover, as Mircea Eliade has pointed out, the Anglo-Saxons likewise saw their great halls as microcosmic representations of all of creation. The destruction of the hall or temple, therefore, would denote the subsequent destruction of the cosmos.

This brings us back to where it all began. The first three chapters of Genesis depict the Garden of Eden as being like a temple. The final vision of Revelation 21-22 depicts heavenly Jerusalem like the epitome of the temple, the Holy of Holies. These two depictions mirror each other and point to a very focal emphasis of Christian cosmology and eschatology, in which the eschatology confirms God's tenets for the creation and declares it completely finished. The only way that one can know what things were meant to be at the beginning is to see them from the perspective of their end. One has to bear this in mind when reading the Revelation, and other apocalyptic biblical literature.

Something similar is evident in the image of the tree of life. It appears as early as the opening verses of the Bible (Genesis 2: 9), and features in the very final ones (Revelation 22: 1-5). What is surprising, though, is that very few other verses mention the tree of life throughout the Bible. It appears four times in the Book of Proverbs (3: 18, 11: 30, 13: 12 and 15: 4), whilst many Old Testament scholars think that the prophet Ezekiel is at least alluding to it in 31: 3-9 and 47: 12. Then, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 4: 10-12, there is an increased use of the image of the tree of life in the apocalyptic genre of texts. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commenting on Genesis 3: 22-24, the entire saga of the creation comes to its climax in these verses. It turns out that the story is all about this tree.

After succumbing to temptation and eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam has been denied access

to the tree of life, but the hunger and desire for it continues. Now separated from it by the chasm of death, it reminds humanity of the paradise lost, and of its divine source of life. This final and decisive expulsion from life, with the doors firmly shut, has not deterred Adam's descendants from continuing to try to find their way back in. Now roaming the cursed earth, humankind is in search for what has been lost – banging at the closed doors, only to repeat the cycle of desperate rage against the burning sword in the hand of the angel. It is all in vain. No matter what the seed of Adam tries, access to life cannot be renewed on these terms. A flagrant example is the futile attempt at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9).

But God, who is the source of life, has not given up on the crown of his creation – the humankind that is in His image and in His likeness. The source of life, the life itself, the One who lives forever, will not live without us! He wants to give us life that is life in abundance (John 10: 10) – an eternal life (John 3: 16). As the story of redemption unfolds, it becomes more and more clear that all human beings in all human history have been 'doing it wrong'. The cherub guarding the closed doors is indomitable, inexorable and indefatigable. This path back to life is simply out of reach. On the contrary, the path provided by God is utterly counterintuitive, as far as human ingenuity goes. It passes right through its opposite – death. Humanity is invited to conquer death by participation in the One who conquered it by His own death and resurrection – "To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God"; and "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates" (Revelation 2: 7 and 22: 14).

Christian mysticism and spirituality use the symbol of the tree in two distinct ways. The dying tree often featured in the Desert Fathers' stories, when they went through their prayers while plaiting mats from palm leaves. This was a potent reminder, as the palm tree was interpreted very early in Christian asceticism as a symbol of sacrificial death and martyrdom. At the same time, the tree is a symbol of life and growth – the benefits of trees for



all kind of living creatures are numerous. It is precisely in such a context that the tree of life is mentioned in Ezekiel 47: 12. The prophet sees a river that flows from the temple to come. The banks of the river are dotted with trees that bear much fruit. The harvest of their fruit is ceaseless, and their leaves will not wither, as the roots are constantly being watered by the flowing river whose source is in the temple. The fruit is good for food, and the leaves are good for healing. The similarities between Ezekiel 47 and Revelation 22 are more than obvious.

In Revelation however, the motif is developed. In the four passages where it is mentioned (Revelation 2: 7; 22: 2, 14, 19) the reader is told that all of the redeemed have access to this tree and all can taste its life-giving fruit. This image is even more impressive when read in the context of Revelation 22: 4 – ‘They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.’ It is under the trees with their delicious fruit and healing leaves, mentioned in verse 2, that the countless peoples of all races and nations will see God face to face. The ultimate fear that seeing God’s face means death is here reversed. This encounter goes infinitely beyond seeing ‘in a mirror dimly’, as ‘what we will be has not yet appeared’ (1 Corinthians 13: 12; 1 John 3: 2).

Besides this development, Revelation 22 makes a subtle but substantial shift concerning the healing power of the leaves. Whilst in Ezekiel 47 it is for healing (presumably for Israel only), Revelation 22: 2 states that ‘the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations’ (τῶν ἐθνῶν). We are witnessing the finest of literary devices, by which the author makes a link between the fruit (the people of the Covenant, the twelve fruit), and the leaves for healing of all nations, thus making them together participants in the divine life. One more observation about the immediate backdrop is in order. The phrase ‘water of life’ in Revelation 22: 1 is a plausible indication that the healing of the nations is not meant as a medicine or remedy for illnesses, but rather as an antidote, providing a sin-free life. This is confirmed in verse 3, which says that there will be nothing accursed under these trees in the New Jerusalem; the peoples will be healed from anything that causes a curse, much as in the vision of Zechariah in 14: 11 –

'For there shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security.'

Thus, the story of Revelation is one that encourages the reader to take this world seriously. When we consider the historical context of Revelation, we are able to see that the mythological language of the cosmic war depicts the situation in the real world. The application of the message of Revelation has more to do with the earth than with heaven. It is the hope of heaven, the coming Kingdom of God, which gives strength to Christians to continue their fight against evil while on earth. This outlook is affected by a certain view of the Atonement. The so-called classic view of the Atonement is most emphatically committed to seeing the Kingdom of God already established on the earth, standing in utmost opposition to the evil kingdoms under the dominion of Satan. Christ is the 'eschaton', or the divinely ordained climax or crisis of history. It was as a gift of God and not on account of human effort. It was the manifest and effective assertion of the divine sovereignty in conflict with evil in the world.

Although it seems that we live in a period of 'the eclipse of God' (according to Buber) and that God's existence is far from self-evident, remembering what God has done for us in the past gives us hope that ultimately He will bring the history of creation to a glorious victory over the powers of darkness, sin and evil. Christians can confidently continue their active growth toward the likeness of Christ and share in His victory. In Jesus we have exhibited the power by which God rules the world. If Jesus conquered the world (John 16: 33) then the believers who are joined to Him have done the same too.

One is reminded of another powerful image that envisions the glorious future of this present world. In Revelation 7: 16-17, verses which are an adaptation of Isaiah 49: 10, we read: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."



All of this confirms the essential hope of apocalyptic literature, and especially the Revelation. It is about quenching the ever-elusive longing, finding rest in the personal relationship with the Good Shepherd, and most of all about being in the 'far-off country' where tears are no more, and they are not even remembered.

In the words of the poet T. S. Eliot, who in *Four Quartets: Little Gidding* V spoke of all this so evocatively:

*'We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'*

This is precisely what happens in Revelation 22: 1-5, and this is the reason why we should regard this world with utter seriousness. Read with such lenses, apocalyptic literature is, for the Church today, a powerful incentive to never lose courage, and never cease to hope.

WISDOM LITERATURE AS INSPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT WISDOM ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

We read in the Book of Jeremiah 18: 18: 'They said, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says."' This verse depicts the three categories of spiritual leaders among God's people, each according to their mission: the priest who proclaims the divine teaching of the law, the prophet who delivers the word of God, and the wise man who provides counselling. Considering these three responsibilities, the Hebrew Bible is organised into three main sections: the Torah (or Law), the Prophets, and the Wisdom books.

The Books of the Torah and the Prophets, that have always been placed on the same level, are centred on God, the Master of history and events, because the Torah (or books of law) are God's Word that has been given to humans. The Lord has heard the groaning of the people, promised to intervene (Exodus 6: 5-6)



and fulfilled His promise, and the prophets' primary mission is to proclaim the Word of God and encourage people to trust in the Lord and to stand firm in their faith (Isaiah 7: 9). In the Torah and the prophetic books, man is the one who trusts in God. In the Wisdom books, however, man becomes the centre of literature, and God becomes the One Who places His trust in man. God has blessed mankind with perception and wisdom to rule over living creatures, according to what we read in Genesis 1: 27-28, and based on what Jesus asked of those who wish to achieve a certain objective: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost, to see if you have enough money to complete it? Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able...?" (Luke 14: 28 and 31).

Thus, although the Books of the Law and the Prophets are distinguished by the theology of the history of salvation, wisdom literature introduces the theology of creation, which translates into differences on the human level. In the theology of history, it is God who dictates to man what to do and how to do it. The Torah is in fact a divine revelation to Moses (Exodus 20: 1), and it is the prophets who proclaim the Word of God and tell the people what God requires of them (Micah 6: 6-8), so that man remains safe, because a person cannot sin if God is guiding his steps – although man remains free to accept or refuse, which is what the Bible describes as obedience to God (or disobedience, which is sin). However, wisdom literature offers a different approach to the life of mankind. In fact, since God set man apart by giving him perception, and trusted him to the extent of entrusting him to rule over creation, man must decide for himself what he has to do, knowing that this might entail the risk of committing mistakes. In any case, there is no sin in committing mistakes because every person learns from his mistakes. A person who observes what is going on in daily life and how people around him are behaving, and knows how to draw the appropriate lessons, learns how to make the best choices, and with time acquires experience and becomes wise. He might even sometimes aspire to share his experience with others, especially with his children, so that they

can discover early the approach that they need to adopt in life. The advice of these wise men laid the first foundations of some of the wisdom literature's texts.

We can thus say that the first principle on which wisdom is based is: Look, judge, act. At this level, since a person remains free, we do not speak of obedience or sin, but rather of wisdom and foolishness (ignorance). He who rejects good counsel has not sinned, but rather is ignorant and made a mistake – but he who accepts it is wise. Therefore, there is no limit to wisdom, because the wise can always become wiser.

Wisdom literature in the Old Testament is not limited to the Books of Wisdom, namely books of prayer (Psalms and the book of Lamentations), Writings (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, Sirach), poetry that glorifies love (Song of Songs), in addition to the Book of Job and the philosophy of revolution on pain and lack of understanding it. There are also historical stories (Ruth, Esther and Tobit) and historical records (Ezra, Nehemiah and Maccabees). Wisdom literature, unlike prophetic literature, did not emerge from and is not specific to the 'Biblia', as it was found in all Eastern civilisations in the biblical era. Of course, Joseph was known for his wisdom in Egypt (Genesis 41: 39), and in the tenth century BC Solomon was the example of wisdom, and the Queen of Sheba, who was also known for her wisdom, revealed wisdom treasures in neighbouring civilisations in Sumer, Babylon and Egypt. This demonstrates the efforts of human thought to confront the realities of daily life, and to distinguish what should and should not be done for the good of individuals and the cohesion of society. These texts, which reflect practical skills and life literature, were meant to be transmitted across generations, and contain the ethics of family, community and political behaviour, without delving into individual interests. This is what we read in the Book of Proverbs, and it indicates the ecumenical nature of wisdom, which seems to be a blueprint for the contemporary humanist movement. Should we therefore consider that wisdom was from the beginning independent of religion?



THE PATH AND DEVELOPMENT OF WISDOM

The wisdom of the ancients, which was centred on the practical principles passed on from generation to generation through popular sayings, pictorial expressions, and symbols that can be memorised, is rooted in the land and agricultural activity – ‘He who gathers crops in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son’ (Proverbs 10: 5) – and also covers the intimate personal life: ‘Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened calf with hatred’ (Proverbs 15: 17). However, over time it has become a sort of metaphysical search, beyond concrete things and material and historical events, and has become (for those influenced by Greek thinking), a philosophy emanating from human understanding, based on the mind alone and without recourse to any revelation from outside of man. Philosophy freed man from religion, and according to contemporary language, philosophy was completely separate from theology. This ‘Greek wisdom’, however, came late, and this was not the case in Eastern civilisations, that were completely religious.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WISDOM AND MONARCHY

In ancient times, the source of wisdom used to be considered divine. Man, who was in search for happiness, realised his inability to find the path to it, and concluded that he had no hope of attaining happiness except through the gods who alone were able to lead him towards his goal. The gods gave people a king to reign in their name, lead his people, and rule with justice and righteousness, which is what the Jewish people had demanded from Samuel: “Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8: 5). In order for the king to fulfil this royal responsibility, he had to surround himself with people who were able to recognise the divine will (fortune tellers, wise men) according to the Book of Proverbs: ‘By me (wisdom) kings reign and rulers issue decrees that are just’ (8: 15).

WISDOM FROM THE LORD HIMSELF

This royal wisdom, which was common to all civilisations, was regarded by the prophets as special, in that they declared that kings' wisdom was related to the extent of their application of God's teachings. Prophets used to mercilessly mock the 'wisdom' of kings who enriched themselves at the expense of the poor, and who abandoned true wisdom (that is, 'the fear of God'), for corrupt political calculations. The strong condemnation by the prophets of royal authorities led to taking the throne of wisdom from the king and giving it to the Lord Himself: 'All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, whose plan is wonderful, whose wisdom is magnificent' (Isaiah 28: 29).

Like the manna provided for His people liberated from Egypt, God's Law will give birth to and nourish the people. With this transcendent Law, confrontation will break out with the human wisdom emanating from man. The divine wisdom coming from above is not the prerogative of kings and rulers, governed by their changing desires and depending on their interests, but it is rather the wisdom of God that provides clear teaching, that everyone can assimilate and that nourishes everyone's understanding. This wisdom does not treat people coercively, nor does it compel them to follow it, to be submissive to a god and flatter him to gain his favour. On the contrary, this wisdom is described in the biblical texts as a fountain that quenches people's thirst for perfection and joy.

Thus, according to the Book of Proverbs, the pursuit of understanding and the search for consciousness is vital, and this is why wisdom urges a person to do so, exactly like a mother who encourages her children to eat healthy foods: "Now then, my children, listen to me..." (Proverbs 8: 32). "'Let all who are simple come to my house!" To those who have no sense she says, "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live"' (Proverbs 9: 4-6). Sirach goes so far as to consider wisdom as a woman that a man has to search for and marry (Sirach 14: 20). It is as if wisdom is the feminine image of God, who, since creation, wanted man to enjoy happiness: 'Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree



of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed. By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place; by his knowledge the watery depths were divided, and the clouds let drop the dew' (Proverbs 3: 17-20). Human wisdom is then essentially nothing but 'the fear of God' – 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding' (Proverbs 9: 10). It is wisdom that liberates man from every fear: 'When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared' (Proverbs 3: 24-26). Thus, the world will enjoy the shining light of wisdom, while the corrupt and ignorant will drown in deep darkness (Proverbs 4: 18-19). The moral equation is hence clear: good acts lead to happiness, while wicked acts lead to unhappiness; 'The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous' (Proverbs 3: 33). However, this equation entails serious difficulties!

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF WISDOM AFTER THE EXILE

The prophets, for whom wisdom was separate from power, were the first to attempt to separate religion from politics. In Babylon, wisdom thinking developed to the extent that the 'wise' gradually replaced the prophets. Wisdom, due to its adherence to God and His Law, is capable of enriching the understanding of those who seek it; therefore, intellectual study and research are necessary for the growth of wisdom, to reach God. These are prerequisites for life and cannot, in any case, be optional. This wisdom is the creational mind that controls the universe (Proverbs 8: 22-36), it is the word of the Most High (Sirach 24: 3), and a person must meet it to assimilate it and live on.

In contrast to the priests, who were the guardians of religious institutions and responsible for rituals and ceremonies in the Jewish communities in Babylon, Alexandria, and Jerusalem, this wisdom movement generated a new group, the 'sopherim' (or

scribes). These sopherim, who gathered both sources of divine and popular wisdom, took upon themselves the task of teaching writing, grammar, arithmetic and natural sciences to form the cadres of political and religious administration in the country, based on popular wisdom as well as royal and religious wisdom.

Ever since the royal era, there were sopherim who transcribed oral traditions, which formed later the foundation of the Torah. These sopherim would later collect all popular sayings in classified collections for educational and ethical purposes; the Book of Proverbs is one result of this work. During the exile, the work of the sopherim took on great importance and contributed greatly to the development of the Jewish religion, which, in addition to the collective nature of faith, was enriched with an internal personal dimension. In fact, in the absence of a temple, praying became even more important than ritualistic sacrifices – ‘The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him’ (Proverbs 15: 8). Personal understanding of religion as a source of wisdom assumed great importance, namely through studying and contemplating texts and praying. However, this wisdom with a personal dimension still encountered numerous difficulties. What the Book of Proverbs proclaims seemingly constitutes a contradiction between encouraging understanding and warning against personal discernment and wisdom: ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil’ (Proverbs 3: 5-7). As the prophet Isaiah warned, ‘Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight’ (Isaiah 5: 21); “Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish” (Isaiah 29: 14).

However, do the Lord’s wisdom and man’s wisdom contradict one another? Is the fear of the Lord consistent with the efforts of the mind that is free from all authority and submission? The Book of Proverbs depicts a person’s submission to God’s law as a happy submission, because knowledge is a dimension that resembles pleasure according to the way Proverbs describes marital



faithfulness (Proverbs 5: 15). With the personal dimension that faith took during the Captivity, the covenant that God made with His people became a covenant that every believer should preserve through his personal relationship with the Lord. This engendered a powerful pietist movement during the post-captivity era, but the promise of happiness to those who 'fear' the Lord has not always been fulfilled. Believers have in fact even felt that the wicked were living in luxury whilst the righteous suffered tragedies. However, despite everything, human experience transcends this poetic vision.

Although the prophets considered that their people's suffering was the result of them drifting away from God's Word, the Book of Lamentations confirms that these calamities are not related to the sins committed, thus affirming the difficulty of understanding the divine word. Hence the logic of rewarding the pious conflicts with their experience of pain and death, which is reflected in the Book of Job, who rebelled and was angry at his lack of understanding, and in Ecclesiastes, which highlights the confusion and submission to an apparently unfair and inconsistent divine wisdom. They hence concluded that if there is no meaning to life, and nothing new under the sun, man should finally understand that 'living now' is the happiness that he can obtain, so we read: 'You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see...' (Ecclesiastes 11: 9). We have only one life to live – and no one knows what tomorrow will bring. There is a time to be born and a time to die, but God alone knows when this time will come (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11). Let us therefore rejoice in the short moments of happiness that the Lord gives us. Isn't this the prevailing logic in our world today?

In any case, we can conclude that biblical wisdom is not one coherent and uniform intellectual movement, but rather a researching intellectual movement, with a thinking and debating approach. Although it began as practical know-how, it has developed into a lifelong approach, leading to a new knowledge of 'how to be'. This movement oscillates between observing reality on the one hand, and ideology on the other. It started through

observing social reality, contemplated observations and tried to draw lessons to find happiness.

This practical wisdom was then subject to criticism in the name of the Torah revealed to Moses, and then in the name of the theology of reward and punishment, which differs from actual experiences. That doctrine was also called into question, based on life experience.

If it is true that wisdom is the path to happiness, then the search for this path has not ended.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO OUR WORLD TODAY?

Biblical wisdom began with the material dimension before moving to the religious dimension; however, it took quite some time to move from the realistic material dimension to God and His relationship with man and society, from understanding the experience without returning to the divine authority, to a thinking in which the relationship with God plays a pivotal role and governs daily life behaviours. This wisdom understood that God was the One who created the world and He who rules it. For man to observe the Law and its rituals in the different areas of personal and public life, is to take his right place in the order of the cosmos, in his relationship with God and with his fellow man. We can hence understand how respecting the divine will is a source of joy, as this reflects the unity of man, and strengthens the unity of society and its harmony with God.

Today, however, we live in a secularised world, in which, for many of our contemporaries, turning to God in their quest to live joyfully has become incomprehensible or illogical. Whilst biblical texts are for them similar to the voices of the prophets, inherent to a tradition that concerns only a specific people, and ruled by the fact that God intervened in history, wisdom literature connects more with the concepts and logic of today's world. It is based on daily experience, in a quest to sense the divine will in the human world, and the fundamental unity between this will, the universe and man.



WISDOM LITERATURE AS INSPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES

The Word of God has always represented a challenge to the human mind and to both human and historical concepts of 'truth'. How many times has the divine revelation declared, through the prophets, that what people might consider a state of peace and prosperity is, in fact, a situation of crisis? This was the case, for example, in the economically prosperous era of Jeroboam II (786-746), during which Amos' prophecy denounced social injustice that rendered all liturgical and religious practices meaningless.

The 'Biblia' depicted the journey of the people of the Covenant as being marked by human betrayals that God faced with faithfulness and the call to repentance. What is considered a crisis for God's people is not governed by social or economic criteria, but by the life-giving Word of God. Much of the Bible comprises the history of the people's crises and their testimonies about God's Word in various forms, and during different periods.

How can wisdom literature be a source of inspiration for our world today and for our churches?

We read in Ephesians 5:15-16: 'Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.' The phrase 'the days are evil' is a metaphor that expresses rampant evil, which has become evident in the empty words of humans and their ignorant behaviour; these are days in which evil people prevail, interest groups manipulate, and overtly arrogant pressure groups control the world; days dominated by misery, difficulties, and pain for believers. This letter to the Ephesians does not imply an invitation to evade commitment, but is rather a call to resist the sweeping current. It is a time when believers should know how to demonstrate their faith through their ability to resist, by declaring their commitment to the Gospel and to the inalienable rights of the poor.

Times of crises are at the same time opportunities for effective action by believers to confront wickedness in society. They have a responsibility to expose the truth about the wicked, and to

confront them appropriately. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, the phrase 'not... but...' is repeated three times to describe what a Christian must do to reverse the actions of the world, although its ways may appear to have prevailed (Ephesians 5: 15, 17, 18); vigilance, attention, clarity, awareness and discrimination are all required. Times of crises are opportunities to explore and proclaim Christian wisdom. These are times to live in the present moment by testifying to Christian distinctiveness. This is how we 'make the most of every opportunity' (Ephesians 5: 16) or redeem the time. We live in the present even though evil sometimes prevails at the expense of the Gospel's mission. We redeem the time by giving it a positive meaning, making the most of every opportunity, considering it as an opportunity to reveal the truth and to discern God's will in all the details of life – in love and passion (the Song of Songs), pain (Job), death and meaninglessness (Ecclesiastes), work, friendship, use of property, anger, joy, hate and desire (Proverbs) and in prayer (Psalms).

Yes, our modern world desperately needs to re-learn humanistic rules and rediscover the salvific nature of its limits and weaknesses. At this level, wisdom literature provides us with a rich path that we can follow. These times of crisis that we are going through today provide us with the opportunity of emphasising the importance of teaching wisdom literature centred around two poles. The first of these is attention to man, and the position of research based on experience and awareness of the changing and mysterious reality, which sometimes remains without answers – 'For who knows what is good for a person in life...?' (Ecclesiastes 6: 12), and 'what is man...?' (Psalm 8: 4; 144: 3) – in addition to all the questions that we find in the Books of Job and Proverbs. Wisdom literature leaves the door open to inter-civilizational and intercultural dialogues. The second pole creates a spiritual path that can be taken in times of crises, to give meaning to existence, whilst respecting man, whom God created in His own image.

We find in the New Testament an inspiring parable about the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25: 1-13), which reveals the essential wisdom required to meet the bridegroom and live happily according to the Book of Proverbs: 'My son, if your heart



is wise... there is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off' (Proverbs 23: 15-18). Wisdom here is tantamount to faithfulness to God and obedience to His commandments. These are not compulsory commandments, but rather a basis for sound thought and a path to follow in life. A person who follows these commandments is a wise person who wins life and happiness. This is the case for the wise virgins who knew how to keep their faith in God, and followed His path leading to life. The foolish on the other hand are those who do not choose wisdom, who oppose God and do not listen to His words, thus reaping disastrous results – exactly like the foolish virgins, who did not observe God's commandments and lived indifferently to the consequences of their situation.

What matters in wisdom is anticipation and acting with a view to the future, rather than merely being concerned with the present. The wise virgins had taken oil with them, and were hence prepared for the divine future. They understood that wisdom is what leads to the good, the eternal truth, as Paul the Apostle wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight' (1 Corinthians 3: 19) and 'For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom' (1: 25). God's wisdom might seem foolish to people because they are unable to understand what His purposes will lead to. What appears foolish to people today is, in fact, beyond what we understand simply as good and bad.

Wisdom transcends us, because we have a limited intellectual capacity and are constrained by time – so we still need revelation, that guides our steps to participate in God's work in leading man and in creation. In this context, Jesus Christ came as an example of the new creation and the new man; an example whom we can follow and in whose footprints we can walk, confident that He is the way, and the truth, and the life. Faith involves joining God's programme. It is the wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1: 30), although it seems foolish in our selfish material world. Giving Himself, serving others, forgiving, and sharing is not a 'logical' strategy in this world dominated by personal interests, consumerism, power, authority, and money – a world in which man considers himself to be its epicentre and puts his interests above all other considerations.

It is indeed foolish. Therefore, the need arises to provide an example that our world can understand and accept. We need to crystallise a theology which is rather a teleology, the science of 'telos' or 'finality'. If the Cross is 'foolishness to Gentiles' (1 Corinthians 1: 23), this is because it represents a wisdom that cannot be understood by those who do not see the purpose of it and where it can lead. The true wisdom is rather a 'lack of wisdom' for those who do not understand that after death comes a life that is more important than biological life, and a salvation that is not an earthly pleasure but an eternal good.

What is required is to hear the Word in order to recover from foolishness. The fool who says in his heart 'There is no God' (Psalm 53: 1) is the one who does not take God's Word into account and acts only according to his whims. He is the one who pays no regard to God in his decisions and actions, because, according to him, God is not a reference to which he returns in order to know which path to follow – unlike the wise, because 'the wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness' (Ecclesiastes 2: 14), and the only antidote for foolishness is the Word of God.

WISDOM LITERATURE AS INSPIRATION FOR CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES

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“FRIENDSHIP” IN WISDOM LITERATURE AND ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

The biblical wisdom literature is not typically viewed as a source of inspiration for contemporary ecumenical relations. In handbooks and histories of the ecumenical movement we do not find many references to this part of the Scriptures. So, we find ourselves in rather uncharted territory this afternoon.

Our daunting task is to bring together insights from the ancient sages on the one hand, and the modern missionary and ecumenical movement on the other. We will try to do that by exploring the concept of ‘friendship’ or ‘partnership’ in the wisdom literature through two representative texts. We will then briefly consider what role this concept played in twentieth century ecumenism.

FRIENDSHIP IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

‘bechal-’ēt ohēv harēa’ (Proverbs 17: 17)

This Hebrew sentence is often translated as ‘a friend loves at all

times', and provides a neat summary of the concept of friendship in the wisdom literature. It is often used as an inspirational and devotional text; we have it embroidered on a little cushion on our living room sofa.

This little sentence contains the two main terms for 'friend' that are used in the Hebrew Bible, from the two verbs אהב and רעה. The first (אהב) is the stem whose primary meaning is 'to love'. As participle it is in some places best translated as 'friend'. Think, for example of the famous designation of Abraham as God's friend (Isaiah 41: 8, referred to in James 2: 23). This form of the verb as is used here in Proverbs 17: 17. The Jerusalem Bible emphasises this and translates: 'A friend is a friend at all times.'

The primary meaning of the stem רעה is 'to feed' and as a participle it becomes 'shepherd' or 'keeper'. A secondary meaning of this stem is 'friend', and in various derivative forms it then takes on the meaning of 'companion', 'friend', or 'neighbour'.

In light of all this, Bruce Waltke seems to offer a translation of Proverbs 17: 17 that is spot-on: 'At all times a friend is one who loves' (*Proverbs 15-31*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005, NICOT, p. 45). Waltke comments that friend (*harēa*) here is best interpreted as 'the ideal neighbour', one who is prepared to help out in emergencies, such as leaking roofs, and one who is willing to share food. Waltke continues to say that the verb *ohev* here means 'a friend's recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of the one with whom he desires to be at all times in a reciprocal relationship, even in extreme anguish and suffering.' He continues to say that 'the true character of love expresses itself by substantive, unselfish action in adversity, not by outward kisses.'

The short sentence of Proverbs 17: 17 carries a rich meaning. Friendship means loyalty, care for the other, faithful support at all times (especially times of suffering), and a willingness to share one's food.

FRIENDSHIP IN THE WISDOM OF JESUS BEN SIRACH

The second key text we consider is the sixth chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). This book is



much younger than the Proverbs, but uses the same Hebrew terms for 'friend'.

Sirach repeats that true friends stand by you in your time of trouble (יום צרה), a term that was also used in the Proverbs. That is why Sirach likens a faithful friend (אורח אמונה) to a shelter, a treasure, and a life-saving medicine. True friends show unselfish solidarity, and as such may be closer than one's closest family, as Proverbs 18: 24 also suggests. False or unworthy friends are interested in you only in times of prosperity, but disappear when you fall on hard times.

Like Proverbs, Sirach takes it for granted that friends eat together. But eating together is no guarantee of lasting friendship. Those who are interested in sharing a meal with you may abandon you or even turn against you and become your enemies, Sirach warns.

Sirach adds the dimension of good counsel, which can come only from a true friend, whilst the words of false friends are shallow and clichéd. Throughout the wisdom literature it is evident that this good, friendly counsel will not always affirm us, but may be painfully critical. As Proverbs 27: 6 says: 'Faithful are the wounds of [inflicted by] a friend.' The famous image of iron sharpening iron in the same chapter (v. 17) appears to have the same intention.

Sirach links true friendship with the 'fear of the Lord' (6: 17). Those who fear God will know how to choose the right friends and how to behave as friends. This statement is followed by that of 'like himself, so is his friend.' The point cannot be missed: faith is an important foundation of friendship.

FRIENDSHIP IN ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

According to the eminent mission historian Dana L. Robert, the story of Christian mission in the twentieth century pivots on friendships, especially intercultural friendships. She retells the story of the ecumenical missionary movement by referring to the bonds between church leaders from the West and church leaders from the East, starting with two leaders from the Christian student

movements: the Indian V.S. Azariah and the American Sherwood Eddy. (*Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 58-59).

Whilst researching the history of the Dutch Protestant mission in Indonesia, I also found out that friendships were crucial to the development of churches, to ecumenical relations, and to missionary initiatives. A famous friendship that considerably advanced the self-determination of the Indonesian Protestant churches was that between Dutch missionary Hendrik Kraemer and a Batak church and political leader by the name of T.S.G. Mulia.

Such friendships reflected many of the characteristics that we discerned in the texts from Proverbs and Sirach. The friendships between individuals were not infrequently the essential building blocks for partnerships between churches. Partnership and friendship are not exactly the same thing, for it is possible to be in a partnership whilst not having feelings of friendship for the representative of the partner organisation or church. Nevertheless, partnership and friendship have many traits in common.

By way of closing, I would like to suggest three of the key traits: equality, mutuality, and reciprocity. This is, in a sense, a mere repetition of the observations on Proverbs and Sirach. These three qualities are, in my view, essential elements of both friendship and partnership. They build on each other. There can be no mutuality without equality, and no reciprocity without the other two qualities.

We need equality in East-West relations. For centuries Western nations have lived with an illusory superiority complex, which has created a corresponding inferiority complex. This inequality has caused Western Christians to dominate their friends and partners from other cultures. V.S. Azariah was painfully aware of this, and that is why he used his speaking time at the famous 1910 Edinburgh conference to plead for friendship!

We need mutuality in East-West relations. Mutuality means that the initiative in the relationship may be taken by both partners. We are each other's shepherds and neighbours. Today the invitation may be yours; tomorrow it will be mine. Sirach speaks of table-fellows who no longer accept invitations in bad times. Are they



too important to dine with a partner who has fallen into poverty? Mutuality is a matter of power-sharing.

Lastly, we need reciprocity in East-West relations. Support has traditionally been a one-way street, and often continues to be so. Do Western Christians really think that they do not need any assistance? Reciprocity means that we know how to give and how to receive. This may be more difficult than it sounds, for only the humble are willing to receive. Reciprocity also means that we are ready to receive both friendly and critical words – ‘Faithful are the wounds of a friend.’

The history of the twentieth-century missionary and ecumenical movement shows us the slow discovery of the values of friendship as they are expounded in the wisdom literature. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this quest between East and West continues. There is more to learn; there are deeper dimensions to discover in our ecumenical relations; so let us not tire, and continue to build our friendships and partnerships. To quote Sirach once more (6: 14): ‘Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter; whoever finds one has found a treasure.’

EARLY CHURCH MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Your Eminences, dear sisters and brothers –

Allow me to start by quoting from Psalm 55:

‘Give ear to my prayer, O God, and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy! Attend to me, and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and I moan, because of the noise of the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked. For they drop trouble upon me, and in anger they bear a grudge against me. My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness; (Selah) I would hurry to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest.” ...But I call to God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice. He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me... Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved... But I will trust in you.’



The words of this psalm and others were repeated by the Early Church and more recently in Iraq and Syria...in our Eastern countries.

When my friend Mike Bassous asked me to take part in this conference by addressing this topic, I asked for some clarifications from my dear brother Issa Diab. Because of the limited time available, and in an attempt to explore people's opinions and views of the subject, I asked believers in the church where I serve to stay after prayer for a few minutes, and asked them: "What comes to your mind when we talk about: 'The Early Church models of engagement' – how they lived through suffering and persecution, and how they resisted? The answer was straightforward: "Father, we are living in bliss in Lebanon – the Early Church suffered greatly." They then began giving me names and examples: Ignatius of Antioch, Saint Thecla...

The approach I am adopting in this paper is neither a theological nor a purely historical one. It is a simple attempt to present some models of engagement that are engraved in the historical memory of our church's people. This approach is therefore limited and aims to represent a word of encouragement for our present and future, while shedding light on this aspect of the Early Church.

The figures I will be talking about in my contribution have lived through their Christian engagement, embodying a resisting attitude – not with arms but with flesh, blood, thought, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit. These various figures – male and female, old and young – provide an image of the early Christian community and its stance in relation to persecution and pressure.

Our aim in reading history is not to sing the praises of pain, encourage sacrifice or venerate heroes. We can rather talk about the 'genius of the resistance', and about their love of the Master of life, despite the death that was surrounding them. What I will say is not intended to encourage anyone to imitate this person or that from the past, but what these people have gone through helps us to draw some conclusions. They raise great questions about us and our reactions. It is a step forward, although it might appear that what they lived through was nothing but death and persecution. However, they saw the light of Christ despite the

blackness surrounding them. They were exposed to the madness of hatred, as were Jesus, the disciples, and all those who chose to follow Christ.

I will thus talk about three figures: Ignatius of Antioch, Saint Thecla and Irenaeus of Lyon.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, 'THE GOD-BEARER' (DIED C.107 AD)

As a bishop and pastor of a church, he came under external pressure and faced internal difficulties. He encouraged believers to stand firm in their faith and maintain unity. Saint Ignatius called himself 'the God-bearer' and his trial and martyrdom correspondence are a true embodiment of this expression: 'Whoever believes in God and that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and whoever acts with goodness for God and out of love for Him, carries God in his heart...and I carry God in my heart because Christ said: "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14: 21).'

While en route to Rome, where he met his martyrdom, he seized every opportunity to testify of Christ and teach the churches. The letters he wrote expressly reflect his Christian engagement and the model he gave. In fact, he left us seven epistles, which are considered 'masterpieces of the Patristics' writings, as they reveal the Spirit of the Lord, the firm belief in Jesus Christ and the ardent concern for churches, as well as valuable information about the Early Church and some of its difficulties, interests and positions.

What strikes us is his description of martyrs in his Epistle to the Ephesians: 'I am far inferior to you, and require to be sanctified by your Church of Ephesus' (Ephesians 8). He affirms in his Epistle to the Smyrnaeans: 'Prisoner as I am, I am giving my life for you' (Smyrnaeans 10). He speaks also about martyrdom in the name of the Lord Jesus as an honour and a purpose, following the example of the Passion of the Saviour, who is life: 'For the simple reason that near the sword means near God. To be with wild beasts means to be with God. But it must all be in the name of Jesus Christ.



To share in his Passion, I go through everything' (Smyrnaeans 4); 'These bonds, these spiritual jewels' (Ephesians 11).

His great humanity is reflected when he, as a martyr, asks for the love and prayers of churches everywhere. He wrote to the Ephesians that he hoped, through their prayers, to be permitted to fight with beasts at Rome, so that he might become a true disciple of God (Ephesians 1).

He insisted on pursuing his teaching mission, even during his captivity, and used to send churches instructions to encourage the believers to preserve unity in love: 'Seek by meekness to subdue the more troublesome' (Epistle to Polycarp 2); 'By our patience let us show we are their brothers, intent on imitating the Lord, seeing which of us can be the more wronged, robbed, and despised. Thus no devil's weed will be found among you' (Ephesians 11); 'Avoid divisions, as being the beginning of evils' (Smyrnaeans 7).

The martyr entrusted God with his widowed church and asked local churches to take care of it, pray for it and love it: 'Remember in your prayers the Church in Syria, which now has God for its shepherd instead of me. Jesus Christ alone will oversee it, and your love will also regard it' (Romans 9). He clearly writes in his Epistle to the Romans: 'For I am afraid of your love, lest it should do me an injury...for neither shall I ever have such another opportunity of attaining to God... Do not seek to confer any greater favour upon me than that I be sacrificed to God while the altar is still prepared... Only request in my behalf both inward and outward strength, that I may not only speak, but truly will; and that I may not merely be called a Christian, but really be found to be one... Christianity shows its greatness even when it is hated by the world... I write to the Churches, and impress on them all, that I shall willingly die for God... I beseech of you not to show an unseasonable goodwill towards me. Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ. Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God...may I enjoy the wild beasts that are prepared for me... Pardon me in this: I know what is for my benefit. Now

I begin to be a disciple...I am about to be born again. Pardon me, brethren: do not hinder me from living, do not wish to keep me in a state of death... Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God.'

SAINT THECLA (DIED C.90 AD)

A well-known figure in our East, Saint Thecla believed in Christ though the preaching of the Apostle Paul. She was engaged, but refused to get married and wanted to dedicate her life to Christ, abandoning everything, especially her wealthy family.

She was subjected to domestic violence and pressure from her mother and father; she was a young but strong girl. She did not bow to the pressures of the Roman authorities and the viceroy's threats. She rejected idolatry, preferring martyrdom as a new way of life, which gave rise to many questions. She did not care about her problems, and despite the permanent danger she faced, she did not resort to self-withdrawal but rather continued her journey. She joined Paul in Antioch, and became an evangelist. Church Fathers from the East and the West regard her as an example of a holy virgin.

We read in Tone 3 a Troparion for Saint Thecla: 'O Glorious Thecla, companion of Paul the divine, thou wast inflamed with the love of thy Creator. By the teaching of the divine Preacher thou didst despise the passing earthly pleasures and offered thyself to God as an acceptable and pleasing sacrifice, disregarding all suffering.'

We can also read in Tone 2: 'You were enlightened by the words of Paul, O Bride of God, Thecla, and your faith was confirmed by Peter, O Chosen One of God. You became the first sufferer and martyr among women, by entering into the flames as into a place of gladness. For when you accepted the Cross of Christ, the demonic powers were frightened away. O all-praised One, intercede before Christ God that our souls may be saved.'

We read too a Troparion for Saint Thecla in Tone 4: 'Jesus, your lamb Thecla cries out to You with great love: "O my Bridegroom, I



long for you in great pain, I am crucified with You, and in baptism I am buried with You. I suffer for your sake in order to reign with You, I die for You in order to live in You.””

John Chrysostom gave Thecla as an example in his homily to the people of Constantinople: “Hear then of the blessed Thecla, who, for the sake of seeing Paul, gave up her jewels; but you, who have always been Christians and are proud of your Christianity, will not give an obolus to the needy for the sake of seeing Christ.”

IRENAEUS OF LYON (DIED C.202 AD)

Irenaeus was born in the East and went west to Smyrna (modern-day Izmir in Turkey) between 135 and 140, and was a student of Bishop Polycarp, who in turn had been a disciple of the Apostle John. We do not know when he moved from Asia Minor to Lyon, France.

He lived his Christian engagement by transferring and defending the true faith in his struggle with Gnosticism, his primary concern being to announce the evangelical message of salvation, and protect the baptised from wrong ideas. He succeeded in guiding many to the path of the Gospel. His life was marked by service to the needy, and by humility and being faithful to the message of Christ.

According to the historian Eusebius, Irenaeus, whose name means ‘the peacemaker’, had worked for unity and reconciliation between the Pope in Rome and the bishops of the Asia Minor Church. He went back, as he used to say, to his memories with his teacher Polycarp, who was the disciple of John the Apostle, to emphasise the importance of faithfulness to the teaching. Irenaeus was above all a man of faith and a shepherd, whose passion was to preach about salvation.

As Pope Benedict says in his teaching about Irenaeus, his writings had a dual objective: to defend the true creed in the face of heretical attacks, and to clearly announce true faith. His writings open up new horizons in our quest for Christian unity. It is important to distinguish between faith and its multiple

expressions, in addition to acknowledging a basic element of unity – that anything unnecessary must not be imposed. Unity is important in foundational matters – freedom in diversity and love in everything. Irenaeus is a figure who calls us to adhere to the transmitted Word of God, acknowledge Christ as the Saviour of mankind, and embrace the biblical view of man.

There are undoubtedly many other notable people whom we could mention, who lived a different kind of engagement in the Early Church. As I have already said, in speaking about these figures I do not really mean to adopt an archaeological approach to the past, but rather to highlight some of what these people have done – how they adapted to their circumstances, used language, addressed social questions, and spoke about salvation.

We repeat in our prayers, according to the rituals of the Maronite Syriac Church: “Remember, O Lord, the true teachers, who clung on to true faith; especially Peter, Paul, Mark, Clement, Ignatius, Dionysius and Julius, who endured torture and persecution for the sake of the steadfastness of your Church.”

I conclude with some thoughts prompted by considering the above models:

- They announced and testified for Christ, which cost them their lives. How are we announcing Christ, and what is this costing us?
- The Early Church provided many examples and models of persecution, by people made of flesh and blood like us. What models are we presenting to the world today and in the details of our daily lives?
- They were ‘weak’, but strong in clinging on to the Word of life. Is God’s Word a source of inspiration and power for us too?
- They lived the Gospel and became an open and living Gospel, a basis for the unity of the Church. How are we living the Gospel, and is it the centre of our lives?
- They used to say that the martyrs’ blood is the seed of Christianity. Today we can say that the martyrs’ blood is the seed of Christian unity.



- How can persecutions and pressures help us to achieve greater unity among ourselves as Christians? Are persecutions not an opportunity, and an invitation, for us to live in a greater mutual solidarity as Christians, in spite of all our diversity?

Our people need realistic answers. Our joint work as a faculty with the Bible Society in Homs is in fact a source of hope and great joy after the bloody war.

Thank you.

EARLY CHURCH MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT

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A POLYPHONE VOICE – THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ITS RESPONSES TO PRESSURE ON CHRISTIANS

1. The Reality of Suffering and Persecution as Part of the Christian Identity According to the New Testament

The New Testament bears witness to the fact that rejection, suffering and persecution are integral parts of Christian identity. According to the Gospel of John there is no Christian faith without facing persecution in one form or another: “Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ **If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.** If they kept my word, they will also keep yours” (John 15: 20).⁴²

42) All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV): *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Crossway, 2011.



(i) Jesus and the tradition of the Gospels

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God and inviting His disciples to follow him. Even a superficial analysis will clearly demonstrate that 'persecution' and 'pressure' are a key element of Jesus' teachings.

To follow Jesus, this is the clear message – reiterated by Him and to be found again and again in the tradition of the Synoptic Gospels – which includes predicted experiences of rejection, suffering and persecution. This message was not always welcomed, even by His closest disciples, as the example of Peter in Mark 8: 32 shows. "If anyone would come after me," Jesus tells them, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8: 34 and paralleled in Matthew 10: 38 and Luke 9: 23). Jesus continues: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8: 35). Similar is the message of Mark 13: 13 (paralleled in Matthew 10: 22 and Luke 21: 17): "And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." In Luke 12: 4 (paralleled in Matthew 10: 28) Jesus reminds His disciples, "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do."

Jesus Christ himself, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, experienced an ever-increasing hostility – mainly from the Jewish religious authorities – culminating in his death on the cross. The contemporary Jewish authorities rejected Jesus' way of interpreting the Scripture in teaching and living. Jesus experienced rejection that the prophets of the Old Testament had previously experienced in a similar way.

The Gospel of John adds to these voices by stressing the internal Jewish conflict between those who believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and those rejecting such identification. Jesus announces that a violent separation from the synagogues will await his followers: "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16: 2).

In collaboration with the Roman authorities and the Governor Pontius Pilate, the Jewish religious authorities pushed for the violent death of Jesus on the cross – a death sentence that could be implemented only by the Romans. Here the tradition of the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John is similar.

(ii) The Apostolic tradition – the Apostle Paul and the Acts of the Apostles

For the writer of the most ancient books of the New Testament, the Apostle Paul, the suffering Jesus Christ is the role model for any Christian (and in particular for those in situations of) suffering persecution: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us” (Romans 8: 18). Paul’s theology of the cross is in fact a theology of suffering. Paul, himself privileged to be a Roman citizen, is mainly experiencing rejection and persecution by his fellow Jews, but also from local authorities beyond. Indeed, Paul is even, in some ways, proud of all the experiences of hardship during his life.⁴³

According to the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus’ followers, the Apostles and the first believers were facing hardship, pressure, punishment and even persecution, which led to the death of the first martyr, Stephen (Acts 7). It is not without significance that only two of the 28 chapters of the Book of Acts do not refer to any situation of persecution. Whilst Peter and John are arrested and flogged (Acts 4), Stephen is the first one to be stoned to death by the Jews because of his faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul, who persecuted the Early Church himself, will likewise experience persecution after his conversion.

In the report of the Book of Acts, however, the ‘great persecution’ (Acts 8: 1) turns into a blessing, with the spread of the Gospel

43) *Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one – I am talking like a madman – with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers* (2 Corinthians 11: 23-26).



beyond Jerusalem.⁴⁴ Further persecution leads to the violent death of James, the brother of John, and the arrest of several Christians (Acts 12: 1-5).

Even if the voices in the New Testament are polyphone, the message of comfort, encouragement and hope is clear: authorities, whether religious or political, may demonstrate a hostile attitude towards the followers of Jesus Christ, but in the end the victory is with God. The Beatitudes, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, are only one example: “**Blessed are those who are persecuted** for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5: 10).

2. Pressure on Jesus, his Followers and the Early Church from the Roman Authorities

Whilst some of the pressure on early Christianity is from the Jewish religious authorities in the Roman province of Judaea at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, as well as from some synagogue leaders in the diaspora where Paul preaches the Gospel, increasingly pressure is put on the growing Church by the Roman authorities. In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, it seems that the faithful are experiencing extreme pressure from a hostile Roman state.

In respect of pressure from the Roman authorities on the early Christian Church, it has been argued that persecution in the second half of the first century might rather have been local or regional at most, and mainly sporadic, but not yet widespread throughout the Roman Empire, where systematic persecution occurred only in later centuries. Indeed, for the period when the writings of the New Testament came into being, this might be true. However, for those affected by it the experience of persecution would have been the same, irrespective of whether it was only in their own local environment or was already empire-wide.

44) *And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles* (Acts 8: 1).

Nevertheless, the totally unjust claim of scholars like Candide Moss in her provocative publication 'The Myth of Persecution' – that Christians invented a story of martyrdom, since there would have been no persecution at all before the third century AD – has to be clearly refuted.

It is not only the Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his 'History of the Church', written in the fourth century, who depicts the previous three centuries as a time of suffering and persecution, nor is it the increased production of Christian literature about martyrs from the second century onwards. There is extensive documentation about the fact that pressure had been put on the Christians. The legal framework of the Roman Empire left space for interpretation in the provinces. At the very least the Emperors Nero, Domitian and Trajan were known for the pressures that they imposed on the early Christian Church.

It is not necessary to quote all the non-Christian sources from Antiquity like Tacitus,⁴⁵ who deals with the cruel treatment of Christians in Rome under Emperor Nero after the fire in Rome. I could also quote the first letter of Clement,⁴⁶ referring to the death of the Apostles Paul and Peter in Rome, or the mention of strict measures against Christians during the reign of Nero, as described in Suetonius' biography of Nero.⁴⁷

Whether Nero's persecution was primarily local to Rome might be arguable, but under Emperor Domitian (90-95 AD) it spread wider, even if Tertullian in his *Apologeticum* refers to Domitian 'being not as cruel as Nero'.⁴⁸ Emperor Trajan was hostile towards Christians who refused to join in with public sacrifices in Asia Minor – they were sentenced to death. Evidence of this appears in the correspondence of Governor Plinius.⁴⁹

In the Christian tradition persecution has been interpreted as beneficial to the Church. I could, for example, quote the (Western)

45) Tacitus, *Annales* (XV, 44, 2-5).

46) 1 Clement 5-6.

47) 16, 2.

48) Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 5, 3: '...portio Neronis de crudelitate.'

49) Plinius, *Letters* X, 96.



Church Father Augustine, who claims that persecutions would strengthen the Church.⁵⁰

Of course, the Christian teaching (following the Jewish tradition) of an exclusive monotheism was not easily compatible with the widespread polytheistic traditions at the time of the Early Church. The authors of the New Testament were well aware that the preaching of the Gospel, of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, was offensive – to Jews as well as to Romans (1 Corinthians 1: 23).⁵¹

This focus on the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, who had been sentenced to death like a criminal, did not improve the image of the Christians. That Christians, by their absence from official feasts, spectacles and sacrifices, led a life different from the norm made them seem suspect. They had their own ‘strange’ and mysterious rites, similar to those of the diaspora Jews. However, whilst growth in Judaism was limited due to its bond to ethnicity, Christianity experienced a continuous expansion throughout the Roman Empire.

The relationship between the Early Church and the Roman State, in the first century at least, sometimes shows co-existence, sometimes adversity, and at some times and in some places elements of interconnection. Acknowledging the polyphony of the New Testament with regard to how the Roman state should be viewed by Christians, a few elements should be taken into consideration. The authors of the New Testament writings, and in particular the Apostle Paul, were living, preaching and writing with the conviction that the *parousia* (the return of Christ) is very near. From this rather ‘eschatological’ perspective, the sufferings of the time were interpreted merely as a sign that Christ’s return would happen imminently. Hence the call for patient endurance dominates in these New Testament writings.

50) De Civitate Dei, XVIII, 52; (‘...quibus exerceri oportet ecclesiam.’).

51) ‘...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.’

3. How Should Believers Interact With Religious or Political Authorities, Especially in Situations of Conflict?

(i) Holding on to Faith in the Midst of Suffering

In a time of pressure, the authors of the New Testament texts reiterate their warnings not to compromise, to maintain Christian identity and to remain firm in the faith. The earliest example is the Apostle Paul writing to the Church at Thessalonica: ‘... that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this’ (1 Thessalonians 3: 3).

The same message is propounded in a more elaborate way in the Letter to the Hebrews – the time of pressure will pass, endurance is what is needed during this period: ‘But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls’ (Hebrews 10: 32-39).

(ii) Fulfilling Obligations of Citizenship (e.g. taxes)

Before going into detail, it has to be stated that despite the experience of discrimination, and even persecution, early Christianity was not against the Roman Empire and its institutions in general. It is clearly evident in the New Testament writings that the Christian believers did not have a generally hostile attitude to the state, or even a significant wariness of it.

The most prominent example is certainly what Paul writes to the church in Rome, in Romans 13. One might claim that Paul had



already written his letter to this church in Rome in 56 AD, from Corinth – years before the first persecutions by Emperor Nero would trouble his fellow Christians in Rome. One might also claim that Paul, as a Roman citizen, being proud of his identity and benefitting from the institutions of the Roman Empire during his travels, had a relatively positive view of the state. And one might also claim that Paul, expecting the *parousia* of Christ in the near future, did not take into consideration a change of relationship between the state and the growing number of followers of Jesus Christ.

However, Paul already had knowledge of the not always friendly political attitude towards the Jewish religion, for example by the Emperor Claudius, who, according to Suetonius, expelled the Jews from Rome, probably in the year 48 or 49 AD – which is the reason why the Apostle came to meet Priscilla and Aquila.⁵²

Nevertheless, Paul wrote to the Church in Rome: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God' (Romans 13: 1).

Whilst, particularly after the experiences of the 20th century, the concept that governing authorities have been 'put there by God' is strongly disputed, especially in Western Theology, the call of the Apostle Paul to lead a Christian life, to obey the rules of the state and to pay all forms of taxes and tributes has proven to be a way to show loyalty to state authorities without compromising the believer's own Christian identity: 'For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed' (Romans 13: 6-7).

The advice given by Paul to his brothers and sisters in Christ in Rome is in line with the teaching of Jesus in Mark 12: 14-17, when Jesus is asked whether obedience to the Law of Moses

52) Cf. also the report in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 18: 1-2): *After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.*

is compatible with the Roman Emperor's demand for taxes. In this encounter Jesus does encourage the payment of taxes to the emperor, but then makes the clear statement that veneration and love are merited only by the one and only God⁵³.

In another letter the Apostle Paul, writing to his beloved church in Philippi, whilst himself being in prison and hoping for death rather than for life, reminds his brothers and sisters in Christ that Christians are simultaneously living in two worlds, and that they have a dual identity. But, even in his particular situation, Paul does not reject the existing political authority when he says: 'But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ' (Philippians 3: 20).

Loyalty towards the authorities is also what the letter to Titus, written probably a generation later, urges: 'Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work...' (Titus 3: 1).

However, following the teachings of Jesus and the advice of the Apostle Paul, a clear definition of the limits of obedience is given in the first letter of Peter: 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor' (1 Peter 2: 13-17).

(iii) Praying for the (Even if Hostile) State

Following the tradition of Jeremiah 29: 7, various writings of the New Testament urge prayer, even for enemies; this also includes a

53) *And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him. (Mk 12:14-17).*



hostile religious or state authority.⁵⁴ The most prominent example is Matthew 5: 44, where Jesus calls for love for one's enemy and prayer for the persecutors: "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Irrespective of whether the government is friendly, neutral or hostile towards the Christians living in the empire, the call for prayer for the authorities advocated in Paul's first letter to Timothy is very clear (1 Timothy 2: 1-4). This call for prayer, echoed by the first letter of Clement (61),⁵⁵ will be the biblical foundation for all liturgical intercessions for the emperor in liturgies of the Western and Eastern Christian traditions:

'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2: 1-4).

(iv) Dialogue to Overcome Misconceptions and Misunderstandings

Within scholarly debate there is dispute about whether the encounter, in Cyprus, of the governor Sergius Paulus with the Apostle Paul and his travel companion Barnabas (Acts 13: 4-12) led only to mutual respect and understanding or actually to the conversion of the governor – or even the entire island.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the occasions depicted in the account of the Acts of the Apostles of Paul's encounters with representatives of the Roman Empire during his travels to Rome as a prisoner – with the opportunities to explain what the Christian faith is (and also what it is not) – show that dialogue and explanation, elimination of misunderstandings and false concepts are a key element of

54) "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29: 7).

55) 1 Clement 61.

56) Cf. Acts 13: 4-12, esp. Acts 13: 12: *Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.*

Christian interaction with suspicious or hostile authorities. The opportunity that Paul, as a prisoner, uses to explain his Christian faith to the governor Festus (in Acts 25) could serve as an example.

(v) In (only) the ultimate conflict situation: opposition!

The New Testament of course recognises the situation in which loyalty towards a hostile authority is no longer possible, since the demand of an earthly authority to be venerated as god is not at all acceptable for Christians! Following the Jewish tradition, love and adoration is due only to God, the creator of heaven and earth. This is not the time to recall the respective traditions of the Old Testament and the stories of conflict as depicted, for example, in the books of the Maccabees. In this ultimate conflict situation Christians are challenged not to compromise their faith, and to embody what, according to the account of the Book of Acts, Peter and the other apostles stated: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5: 29). The most prominent example advocating strict opposition towards a hostile state is the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation goes a long way in urging active rebellion and opposition in a situation where a hostile emperor demands the unacceptable: veneration as god. In his seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, the Prophet John, during his involuntary sojourn on the island of Patmos, responds to the different reactions of the churches to the claim of the emperor to be venerated as god. Resistance? Opposition? Or participating 'pro forma' in the required rites, albeit half-heartedly, in order that daily life can continue as usual? John uncompromisingly depicts the life of each of the churches – including their dealings with some groups within these churches. Even the church of Pergamon, praised for the testimony of the Martyr Antipas (Revelation 2: 13), is in danger of losing its focus and compromising in day-to-day life. Obviously there was no unity among each of the seven churches about how to respond to the challenges that they were facing from within, as well as from without, through the emperor's requirement to participate in pagan rituals.

In dramatic visions the Prophet John paints a picture of the



ultimate battle between Jerusalem and Babel – the Church and the Roman Empire – and with images of hope he encourages his fellow Christians in Asia Minor to make the right decisions, and to remain firm in their faith without compromise.

The Book of Revelation also voices a cry for justice and for an end to suffering: 'They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"' (6: 10).

It should be noted that in Revelation not only are those suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ mentioned, but the author also takes a universal perspective and recalls all victims of the injustice and cruelty of the Roman Empire: 'And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth' (18: 24).

However, the Book of Revelation is also one of comfort and reassurance for Christians under extreme pressure. The clear message of this last, and often disputed, book of the New Testament is that, whatever the current situation might be, God Himself is the One who rules the world. This calls for the Church to live as the contrast to the political empire – the new Jerusalem in contrast to the current Rome. 'Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus' (14: 12).

(vi) The Christian response to suffering by those not (yet) suffering

But the New Testament not only has a message for those Christians suffering oppression or persecution; it also challenges those who are able to live out their faith undisturbed and in freedom. Most important here is the call for prayer for suffering brothers and sisters in Christ; but there is also a call for compassion, solidarity and advocacy for those who are suffering, from those who are not (yet) affected.

The image of the Church as the Body of Christ calls for Christian solidarity in different ways.⁵⁷ As 1 Corinthians 12: 26 says, 'If one

57) Cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 26: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.*

member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.' In his second letter to the Church in Corinth Paul also refers to the power of prayer for those under pressure: 'For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many' (2 Corinthians 1: 8-11).

Imprisoned brothers and sisters suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ are requesting practical solidarity: visits to those imprisoned for their faith (Matthew 25: 36) are only one example, mentioned more than once in the New Testament: 'Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body' (Hebrews 13: 3).

Those not (yet) living under circumstances of oppression or persecution should not forget those living in a far more difficult situation! However, the experience of 'religious freedom' should be gratefully used as an opportunity to spread the Gospel. It should also be seen as a call to prayer for those in a far more difficult situation, for practical solidarity, assistance and advocacy for brothers and sisters under pressure, wherever and whenever possible.

Let me close my thoughts with a perhaps rather unconventional thought. Could it be that the absence of any negative attitude towards Christian faith might indicate that our proclamation of the Gospel, that our core Christian identity, is endangered because it has become 'lukewarm' – to quote the prophetic words of John in Revelation? That living out the Christian faith in the so-called comfort zone of traditional 'Christendom' has become a tradition rather than a conviction? That talking about values, ethics and socio-political issues has overtaken our core calling,



the proclamation of 'Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles' (1 Corinthians 1: 23)?

Could the deepened dialogue with Churches living under more difficult circumstances help Western Churches and Western Theology to re-focus on the heart of the Gospel? Could intensified prayer and solidarity for Christians under pressure turn into a blessing for Western Churches? Could our Christian witness be inspired and deepened through encounters and partnerships, for the mutual benefit of all? We can learn much from the New Testament writings, especially the Pauline letters, but also from Revelation, about connecting with one another (e.g. Romans 16) to grow in thankfulness and passion.

**PRACTICAL WAYS
OF ENGAGING
WITH THE
SCRIPTURES IN A
SUSTAINING WAY**

MIDDLE EAST CASE-STUDIES

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OVERCOMING FEAR WITH INFORMED HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

We live in a culture of fear.

One only needs to pass through an airport to realise anew how terrified we are of each other. There are security checks, alarms, cameras, ways to trace people's records, etc. An attitude of suspicion prevails in almost all the airports in the world. Every time someone wants to visit a country in the Middle East we are asked: is it safe? Embassies guide their citizens by providing them with coloured maps, on which safety is indicated at different levels. And every time an attack happens, particularly in Europe, the fear barometer rises again. Fear of strangers, fear of violence, fear for our economic security...

We all seem to be gripped by fear, and the concepts of safety and security are becoming our guiding principles. We have come to love safety more than God and our neighbour, and we find ourselves making strange and uninformed choices and alliances to secure our safety. Out of fear, we try to combat our vulnerability through a search for strength and empowerment.



It has been pointed out that fear creates one of two reactions: retreat or attack. While some strong powers choose to attack when faced with fear, **the rest of us retreat**. We retreat by trying to draw more defined borders around our countries or our communities, to protect ourselves and to protect our identities. It is no wonder that in today's political discourse the proposal for strict borders, or even for separating walls – for **withdrawing** – are very appealing to those who are genuinely afraid for their safety, their future, or their identity.

However, the experience of the disciples on the day of Pentecost challenges us and our fears. After Christ's resurrection and ascension, the disciples were retreating and recoiling out of fear. In effect, they erected borders around themselves and closed the doors. They were afraid for their lives and they remained an inward-looking group protecting their traditions. The day of Pentecost made them open the doors and go outside. From that day on, empowered by the Holy Spirit, they could connect to numerous people from foreign lands, from various ethnicities, languages and cultures. Fear was brushed aside and they stood in all vulnerability, and accepted being **ridiculed**!

Much of the fear we experience today is related to ignorance and misinformation – or 'fake news'. Ignorance of 'the other', his culture, her world, his hopes and her dreams. Most of us operate with prejudices that only serve to isolate us from each other.

I was asked to speak about a project that illustrates the Church working together to support its community under pressure, and to be honest there are many such wonderful projects in the country; from educational centres for Syrian refugee kids, to training courses for single Syrian mothers, equipping them to support themselves, to trauma healing workshops in many forms and shapes...

But I have witnessed during the past few years the power of that which is stronger than isolated projects: relationships, connections. Relationships within and among the various Christian communities in this region of the world, and connections and relationships with our sisters and brothers outside of the region.

This might sound like an old story – aren't we here together this morning because of relationships and connections? Sure! But

there also seems to be such a big focus these days on **projects** that we tend to lose sight of the value of relationships – of being together, of opening up to each other and of listening to each other.

A wonderful event, that illustrates this opening up and connection, happened – also in cooperation with the Middle East Council of Churches – a few months ago. I am referring to the International Ecumenical Youth Meeting, at which all the churches of Lebanon (some 14 or 15 different traditions in total) worked together to bring hundreds of young people – from all our churches, from neighbouring countries and from the West – to spend a few days in each other's homes and churches here in Beirut. The aim was to pray together and to sit together around Bible texts, and listen to each other's stories, through and in dialogue with a number of selected Scriptural texts.

In order for this to happen, local churches had to open their gates. They had to trust each other. Families had to open their homes to host young people from suspicious areas. And young people had to overcome prejudice about each other's countries, confessional backgrounds and cultures. Western young people had to overcome their fear of the Middle East's bad reputation.

It was not easy to convince groups and individuals to open the gates. To welcome each other and to host strangers who are different in so many ways. To stand in a position of vulnerability, not being in control of what will happen and how their relationships will develop. Each one of our communities would rather have withdrawn, remaining within the safety of its own territory, hosting people from their own denomination or country.

However, at the end of the event a multitude of new connections and relationships were established across geographic and denominational borders – on the level of churches, church leaders, and young people. Many went back home encouraged and supported by the realisation that they are not alone! That someone heard their story and knows about their struggles and hopes. That they were welcomed by strangers who became friends. That trust is still possible!



Today, as the situation in north-east Syria is deteriorating, I see on social media these connections coming to life. I see how the level of empathy has increased, as the names of villages and churches under attack are not simply names but represent pictures of known faces – of friends. Similarly, when attacks happen in European cities, solidarity is more easily achieved, despite the distances.

As Christians, we cannot accept that fear should dictate our choices. Even though many of our communities today are surrounded by all the ingredients for panic, neither recoiling nor attacking are Christlike reactions.

I believe it is our call today to foster a culture of trust to counter the culture of fear, both in the Middle East and internationally. A culture in which we are not eying each other with suspicion, nor dealing with each other in a utilitarian manner. A culture of trust in which right relationships are valued more than project proposals and budgets. A culture in which we are genuinely interested in each other as Christian communities and are not threatened by differences or diversity.

This culture of trust is possible because it is not dependent on 'princes and mortal men' (Psalm 146: 3), but on our God and Maker who Himself did not hide behind barriers and borders to protect Himself, but in all vulnerability came to us in the person of Jesus Christ to establish right relationships.

Even if this vulnerability looked ridiculous to the wisdom of this world and resulted in the cross.

MIDDLE EAST CASE-STUDIES

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THE MARTYRS OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The topic of martyrdom is the clearest reflection of early Christianity, when Christians were the exemplar of love, sacrifice, faith, endurance, love of enemies and other virtues. The story of martyrdom is the story of preaching the Gospel to the whole world, and to all people. Christian faith spread quickly and was rooted in the depths of humanity, expanding in all directions, more through martyrdom than through preaching and teaching.⁵⁸

Although this was the case for the early martyrs of Christianity, we find that today history is repeating itself. The Coptic Orthodox Church has in fact experienced a number of martyrdoms in the twenty-first century during successive violent attacks, and we have chosen to talk about these assaults, starting with the bombing of the Saints Church in Alexandria, which claimed the lives of 20 people on the first day of 2011.

58) His Grace Anba Youannes, *Martyrdom in Christianity*, p.13



This attack, which had a great resonance in the whole world, was denounced by various countries and by all other churches and also Islamic figures.

LIBYA'S COPTIC MARTYRS

On Sunday, February 15, 2015, 21 young martyrs of the Christ (including a man from Ghana) lost their lives in Libya, at the hands of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (*Daesh*), and their shocking martyrdom was caught on video. After they were kidnapped, these men were killed because they refused to deny their faith in Christ, although they had ample time to compromise with their assailants. However, our Coptic martyrs categorically refused to abandon their faith. The last words they uttered while raising their eyes to heaven were "Lord Jesus" before they were slaughtered.

MARTYRS OF ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL'S (COMMONLY KNOWN AS EL-BOTROSEYA) CHURCH

The painful assaults did not end there. On December 11, 2016, a bombing targeted St. Peter and St. Paul's Church, adjacent to St. Mark's Cathedral, seat of the Coptic Orthodox Pope, killing 29 people (mostly women) and injuring around 30 others.

National unity manifested itself clearly after the attack as President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi ordered that an official memorial service for the martyrs be held at the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier; this service was attended by the President himself and by His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, who had cut short his visit to the Greek Church and returned to Egypt immediately after hearing the news.

The State restored St. Peter and St. Paul's Church within less than 20 days so that worshippers could celebrate the beginning of 2017 in it. His Holiness Pope Francis, Pope of the Vatican, later visited this church during his visit to Egypt, where a meeting was held with His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, His Beatitude Theodoros II,

Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, His Beatitude Ibrahim Ishaq, the Coptic Catholic Patriarch, His Beatitude Gregory III Lahham, former Patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Alexandria, Reverend Dr. Andrea Zaki, President of the Protestant Community of Egypt and His Eminence Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis, Head of the Anglican Church.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and many other world leaders visited the church, which became, after the attack, a witness to the resilience of the Copts' faith.

THE BOMBING IN ST. GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL IN TANTA

A few months later, on the morning of April 9, 2017 (Palm Sunday), a terrible explosion at St. George's Cathedral in Tanta left 28 martyrs, and 46 injured.

While deacons were chanting a joyful melody (*Evlogimenos*) in commemoration of the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, evildoers killed 28 of the best deacons and young people at St. George's Cathedral, leaving an awful scar in the hearts of worshippers and the martyrs' families. This, however, was a true reflection of what is written in the Bible: 'I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (Romans 8: 18).

Prayers joyfully began at 6 in the morning; and after finishing reading *Ebraxis* (biography of the saints), the chorus of deacons started chanting Palm Sunday's hymn (*Evlogimenos*). It was 9: 04 in the morning when a massive explosion shook the cathedral, filling it with shrapnel, human remains and bodies. The scene was terrifying and frightening, and worshippers could not grasp what was happening. As the situation became clearer, they saw the bodies of deacons lying on the ground with torn service clothes, amputated limbs, and body parts scattered around. Twenty-eight died as martyrs during this bloody attack, and many others were injured, especially among the men and women sitting in the front pews. Security camera footage later showed that a terrorist



detonated his bomb while walking from the pews reserved for men and heading towards the deacons' chorus.

The Church cancelled Easter greetings events and His Holiness Pope Tawadros came to visit the martyrs' families on the morning of Easter Day. His Grace Anba Paula, Bishop of Tanta, celebrated Easter Vigil Mass with the families of the martyrs in the Diocese of Tanta.

ST. MARK'S CHURCH BOMBING IN ALEXANDRIA

On the same day (April 9, Palm Sunday), in an attack similar to that perpetrated in Tanta, another terrorist detonated himself at the entrance to St. Mark's Church in Alexandria, in which His Holiness the Pope was celebrating Palm Sunday Mass.

The terrorist had repeatedly attempted to enter the church, but when the guard insisted on directing him towards a metal detector, he blew himself up, leading to the martyrdom of seven Copts. On the same day, the Coptic Church presented the martyrs of Tanta and Alexandria as a sacrifice of love, anointed with the smell of incense, to the Lord.

His Holiness Pope Tawadros, who had visited the martyrs' families in Tanta on Easter Day, also paid visits to the families of the martyrs of Alexandria, and to the injured. His Holiness' meeting with the families and the injured in the hospitals, whether Christians or Muslim police officers, was intended to lift their spirits.

THE MARTYRS OF ST. SAMUEL MONASTERY IN MOUNT QALAMOUN

On May 20, 2017, while on its way to visit the Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor in Mount Qalamoun, a tourist bus had just crossed the desert road when it encountered a car with ten gunmen camouflaged in uniforms and gloves, who opened fire at the bus after leaving the plateau at a location called Abu Tartour. They first fired on the tyres to prevent the bus from moving, then fired on the driver. When one of the passengers left the bus to

check what was happening, they killed him immediately, before climbing in and shooting at the men's heads and necks. They shot at the women's feet to prevent them from moving, also wounding a number of children, and stole the women's jewellery. Two other cars coming from Deir Jarnous, transporting workers to the monastery, were also attacked, whilst three other persons from Beni Mzar were shot dead in their car.

The gunmen had demanded that the martyrs deny their faith, but they refused to do this; so when their car broke down, the gunmen set fire to it. The total number of martyrs in Mount Qalamoun thus rose to 28 people while 23 others were wounded.

Therefore, attacks on the Copts up to May 2017 raised the number of martyrs to 95, and of those injured to 218, as follows:

- St. Peter and St. Paul's Church - 29 martyrs and 50 wounded
- St. George's Cathedral in Tanta - 30 martyrs and 105 injured
- Alexandria attacks on Palm Sunday - 7 martyrs and 40 injured
- Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor in Mount Qalamoun attack - 28 martyrs and 23 wounded.

MARTYRDOM OF HEGUMEN SAMAAH SHEHATA, PRIEST OF ST. JULIUS AL-AQFAH'S CHURCH IN EZBET GERGES BEIK IN BEBA AND EL-FASHN DIOCESE ON OCTOBER 12, 2017

Father Semaan Shehata and Reverend Bayman Mouftah, pastor of Al-Malak Church in Matay Diocese in Ezbet Francis were on a mission in Al-Salam city in Cairo. While walking, they were attacked by a man named Ahmed Saeed, aged 19, who ran after Father Semaan and struck him several times with a cleaver until he killed him, before fleeing the scene; he was later arrested.

MARTYRS OF ST. SAMUEL MONASTERY, MOUNT QALAMOUN (SECOND ATTACK):

Other martyrs from the Coptic Orthodox Church lost their lives on Friday, February 2, 2018 on the road leading to the Monastery



of St. Samuel the Confessor. At 1pm a minibus carrying a group of people from Kawamel Bahri in Sohag Governorate, who had visited the monastery and attended a baptism, was attacked by four terrorists. These terrorists, who came out of the mountains in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, opened fire on the bus, wounding five people. The terrorists then headed to a bus behind it which was carrying 20 people from Minya, aged between eight and 55; first they killed the driver, then fired at the tyres and started shooting intensively at the passengers, killing 7 people and wounding 21 others, before fleeing to the desert. As a result of this assault, the overall number of martyrs rose to 102 and the injured to 239.

MARTYRDOM MOTIVES AMONG COPTS

Mankind has never known martyrs like Christian martyrs, characterised by their enthusiasm, courage, faith, gentleness, patience, endurance and joy in martyrdom. They embraced death with a joy, calmness and meekness that stunned the whole world.

This is the case for the Coptic martyrs and there are many reasons behind it:

- This world is ephemeral compared with eternal life – ‘So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal’ (2 Corinthians 4: 18).
- Christians, and particularly Copts, feel that they are strangers in this world – ‘Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul’ (1 Peter 2: 11).
- The martyrs knew that this world is full of evil and that we go through sadness, pain and distress in life – ‘the whole world is under the control of the evil one’; ‘you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices’; ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes.’
- The Copts understood that the troubles, sorrows, and pain of this world will eventually lead to a great glory in heaven – ‘I

reckon that the pain of present times is nothing compared to the glory that is to be revealed' (Romans 8: 18).⁵⁹

That is why they let go of their bodily lives and surrendered to Christ, probably encouraged by the words of Jesus: "I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am" (John 14: 3).

All this was done out of the love which was explicitly expressed by Saint Paul: 'Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8: 39).

THE MARTYRS' CHARACTER

it is beyond the limits of logic, and contrary to human nature, to acknowledge that sorrows create joy and distress generates solace – but this is Christianity, and the spiritual impact of the work of the Holy Spirit, in the words of St. Paul: '...dying, and yet we live on... sorrowful yet always rejoicing...' (2 Corinthians 6: 9-10). This is perhaps due to:

- The divine help that God promised all the persecuted for the sake of His name.
- The Church's sympathy with the persecuted, the families of the martyrs and the injured.
- Their feeling that they are honoured to suffer for the noblest of reasons.
- Their looking forward to the great glory awaiting them.
- Glorious revelations that had the greatest impact in encouraging them.

THE PROBABLE RESULTS OF THESE MARTYRDOMS

- Many Copts were eager to die as martyrs and viewed martyrdom as a route to receiving the crown of glory.

59) His Grace Anba Youannes, *In commemoration of Christian Martyrs*, pp. 30-33.



- Martyrdom for these people was not recklessness, but reflected the courage of virtue.
- Martyrdom was a way of preaching. Christian faith spread in the past more by the martyrdom of saints than through education, and in the modern era the phrase ‘the martyrs’ blood is the seed of the Church’ has taken on a whole new dimension.
- This was a practical proof of the sincerity of their Christian faith. Some of the injured who had lost parts of their bodies were glad to testify to Christ.
- This is also a practical proof of Christians’ virtues, as threats and menaces did not affect them. They stood strong, showing meekness and compassion for their enemies, living ascetically in this world and longing for heaven.

THE STATUS OF MARTYRS IN THE CHURCH

Our Coptic Church has designated a day to commemorate modern-day martyrs, a date coinciding with the martyrdom of the Copts in Libya, has preserved their bodies and relics, and has set up a shrine for them and their clothes.

As St. Augustine says: “We do not pray for the martyrs, for they have fulfilled their love for the Lord more than anyone; we ask them to remember us.”

WESTERN EUROPEAN CASE-STUDIES

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THE STRUGGLE FOR CONFORMITY

A CASE-STUDY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN WESTERN (GERMAN-SPEAKING) SOCIETY

Introduction

My words on this wonderful occasion (and my thanks to all those who have made it happen!) are words of anxiety and concern. Looking at the role that the Bible is playing in our Western mainstream churches gives me a feeling of unease.

On the one hand the Bible is still foundational. It is read and interpreted in every Sunday service, and research concerning the Scriptures abounds. But if we look below the surface, things have changed a lot. Protestant churches, officially still clinging to Luther's heritage of 'sola scriptura', have to admit that behind this slogan theology and the churches are moving in another direction, which often uses the Bible to confirm decisions and attitudes which have their origin much more in societal attitudes and changes than in the Bible itself.



My perspective on this topic is threefold:

As a regional bishop of the Lutheran diocese of Upper Austria, I experience a tension within the Church, with different groups no longer understanding each other when it comes to their central point of reference. The question of unity is no longer simply a matter of debate between the churches, but more and more becomes an issue within the churches.⁶⁰

As a theologian, primarily in the field of New Testament studies, I observe a growing irritation about the outcomes of the prevailing attitude and method in interpreting the Scriptures.

And finally, as an individual my own journey has brought me close to the fundamentalist as well as to the liberal approach to the Scriptures. I have come to know the good intentions of both approaches, as well as their shortcomings.

SETTING THE SCENE

When Paul writes, in Romans 12: 2, 'kai. mh. suschmati,zesqe tw/ aivw/ni tou,tw' ('do not conform⁶¹ to this time and world'), he knows what he is talking about. 'suschmati,zw' means to become a part of the scheme of this world, part of the world itself, sharing its values, its way of thinking and behaving. It is a basic human need to want to conform to the surrounding society, since man is a social being, depending on the acceptance of his fellow beings. Being different creates pressure, both internally and externally. In this respect Christians have, at all times, been living in a tension created by their twofold existence: they are citizens of heaven, but they live on earth.

Why do I begin this paper by considering this basic Christian constitution? Because I think it helps to explain the situation of

60) Catholicos Aram I Keshishian, in his keynote speech, emphatically pointed out that we have to find unity in going back to the Bible. I share this view. But as a Protestant, I have to admit that going back to the Bible in the times of the Reformation had a uniting as well as a separating effect (cf. Gregory, Brad S., *The Unintended Reformation - How a religious revolution secularized society*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012. Reaching for unity, we have to integrate the Bible, tradition and hermeneutics into the process, because the Bible never stands isolated but is always part of a tradition and of a hermeneutic.

61) That is how the Latin translation of the Vulgata has it: 'et nolite conformari huic saeculo'.

a certain kind of attitude towards the Sacred Scriptures that is prevalent in Western societies.

Christianity in Western society is living in freedom. There are no persecutions and there is no discrimination, at least not in the German- and the English-speaking worlds – although France, with its system of *laïcité* might be considered an exception.

But Christianity in Western society is no longer living in a Christian society.⁶² It is living in a secular society today. And this situation also generates a kind of pressure – a pressure to conform to a pluralistic society, which fears strong claims of truth, and is suspicious about mission and ‘strong transcendence’.⁶³ It is a society which welcomes religions in their social and diaconal engagement, but feels uncomfortable about any talk of God.

The present state of society as being secular and liberal has been developing for about 200 years. And during the course of this evolution, parts of the Church began to alter their attitude concerning the Scriptures. They began to conform to society more than the other way around. Consequently, the Scriptures are now read in the light of the present much more than the present being read in the light of the Scriptures.⁶⁴

The source of change, its origin and its promoting power – and its lasting influence – can be identified as being in the intellectual circles of enlightenment, and as a consequence in the universities.⁶⁵

62) I will certainly leave aside the question of whether there has ever really been something like a ‘Christian’ era or empire – although it is obvious that there has been a long time in which Christianity has been the single and dominant religion in Western Europe.

63) I have discussed this topic at some length in an essay entitled, ‘The Fear concerning Religion in the Public Space’ (Die Angst vor der Religion im öffentlichen Raum. Einige Überlegungen zu einem kontroversen Thema, in: Michael Bünker, Ernst Hofhansl, Raoul Kneucker (Hrsg.), Donauwellen. Zum Protestantismus in der Mitte Europas. Festschrift für Karl Schwarz, Wien, Evangelischer Presseverband, 2012, 163-179).

64) Of course, this is a form of oversimplification, but still the fact remains that the churches and theology have become selective as to their response to the Scriptures.

65) Cf. Notker Hammerstein, Die Universitäten in der Aufklärung, in: Geschichte der Universität in Europa, hrsg. von Walter Rüegg, Bd. II: Von der Reformation zur Französischen Revolution, München, C.H. Beck, 1996, 495-506. This development did, at first, not take place in the universities themselves but outside them. In fact, the universities were, in ‘enlightened’ circles, considered ‘old-fashioned’. But in the long run the universities conformed to the intellectual and societal shift that took place. ‘Die Universitäten nahmen



To understand the present situation, it might be helpful to consider the current debate about the role of Islam in our societies. We are struggling with a religion which we think has to be ‘tamed’ by enlightenment. If there is talk of a so-called ‘Euro-Islam’, we think of a kind of Islam which, by reading the Quran in the light of historical and critical research, will cool from being a ‘hot’ religion to a ‘cold’ religion, and that, in relativizing its claim to absolute truth, in contextualising the words of the Quran, will end up being compatible to a relativistic and pluralistic Western society. The means envisaged to reach that goal are twofold: on the one hand we need promoters of such ideas within the Islamic community, and on the other hand we try to achieve this by giving Islamic theology a place in the universities. Because many think that in the long run, if Islamic theology is part of the intellectual climate and the scientific community of Western universities, it cannot and will not resist the pressure to conform to Western patterns of thought. And then from the universities, this new way of thinking will reach the community of Islamic believers through their theologians, preachers and teachers.

The key question is: what makes people so sure about the outcome of this experiment? And the answer might be: the way that the churches have altered and changed in Western societies.

Of course, I appreciate that on the whole this model of interpreting the development of the Church, and the role of the theological faculties, is far too simple to tell the whole story, and to tell it in a fair and sound way. But still, it contains an element that cannot be ignored and might help us to understand our present situation.

die aufgeklärten, modernen Vorstellungen und ihr Wissenschaftsverständnis, ihre Lehren auf und reformierten sich – so könnte man sagen – aus und in sich selbst. Die protestantischen Universitäten und Territorien gingen voran und zwangen die katholischen Reichsteile – hier mittels der Landesherren und Regierungen, also mittels verordneter Aufklärung – zu folgen. Die Universitäten dieser Länder waren im allgemeinen Volluniversitäten, sie verfügten über alle vier Fakultäten. So nahmen alle Wissenschaften, nicht zuletzt die Theologie, an dieser Erneuerung teil. Das erhielt die Hochschulen nicht nur lebensfähig, lebendig und geistig bestimmend, sondern garantierte ihren Anspruch, den gesamten Kosmos der Wissenschaften zu umfassen und zu verwalten.’ (505)

TODAY'S SITUATION

So, what does today's situation involve? Initially I focus on theology as it is taught at almost all German-speaking universities in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Of course, I cannot avoid the danger of oversimplification and generalisation. But still, the people I will quote as examples are highly respected members of the scientific community, being representative of many others, who might not put it so frankly but are clearly acting according to the same attitude. The famous New Testament scholar Gerd Theißen writes in his 'critical catechism':

'Everywhere we have to distinguish between the traditional faith and the truth and sense that we can find in him today. In a condensed way I have written what is important for me concerning the Christian faith. Conformity with me has priority over against conformity with dogmas or churches. With such a conviction a Protestant does not find himself at the edge of his church, but in the very middle of it. For Protestantism is a religion of freedom and reason.'⁶⁶

Such an attitude is in general typical of a wide range of theology, and especially of biblical criticism. To put it bluntly, the point of reference has changed. The Bible indeed remains important, but it is regarded as important as a great and marvellous historical document of Israel's and the Church's faith. As such it is treated as not essentially different from our present experience and reasoning and believing. In fact, the response to it is critical. What is regarded as 'acceptable' is what can be accepted in the light of the experience and knowledge of today.

A similar line of thought is represented by the eminent Swiss scholar Ulrich Luz. Let us hear what he thinks of the Church and the Bible:

66) Gerd Theißen, *Glaubenssätze. Ein kritischer Katechismus*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2. Aufl. 2013, 11. 'Überall müssen wir zwischen dem traditionellen Glauben und dem, was wir in ihm heute an Wahrheit und Sinn entdecken, unterscheiden. In möglichst knappen Aussagen habe ich für mich niedergeschrieben, was mir am christlichen Glauben wichtig ist. Übereinstimmung mit mir hat Vorrang vor der Übereinstimmung mit Dogmen und Kirchen. Doch ein Protestant steht mit solch einer Überzeugung nicht am Rande seiner Kirche, sondern mitten in ihr. Der Protestantismus ist eine Religion der Freiheit und Vernunft.' The translation is my own.



'What do I mean by the 'church'? I will try to give a preliminary definition: for me the church is a dialogical community without any boundaries; a community of confessions and people, who are listening to the Bible and are interpreting it; a community on its way to mutual understanding, consensus and love.'⁶⁷

This is an appealing description of the church – although one notices that the definition is quite anthropological in its focus. But let us continue:

'But if she is a listening community, and she knows that in a dialogue hearing always precedes defining, deciding and acting, then she cannot formulate creeds which are valid forever, and cannot make decisions that cannot be revised, because this would render permanent listening and searching superfluous. But it is only this attitude which fits my vision of "small meta-stories".'⁶⁸

Listening to these sentences, we notice, that the author's 'I', begins to gain a normative quality. The 'I' chooses from tradition what it considers fitting for itself. And it is precisely this attitude which can be seen in the general hermeneutical approach to the Bible:

'The Bible I understand to be a multi-coloured book, that tells "small meta-stories" about God and man. Stories that are fascinating, but cannot be put together in such a way that they create a "great meta-story" which claims dominance and lays hold on other people.'⁶⁹

67) 'Was verstehe ich unter 'Kirche'? Ich versuche eine vorläufige Definition: Für mich ist Kirche eine grenzenlose Dialoggemeinschaft von Konfessionen und von Menschen, die auf die Bibel hören und sie auslegen, die unterwegs sind auf einem Weg zu wechselseitigem Verständnis, zu Konsens und zur Liebe.' Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2014, 556.

68) 'Aber wenn sie eine hörende Gemeinschaft ist und weiß, dass in einem Dialog das Hören immer vor dem Definieren, Entscheiden und Handeln kommt, dann kann sie keine Bekenntnisse formulieren, die für immer gültig sind, und keine Entscheidungen fällen, die unrevidierbar sind, weil dies ein andauerndes Hören und Suchen überflüssig machen würde. Nur dies aber passt zu meiner Vision "kleiner Meta-Erzählungen".' Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2014, 557.

69) 'Die Bibel verstehe ich als ein vielfarbiges Buch, das >kleine Meta-Erzählungen< von Gott und den Menschen erzählt, die faszinierend sind, sich aber nicht zu einer Herrschaft beanspruchenden, andere Menschen vereinnahmenden >großen Meta-Erzählung< zusammenfügen lassen.' Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 2014, 558.

Once again, as sympathetic as this approach may appear humanly, it raises the question of whether it does not in fact radically alter the claim that the Scriptures themselves are representing. If we listen to the first commandment, or to the prophet Isaiah, or to the words of Jesus, or to the teaching of St. Paul – all of them are proclaiming the one God, the Creator and Judge of all people, and Jesus Christ as the first and last Word of God. The call for repentance and belief is universal. It is not thought of as being one story among many others. It simply is the one story that overrules all stories.

What we see in Theissen and Luz is a Christian faith modelled to fit into the western society of the twenty-first century. This society is not willing to accept a claim of truth that is superior to all other claims; Western societies fear religions that make such claims. They have good reason to do so – if, for example, we consider the Thirty Years' War of 1618-48.⁷⁰

But for we Christians, and for the Church itself, the question is a simple one: if we try to transform Christianity and adapt it for the twenty-first century, are we changing it in a way that not only loosens its connections to the faith and tradition of two thousand years, but rather cuts them off?

Let me give you a short list of problems that are (admittedly) connected with the axioms of the historical-critical method:

- The pioneers of the historical-critical method were searching for the original, the authentic, that they thought had been buried by the heap of tradition. From the outset there existed an antagonism between criticism and tradition.⁷¹ One example for this was the denouncing term of 'Frühkatholizismus' – early Catholicism within the New Testament.
- The search for the historical Jesus has proved to be impossible. It produced many different pictures of a supposed historical Jesus, reflecting the interests and goals of the researchers.

70) Frankly, we have to admit that a church which is not able to balance the claim for truth with the command to love is in danger of becoming destructive.

71) cf. Reiser, Marius, *Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift. Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese und Hermeneutik, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 217, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2007, 1-38.



To distinguish between a 'historical Jesus' and a 'Christ of faith' means to separate what belongs together.

- Consider the topic of pseudepigraphy in the New Testament epistles.⁷² In the German speaking scholarly community, there seems to be agreement that out of 13 epistles only seven of the Pauline epistles are letters by the real Paul. All other 'Pauline' letters (the pastoral epistles, Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians), like those bearing the names of Peter, John, James and Jude, are pseudepigrapha, oscillating between fiction and forgery. The justifications offered for this view, concerning the fact that these letters are nevertheless part of the New Testament canon, are not convincing, and so the issue becomes ever more complicated. On the whole, the assumption that somebody other than Paul is speaking, although this person constantly creates the illusion that Paul himself is speaking, is difficult to integrate into a sound understanding of truthfulness. And so the whole topic of pseudepigraphy in the New Testament is no more dominated by the simple assumption that pseudepigraphy has been a commonly acknowledged practice, but there is now discussion about the pastoral epistles (at least 2 Timothy and Titus) being not just fiction but actually deception.⁷³

It is not difficult to list several other current problems (these being just a few examples):

- The historicity of many central events of the Old Testament (such as the events of the Exodus and the Sinai) is questioned. Not discussed, however, is what such a thesis means for a principally historically grounded faith, which confesses that God acted in history on behalf of Israel's and our salvation.

72) Concerning this topic see: Frey, Jörg, Herzer, Jens, Janssen, Martina, Rothschild, Clarke K. (Hrsg.), *Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion in frühchristlichen Briefen*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament Bd. 246, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2009

73) cf. Herzer, Jens, *Fiktion oder Täuschung? Zur Diskussion über die Pseudepigraphie der Pastoralbriefe*, in: Frey, Jörg, Herzer, Jens, Janssen, Martina, Rothschild, Clarke K. (Hrsg.), *Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion in frühchristlichen Briefen*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament Bd. 246, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2009, 489-536.

- The Old Testament, as part of the Christian canon, is on the one hand seen as a corpus of books that should be downgraded in their importance and authority,⁷⁴ and on the other hand seen as a Jewish book to which the Church has no right – especially not to interpret it in a ‘Christian way’.
- There is an ongoing debate about the possibility and therefore the historicity of the resurrection (and miracles in general).
- A heated debate is currently occurring about the complex issues relating to homosexuality and marriage, which is changing the traditional (and biblical) teaching of the Church. It is becoming clear that there exist fundamentally different hermeneutics – very different ways of understanding the Bible. The relationship between revelation, history and reason is defined in a way that no longer gives revelation the primary importance that it deserves.

The problem is, that these debates are not occurring in the departments of religion, but in the faculties of theology. The faculties of theology are the places of study for the pastors of the future. When they begin working in the parishes, they either abandon their university background, or they cling to it but keep it in the background, or (very seldom indeed) they provoke open conflict as they frankly discuss the aforementioned themes in their sermons. As a result, the chasm between university and parishes deepens. Increasingly they seem to be two systems being forced to cooperate, but having difficulties in understanding each other. This situation is highly dissatisfying.

The Bible Societies, and especially those of the Western world, should face these questions and should not ignore them, because they relate to the core purpose of their work. If the Scriptures and their message are not decisive for the salvation of the world, why should we undertake the immense effort to spread them and make them accessible to all people?

John Riches sums up the developments of the last 250 years, in describing two major movements:

74) This hot debate has been initiated by Notker Slenczka. Cf. <https://www.theologie.hu-berlin.de/de/professuren/professuren/st/AT>.



'The last 250 years have seen dramatic changes in the history of the reception of the Bible. Its availability and distribution have increased immeasurably. Thanks to the development of new printing technologies and the work of the Bible Societies and churches and other faith communities both in distribution and translation, it is now available almost universally. (...)

The same period has also seen the development of new directions and methods in the study of the Bible. The rise of historical consciousness in Western Europe and North America initiated a period of great critical scrutiny and theological debate, as scholars and theologians sought to understand the origins of the religious beliefs which were documented in the Bible, and also to understand the process by which these beliefs had come to be in written form, and by which individual writings had subsequently been collected together as authoritative texts. (...)

These developments in, on the one hand, the distribution of the Bible and, on the other, the critical historical understanding of it, have progressed side by side. Their interaction has been complex and requires much further study.'⁷⁵

However, in our situation today simply stating the existence of these parallel movements is not enough.

About 50 years ago, S.L. Greenslade summed up his epilogue of the first edition of the Cambridge History of the Bible in different words: 'But a Christian must say his last words as a Christian. No piecemeal treatment of the Bible can suffice. It must be allowed its unifying principle: Jesus Christ. Its personal and living God is one who reveals himself in action, and the culminating act is his self-giving in Christ. But with its own kind of clarity it combines mystery, the holiness of the transcendent God whose ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts, but who, being beyond our finding, has revealed himself in the mystery of the Incarnation. It is his self-giving in revelation and redemption which finds us in and through Christ, and shows us, and lays upon us, the way of eternal truth and life. This is the Gospel which the

75) Riches, John, conclusion in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible IV*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 750.

Bible perpetually proclaims. It is to be found nowhere else. We rejoice in all truth, but to Christian faith – and the Christian does not pretend to dispense with faith – the Gospel is the measure of, the key to, all truth. In the coronation of the British Sovereign the Holy Bible is presented with these words: "...this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God."'⁷⁶

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Scriptures are a witness that we can never substitute nor overcome. They are unique because they connect us to the very moments where God acted in history⁷⁷ on behalf of our salvation. God chose Abraham and in him the people of Israel. He liberated them from Egypt, made a covenant with them and led them to the Promised Land. He spoke through the prophets and in the last days through His Son. He sent the Holy Spirit, who has led the Church ever since.

The Church is the living witness of these acts of God. And the Church living today has become what it is through the living witness of yesterday's Church. There is an ongoing chain of witnesses passing through time and reaching to the present. But the Church of all times is connected to the Scriptures, and without them as nurturing ground, as point of reference and everlasting 'other', there would be no Church. The Church needs the Scriptures to learn over again about God and His ways of dealing with mankind. The Church will never outgrow the Scriptures, but will be tied to them, connected with them, inspired by them, judged and comforted by them for as long as it exists.

To loosen this connection means weakening the Church in its very essence, depriving it of its vital source of orientation.

76) Greenslade, S.L., epilogue in *The Cambridge History of the Bible III*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1963, pp. 517f., 518f.

77) cf. Deines, Roland, *Acts of God in History: Studies Towards Recovering a Theological Historiography*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum neuen Testament 317, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2013.



To reiterate – to loosen the connection and the relationship between the Church and the Scriptures would mean to loosen the connection to the beginning, the starting point, the history of the relationship between God and man. A Church loosening this connectedness will become independent, self-assured, self-confident, but also self-contained. It would become a religion in the sense of Karl Barth – a human institution, but no more God's creature. It would become '*incurvatus in se ipsum*'.

So once again I return to Paul:

kai. mh. suschmati,zesqe tw/| aivw/ni tou,tw/|
avlla. metamorfou/sqe th/| avnakainw,sei tou/ noo.j
eivj to. dokima,zein u`ma/j
ti, to. qe,lhma tou/ qeou/(
to. avgaqo.n kai. euva,reston kai. te,leionÅ

Do not conform to this world
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind
that you may discern
what is the will of God,
the good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12: 2).

WHAT ABOUT THE SCRIPTURES? A FRAGMENTARY CONCLUSION

First of all, the Scriptures are facing us and we are facing them. The Scriptures are deeply rooted in the Church and are in their beginnings a fruit of the Church and of the Spirit. But still we have to acknowledge the fact that they are confronting us, they are an entity of their own, and they have been regarded as such ever since their beginnings, by the people of Israel as well as by the Church.

That is a kind of mystery: they were conceived within the Church, they are in a sense a fruit and product of the Church, but they came to be viewed in a different, a 'transcending' way. They were still the letters written by Paul. But through Paul the Church perceived and heard the Spirit speaking. It was still Paul

writing, but in his letters it was more than Paul speaking. What we are focusing on is the twofold nature of the Scriptures; without ceasing to be human in origin and outcome, they are believed to be the work of God's Spirit as well. We see the analogy of the nature of Scripture with the nature of Christ. But we have to be careful. We are talking about the Scriptures as representing an analogy, not being the same as Christ in this respect. An analogy always contains both a similarity and a difference. The Church has never gone so far as to define the Scriptures in a role equal to that of Christ. Although the creeds are actually based on the Scriptures, the Scriptures were never made part of the creeds. That seems remarkable even in the light of the Reformation, which depended so heavily on the principle of 'sola scriptura'.

The Scriptures are a gift, a grace given to us, and should be regarded as such by us. If science, and scientifically viewing them, leads us to an increasing disregard concerning this characteristic of the Scriptures, then we should be on our guard. Otherwise what we lose might be far more significant than what we gain.

This is not in the least meant as an argument against researching the Scriptures with all our abilities. And I do not mean that we should leave critical questions aside; indeed, the Church has never done this. But we should always keep in mind what, and in consequence who, we are dealing with. We should not hand over or deliver the Scriptures to science as though to become their master, telling us in consequence what we have to believe and what might be regarded as obsolete. Science can never be the master of Scripture, because science is a human undertaking. Making the Scriptures subservient to the limitations of human reason ultimately means to deny salvation – because the purpose of salvation is to free man from the limitations that he cannot overcome himself.⁷⁸

78) It is not only science and human reason that may claim to define the relevance and limitations of the Bible. This is also the case when the Bible is said to gain its authority from human experience. So Wilfried Engemann states: 'Biblical texts are gaining authority in so far as they show themselves to be faithful witnesses of human ability to cope with life' (Wilfried Engemann, *Autorität der Bibel - Erfahrungssache*, in: SAAT 9/2019, 14). It is true that the Scriptures are deeply connected to human experience. In fact, they are witnesses of human experience and they are able to create and transform experience. But to reduce



Although the Scriptures aim at faith and their claim to witness and reveal the truth cannot simply be demonstrated, how the Scriptures are being handled in the Church and in theology is of great importance. Church and theology should approach the Scriptures with reverence and respect, and with clear knowledge that too critical an attitude towards their reliability will do serious damage to faith, theology and the Church. You cannot treat the Scriptures simultaneously as being merely human witnesses of human faith whilst also witnessing God's revelatory acts in history. The latter dominates the former and it is here that the core understanding of the Scriptures is expressed. Being part of God's revelation makes them 'Holy Scripture'. Being simply the expression of human religiosity makes them the object of the science of religions, but nothing more. Their divine character is able to integrate their human dimension, but not the other way around. One could illustrate this fact by pointing to the philosophical premise: 'finitum non capax infinitum sed infinitum capax finitum' – the finite is not able to grasp the infinite, but the infinite is able to grasp the finite.

Western theology, generally speaking, aims to hold on to both dimensions of the Scriptures simultaneously. But as this almost always begins with considering the human side of the enterprise, it often remains there and there is no breaking through to the divine and revelatory dimension. But this is where the real importance of the Scriptures lies.

No wonder, then, that there has been a strong and lasting reaction to this development, which is nowadays often and all too easily reduced to the cliché of 'fundamentalism'. In fact, we can observe a dual movement since the beginning of the era of Enlightenment. On the one hand theology tries to conform to human reason and make religion a case of 'natural religion', and on the other hand theology tries to conform to the authority of the Scriptures and remain orthodox. Both movements try to stay

them to this ability, and to regard this ability as crucial to their authority, means to hand them over to the rule of experience. Some dimensions of faith are simply not grounded in experience, but may be quite contrary to it. The Bible is a 'singular Vedemecum for living out of faith' as Engemann states - but it is more, because it relates all our experience to him who is Lord and who is alive.

connected to their counterparts to varying degrees. Orthodoxy does not wish to abandon reasoning – as in fact it has never done – and liberalism does not want to abandon revelation. Many tried quite successfully to handle this tension. But the radical elements on both sides gained the attention, and in the long run what has always been a critical dialogue seems to have become a bitter and divisive conflict. That is where we now stand. But that is not where we should remain.

WESTERN EUROPEAN CASE-STUDIES

Prof. Alexander Schweitzer

United Bible Societies
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Translation

THE PRESSURE OF SECULARISATION, AND THE MOTU PROPRIO ON THE WORD OF GOD *APERUIT ILLIS*

It seems risky to talk about the pressure of secularisation in the context of the theme of Christians under pressure or even persecution. By no means do I wish to compare the sufferings and existential threats that Christians are exposed to in many parts of the world with the pressures Christians experience in secularised societies. Nonetheless, in an attitude of solidarity and exchange, within the framework of this conference, it is worthwhile looking at the diverse situations our Christian brothers and sisters find themselves in worldwide. Therefore, I have accepted the invitation to present the recent Motu Proprio of Pope Francis in this context of Christians under pressure.

My 16 year-old son Paul recently asked me: "Why don't you have a decent job, Dad? I hate it if friends ask me what you are doing. Saying that you work with the Bible often provokes strange

questions or reactions.” We live in Germany, and Paul attends a Christian school.

Tolerance, ignorance, indifference and sometimes even hostility towards religion describe the atmosphere which we often find in secularised societies. Religion comes under suspicion, is seen as something ideological, as indoctrination, as prone to fundamentalism, as a safe but narrow place for people who struggle with the liberalism and freedom of an enlightened society. In addition, there are the negative examples given by Christians and Christian leaders, and the attitudes which seem so far away from modern societies’ standards – whether from child abuse to clericalism to the discussions about women’s roles etc. Finally, the Bible is frequently viewed as standing for a fundamentalist attitude: “The Bible says... therefore you must or mustn’t behave like this. Full stop.”

This situation creates pressure; not persecution, usually not physical suffering or existential threat, but, yes, a situation in which people increasingly hide their faith or at least don’t publicly confess it, but rather limit it to Sunday Mass and the parish community.

Needless to say, the reality is more diverse than what I describe here. There are differences between various countries—from an explicitly lay state like France to Germany, where the major churches are public corporations, receive tax income and are among the biggest employers in the fields of kindergartens and hospitals; to Scandinavia, where there are state churches with high numbers of nominal members but low numbers of church goers... And of course, there are flourishing Christian communities and Christians engaged in society, and there are Christian values – not always identified as such – that underpin the social, moral and political systems in many of the Northern and Western European countries. Bible Societies are responding to the realities of secularisation with Bible advocacy programmes, wanting to become not an alternative to church but a space for hospitality, discussion, encounter and convergence.

Let us now look at Pope Francis’ latest *Motu Proprio Aperuit illis*, issued on 30 September – the Feast of St. Jerome, patron of (Bible) translation – in the light of the ‘pressure situations’ for



Christians. Given the time limitations, this can be done only in a random, superficial way.

With this letter, Pope Francis institutes a 'Sunday of the Word of God' for Roman Catholics worldwide. This is not a small thing, and constitutes a real change compared with the usual Vatican position towards universally proclaimed occasions of this type. As the document itself states, for years there have been suggestions for a Bible year, month, or Sunday, and in the past the Vatican was reluctant to establish anything on a global level, pointing out the role of Bishops' Conferences and adopting a decentralised attitude. In addition to this 'ecclesiological' reason, there was a theological argument: The Bible is everywhere, the Word of God is the centre and basis of all expressions of Church, and therefore any separate 'place' for it might not be appropriate or helpful. So, this decision is really noteworthy.

The date chosen for this Sunday of the Word of God is meaningful, too. The third Sunday in Ordinary Time lies within the prayer week for Christian unity, as well as being the day dedicated to Christian-Jewish dialogue. And it comes ten years after the publication of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, emphasising the Bible being at the centre and as the 'soul' of all church activities.

Reading through *Aperuit illis*, you encounter several recurring themes or concepts. One of these is **unity**. Pope Francis sees, in the universal celebration of a Sunday of the Word of God, a strong symbol and a catalyst for unity. On a theological level, *Aperuit illis* highlights unity as a consequence of the biblical message: '...the Scriptures point out, to those who listen, the path to authentic and firm unity' (AI 3). Ecclesiologically, *Aperuit illis* stresses the fact that the Bible must not be monopolised by any group but, on the contrary, only by valuing its contribution towards a deeper understanding by all Christian faithful is it being used appropriately. *Aperuit illis* reads: 'The Bible cannot be just the heritage of some, much less a collection of books for the benefit of a privileged few. It belongs above all to those called to hear its message and to recognise themselves in its words. At times, there can be a tendency to monopolise the sacred text by restricting it to certain

circles or to select groups. It cannot be that way! The Bible is the book of the Lord's people, who, in listening to it, move from dispersion and division towards unity' (A/ 4).

A golden thread in *Aperuit illis* refers to the **centrality of the Word of God**, which is very much in line with central themes in *Dei Verbum*, and responding to the encouragements in *Verbum Domini*. *Aperuit illis* reflects on the various areas which need to be firmly based on the Word of God and to reliably use the Bible, such as in homily, catechism and liturgy. The five decades since *Dei Verbum* have seen a development, a dynamic, in the Roman Catholic Church, in which the role of the Bible has evolved from a special apostolate – one among other apostolates – to a biblical pastoral ministry, to – as underlined in *Verbum Domini* – an inspiration or animation of all pastoral activities of the Church.

Another important dimension developed in the Pope's letter is that of the **context** in which reading of the Bible needs to be embedded; it emphasises the need for interpretation – in the Spirit in which the Bible was written – and in that context the role of tradition, not least to avoid a fundamentalist use of the Bible: 'Without the work of the Spirit, there would always be a risk of remaining limited to the written text alone. This would open the way to a fundamentalist reading, which needs to be avoided, lest we betray the inspired, dynamic and spiritual character of the sacred text. As the Apostle reminds us: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3: 6)' (A/ 9).

Soon commentaries on and analyses of *Aperuit illis* will appear, and will go much deeper. But one last thing that I would like to share is my impression – reading the document as a whole – that with *Aperuit illis* and with the establishing of the Sunday of the Word of God Pope Francis really wants to draw our attention to the essence of our Christian identity. Not to a book, but to the living Word which we find in the book. He wants to draw our attention to its performative character, to the transformation which happens if we relate our lives to the message of the Bible. To underline this, Pope Francis recalls the quasi-sacramental character of the Word of God (the table of the Word – the table of the body of Christ).



How does all this relate to our lives as Christians; as Christians in the world, as Christians under pressure?

Aperuit illis reminds us that our being Christians in the world is not about perfection, professionalism, performance, but about transformation. We don't need to be perfect; we don't need to be specialists in theology, heroes, saints, high performers in moral standards. 'Those who draw daily nourishment from God's Word become, like Jesus, a contemporary of all those whom they encounter: they are not tempted to fall into sterile nostalgia for the past, or to dream of ethereal utopias yet to come' (AI 12).

The unity that the Word of God can produce in our lives and communities is a unity that doesn't exclude others, that isn't defensive and limiting, but which gives identity, strength and the ability to dialogue with people of other religions, different values; it is a unity which strengthens us and helps us to be a living testimony in a very pluralistic world.

And there is an encouragement in *Aperuit illis* not to give up – to persevere. In a reflection on the sweetness and the bitterness of the Word of God, Pope Francis reminds us that the bitterness '... often comes from our realisation of how difficult it is to live that Word consistently, or our personal experience of seeing it rejected as meaningless for life. We should never take God's Word for granted, but instead let ourselves be nourished by it, in order to acknowledge and live fully our relationship with Him and with our brothers and sisters' (AI 12).

In *Aperuit illis*, Pope Francis calls out to us. He says: Nourish your own faith, your Christian identity, your spiritual DNA, by an ever growing familiarity with the Word of God! Develop an ever closer relationship with Sacred Scripture! Let your heart be strengthened! As vitamins and a healthy lifestyle energise the body and lead to balance, strength and resilience, this nourishment you receive from the Bible will make you healthy, will strengthen your heart, will lead to openness, courage, patience, kindness, trust and perseverance.

He tells us, as Christians in the world, often under pressure and sometimes persecution: You can be a witness of God's love in so

many ways, in such diverse circumstances – according to where you are, according to who you are. There is no **one** heroic way; there is seldom a life without contradictions. Strive for God's Word to fill your heart, strive for His love to transform yourself, and you will become a vessel of His love and a witness for others, whoever they are.

**CONFERENCE
COMMUNIQUE**

FINAL COMMUNIQUE

BEIRUT, OCTOBER 12, 2019

THE MAGI INITIATIVE: EAST ⇄ WEST

*A Dialogue Conference Among
Church Leaders*

*BRINGING CHRISTIANS TOGETHER,
THROUGH GOD'S WORD, TO SUPPORT THEIR COMMUNITIES
DURING CRITICAL TIMES*

October 10-12, 2019
Bethania, Harissa, Lebanon

The Bible Society in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and the British Bible Society, in cooperation with the Middle East Council of Churches, held a dialogue conference within the framework of the Magi Initiative: East ⇄ West, under the title 'Bringing Christians together, through God's Word, to support their communities during critical times', from October 10 to 12, 2019, in Bethania - Harissa, Lebanon.

The conference began with a plenary session attended by His Holiness Aram I Kechichian, head of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church; Archbishop Joseph Spiteri, Apostolic Nuncio to Lebanon, representing Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches; Bishop Boulos Sayyah, representing His Beatitude Maronite Patriarch Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi; Bishop George Asadourian, representing His Beatitude Krikor Bedros XX

Gabroyan, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Armenian Catholic Church; Metropolitan George Bacouni, board member of the Bible Society, representing His Beatitude Patriarch Youssef El-Absi; Bishop Michel Kassari, Head of the Chaldean Church in Lebanon; Father Karim Kalach and Father Roni Momika, representing Patriarch Mor Ignatius Youssef III Younan, Patriarch of Antioch and All the East for the Syriac Catholic Church; Mr. Joseph Rida, representing His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Marc; Bishop George Saliba, Bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Mount-Lebanon; Dr. Souraya Bechealany, Secretary General of the Middle East Council of Churches; Dr. Mike Bassous, General Secretary and CEO of the Bible Society, in addition to other religious and educational figures and regional and international associations.

After the opening session, and on the second and third days of the conference, participants representing various Eastern and Western Churches held specialised workshops, which addressed within a biblical framework the pressures faced by Christian communities, and the available opportunities, under the title 'Christian communities during critical times', and discussed practical ways of promoting sustainable biblical engagement, presenting case studies from the Middle East and Western Europe.

The conferees concluded their meetings with a series of recommendations, in which they affirmed the following:

First: Return to the Bible at all times, especially in times of crisis.

Second: Invite all churches and believers to true repentance and appreciating the richness of diversity within the framework of unity within the image of God.

Third: Call upon Christians in the Middle East, who are going through difficult times along with their partners in citizenship from all religions, to draw inspiration from the Word of God to build peace, regain hope, and rid themselves of the phobia of minorities and the delusion of invoking protections, because their main



compass is the dignity of man and their ecumenical work testifies to their unity in faith.

Fourth: Return to the Word of God, that consoles God's people, because adopting an approach which tackles only the repercussions of crises, without going in-depth to dismantle their roots, leads Christians and their partners in citizenship to become stuck in the realm of short-term reactions – when what is truly needed is formulating preventive and sustainable public policies that help Middle Eastern societies to regain stability and prosperity.

A follow-up committee was formed of Rev. Dr. Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington in the Diocese of London; Archbishop Mgr. Yousif Thomas Mirkis, Archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Archeparchy of Kirkuk-Sulaimaniya; Dr. Cristian Romocea, Director of the International Bible Advocacy Centre; Dr. Souraya Bechealany, the Middle East Council of Churches Secretary General; and Dr. Mike Bassous, General Secretary and CEO of the Bible Society in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. The committee, in coordination with the conference participants, will publish all the conference's lectures and decisions, and prepare for future conferences and meetings.



في العمق الى تفكيك جذورها، يضع المسيحيين وشركاءهم في
المواطنة في حيّز ردّات فعلٍ قصيرة المدى، فيما المطلوب صياغة
سياسات عامة وقائية ومستدامة تُعيد لمجتمعات الشرق الأوسط
استقرارها وازدهارها.

إنبثق عن المؤتمر لجنة متابعة مؤلفة من الأسقف د. غراهام توملين أسقف
كينغستن في أبرشية لندن، المطران د. يوسف توما رئيس أساقفة كركوك
والسليمانية، د. كريستيان روموسيا مدير المعهد العالمي للدفاعيات البيبلية، د.
ثرايا بشعلاني الأمانة العامة لمجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط، و د. مايك باسوس
الأمين العام لجمعية الكتاب المقدس في لبنان وسوريا والعراق. ستقوم اللجنة،
وبالتنسيق بين المشاركين في المؤتمر، بنشر كل المحاضرات والمقرارات، وتحضير
لمؤتمرات ولقاءات مستقبلية.

المقدس سيادة المطران جورج بقعوني مُمثلاً البطريرك يوسف العبسي، سيادة المطران ميشال قصرجي رئيس الطائفة الكلدانية في لبنان، الأبوان كريم كلش وروني موميكا ممثلاً غبطة بطريرك السريان الكاثوليك إغناطيوس يوسف الثالث يونان، الأستاذ جوزف رضا ممثلاً قداسة البابا تواضروس الثاني بابا الإسكندرية وبطريرك الكرازة المرقسية، سيادة المطران جورج صليبا مطران السريان الأرثوذكس في جبل لبنان، رئيس جمعية الكتاب المقدس البريطانية الأنبا أنجيلوس، الأمانة العامة لمجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط د. ثرايا بشعلاني، أمين عام جمعية الكتاب المقدس د. مايك باسوس وجمعٌ من الهيئات الدينية والتربوية وجمعيات إقليمية ودولية.

بعد الافتتاح وفي اليوم الثاني والثالث للمؤتمر عَقَدَ المجتمعون، من مختلف الكنائس الشرقية والغربية، ورش عمل متخصصة، ناقشت الضغوط التي تتعرض لها المجتمعات المسيحية والفرص المتاحة تحت عنوان «الجماعات المسيحية في الأزمنة الصعبة»، وذلك في إطار نظرة ببيلية وطرق عملية للالتزام البيبلي المستدام مع دراسة حالات من الشرق الأوسط وأوروبا الغربية. واختتم المؤتمر اجتماعاتهم بسلسلة توصيات أكدوا من خلالها على ما يلي:

أولاً: العودة الى الكتاب المقدس في كل حين لا سيما في زمن الأزمات.

ثانياً: دعوة الكنائس والمؤمنين كافة للتوبة الحقيقية ووضع غنى التنوع ضمن الوحدة على صورة الله.

ثالثاً: دعوة المسيحيين في الشرق الأوسط، الذين يعانون مع شركائهم في المواطنة من كل الأديان من أزمة صعبة، لاستلهم كلمة الله في بناء السلام واستعادة الرجاء والخروج من فوبيا الأقليات ووهم استدعاء الحمایات، لأن بوصلتهم الأساسية هي كرامة الانسان وعملهم المسكوني معاً يشكلوا شهادةً لوحدهم في الإيمان.

رابعاً: العودة الى كلمة الله التي تعزّي شعب الله، لأن الإتكاء على مقاربة الأزمات من منطلق معالجة تداعياتها فقط، دون الذهاب

البيان الختامي

بيروت في ١٢ تشرين الأول/أكتوبر ٢٠١٩

مبادرة المجوس: كنائس الشرق ↔ الغرب

الكنائس في مؤتمر حوارى تحت عنوان
«في الأزمنة العصيبة... مسيحيون معًا
بالإصغاء إلى كلمة الله»

١٠-١٢ أكتوبر ٢٠١٩

بيت عنيا، حريصا، لبنان

عقدت جمعية الكتاب المقدس في لبنان وسوريا والعراق وجمعية الكتاب المقدس البريطانية، بالتعاون مع مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط، مؤتمرًا حواريًا في إطار مبادرة المجوس: الشرق ↔ الغرب، تحت عنوان «في الأزمنة العصيبة... مسيحيون معًا بالإصغاء إلى كلمة الله»، بين ١٠ و١٢ تشرين الأول/أكتوبر في بيت عنيا - حريصا، لبنان.

بدء المؤتمر بجلسة عامة حضرها بطريرك الأرمن الأرثوذكس لبيت كيليكيا قداسة الكاثوليكوس آرام الأول كيشيشيان، السفير البابوي في لبنان المطران جوزيف سبيتيري ممثلًا عميد مجمع الكنائس الشرقية الكاردينال ليوناردو ساندري، سيادة المطران بولس صياح ممثلًا غبطة البطريرك الماروني مار بشارة بطرس الراعي، سيادة المطران جورج أسادوريان ممثلًا غبطة بطريرك الأرمن الكاثوليك لبيت كيليكيا بدروس العشرون، عضو الهيئة العامة في جمعية الكتاب

الروح القدس، عبّر القديس بولس حين قال: «كمائتين وها نحن نحيا.. كحزاني ونحن دائماً فرحون». ولعل السبب في ذلك يعود إلى:

١. المعونة الإلهية التي وعد الله بها جميع المضطهدين من أجل اسمه.
٢. تعاطف الكنيسة كلها مع المضطهدين وأسر الشهداء والمصابين.
٣. إحساس هؤلاء المعترفين بشرف تألمهم من أجل أنبل الأسباب.
٤. التطلع إلى المجد العظيم الذي ينتظرهم.
٥. الرؤى المجيدة التي كان لها أعظم الأثر في تشجيعهم.

ولعل هذا أدى إلى

١. تحمس الكثير من الأقباط للإستشهاد فنظروا إليه كشهوة يريدون ان ينالوا إكليل المجد.
٢. كان الإستشهاد لهؤلاء ليس رعونة لكنه شجاعة هي شجاعة الفضيلة.
٣. كان الإستشهاد كرازة وان كان الإيمان المسيحي انتشر بإستشهاد قديسين أكثر من إنتشاره بالتعليم قديماً ففي العصر الحديث تحققت تأثير عبارة «دماء الشهداء بزار الكنيسة».
٤. وكان هذا برهان عملي على صدق الديانة المسيحية لقد فقد بعض المصابين أعضاء من أجسادهم ولكنهم كانوا فرحين إذ يشهدوا للمسيح.
٥. كما أنه برهان عملي على الفضائل المسيحية فالتهديد والوعيد لم يؤثر فيهم.. كانوا ثابتين محتملين بوداعة ومحبة للأعداء، بزهد في العالميات وشوق للسماويات.

مكانة الشهداء في الكنيسة

لقد خصصت كنيستنا القبطية عيداً للشهداء في العصر الحديث هو تذكارة لأحداث ليبيا، واحتفظت بأجسادهم وذخائرهم. وأقامت مزاراً لهم وملابسهم. وكما يقول القديس أوغسطينوس: «نحن لا نصلي عن الشهداء فهم قد أكملوا حبهم للرب أكثر من أي إنسان، نحن نسألهم أن يذكرونا».



دوافع الإستشهاد لدى الأقباط

لم تعرف البشرية في كل تاريخها شهداء كشهداء المسيحية، من حيث حماسهم وشجاعتهم وإيمانهم ووداعتهم وصبرهم، وإحتمالهم وفرحهم بالإستشهاد، لقد كانوا يعانون الموت في فرح وهدوء ووداعة أذهلت العالم كله.

وهكذا الحال بالنسبة لشهداء الأقباط ولقد كان سبب ذلك يعود إلى:

١. إن هذا العالم وقي بالقياس إلى الحياة الأبدية «ونحن غير ناظرين إلى الأشياء التي تُرى بل إلى التي لا ترى، لأن التي تُرى وقتية وأما التي لا تُرى فأبدية»

٢. شعور المسيحيين والأقباط بأنهم غرباء في العالم ... «أيها الأحباء ... أطلب إليكم كغرباء ونزلاء أن تمتنعوا عن الشهوات الجسدية التي تحارب النفس».

٣. عرف الشهداء أن هذا العالم وضع في الشرير، والحياة فيه حياة حزن وألم وضيق ... «العالم كله قد وضع في الشرير.. «ستكون وتنحون والعالم يفرح» ... «وسيمسح الله كل دمة من عيونهم ...»

فهم الأقباط أن نهاية الضيقات والأحزان وآلام هذا العالم تؤول لمجد عظيم في السماء «فإني أحسب أن آلام الزمان الحاضر، لا تقاس بالمجد العتيد أن يستعلن»^{١١}. ولهذا كان الإنطلاق من الجسد شهوة لكي يكونوا مع المسيح ولعل كلمات السيد المسيح «حيث أكون أنا تكونون أنتم أيضاً (يو ١٤: ٢٠) ألهب شعورهم». كل هذا تم بدافع المحبة ولقد عبّر القديس بولس عن ذلك: «من سيفصلنا عن محبة المسيح ... فأتى متيقن انه لا موت ولا حياة ولا ملائكة تقدر أن تفصلنا عن محبة الله التي في المسيح يسوع» (رو ٨: ٣٩).

نفسية الشهداء

أنه لأمر خارج عن حدود المنطق وفائق لطبيعة البشر، أن الأحزان تنشئ فرحاً، والضيقات تولد تعزيات لكنها المسيحية، بما فيها من تأثير روحي لعمل

(١١) مثلث الرحمت نيافة الانبا يؤانس: في ذكرى شهداء المسيحية ص ٣٠-٣٣.

وبهذا صار إجمالي شهداء الأقباط حتى مايو ٢٠١٧ هو ٢١٨ مصابًا وعدد ٩٥ شهيدًا على النحو التالي: شهداء الكنيسة البطرسيّة ٢٩ شهيدًا + ٥٠ مصابًا وشهداء كاتدرائية مار جرجس بطنطا ٣٠ شهيدًا + ١٠٥ مصابًا وشهداء الإسكندرية ٧ شهداء + ٤٠ مصابًا يوم أحد الشعانين وشهداء جبل القلمون «دير الأنبا صموئيل» ٢٨ شهيدًا + ٢٣ مصابًا.

إستشهاد القمص سمعان شحاته كاهن كنيسة الشهيد يوليوس الأقصى بعزبة جرجس بك بإيبارشية ببا والفسن ١٢ أكتوبر ٢٠١٧

كان القمص سمعان شحاته وبرفقتة القس بيمن مفتاح كاهن كنيسة الملاك بعزبة فرنسيس إيبارشية مطاى في خدمة بمنطقة الزكاة بمدينة السلام بالقاهرة. وأثناء سيرهما بمكان الحادث مترجلين فوجئًا بشخص يدعى أحمد سعيد (١٩ سنة) يحمل سلاحًا أبيض (ساطورًا) يهجم عليهما وشرع يطارد القمص سمعان ثم سدد له عدة ضربات بالسلاح حتى تأكد من مفارقتة للحياة ولاذ بالفرار وتم ضبطه والقبض عليه.

شهداء جبل القلمون (٢) دير الأنبا صموئيل

قدمت الكنيسة القبطية الأرثوذكسية كوكبة جديدة من الشهداء يوم الجمعة ٢ فبراير ٢٠١٨ على الطريق المؤدى لدير القديس الأنبا صموئيل المعترف ففي تمام الواحدة من ظهر ذلك اليوم بينما كانت سيارة ميني باص تقل مجموعة من الأفراد تابعين لقرية (الكوامل بحرى) بمحافظة سوهاج بعد زيارة الدير وعماد طفل فوجئوا بأربعة من الإرهابيين يخرجون من الجبل بسيارة دفع رباعي ويطلقون النار مما أدى لإصابة خمسة أفراد واتجه الإرهابيون لسيارة كانت خلفها تقل عشرين فردًا من مدينة المنيا أعمارهم بين الثامنة والخامسة والخمسون فقتلوا السائق أولاً ثم أطلقوا النار على الإطارات وبدأوا إطلاق النار بكثافة على الركاب فاستشهد على الفور سبعة أفراد وأصيب ٢١ آخرين ثم انطلقوا للصحراء.

وبذا صار إجمالي الشهداء ١٠٢ شهيدًا، و٢٣٩ مصابًا.



تفجير الكنيسة المرقسية بالإسكندرية

وفي نفس يوم ٩ إبريل أحد الشعانين وبتزامن مع أحداث طنطا إذ بالرهابي يفجر نفسه عند دخوله الكنيسة المرقسية بالإسكندرية والتي كان قداسة البابا يصلي أحد الشعانين بها.

وإزاء المحاولة المتكررة من الإرهابي وإصرار حارس الكنيسة أن يمر من البوابة الأمنية الأليكترونية فجر نفسه فاستشهد عدد ٧ من أبناء الكنيسة الأقباط، ولتلف الكنيسة القبطية في يوم واحد شهداء طنطا وشهداء الإسكندرية كذبيحة حب يتنسّمها الرب كرائحة بخور.

ومثل ما تم في طنطا من لقاء لقداسة البابا تواضروس يوم عيد القيامة هكذا أيضًا بالنسبة لأسر شهداء الإسكندرية والمصابين فكان لقاء قداسته بهم له أبلغ الأثر في رفع معنويات المصابين بالمستشفيات سواء المسيحيين أو من رجال الشرطة المسلمين.

شهداء جبل القلمون دير الأنبا صموئيل

وفي ٢٠١٧/٥/٢٠ كانت رحلة في طريقها لزيارة دير القديس الأنبا صموئيل المعترف بجبل القلمون وحينما انتهى الأتوبيس السياحي الطريق الصحراوي إذ بسيارة بها مجموعة مسلحة عددهم عشرة يرتدون زيًا عسكريًا وقفازات (وذلك للتمويه) وأطلقوا النار بداية بعد نزولهم من الهضبة بمكان يدعى أبوطرطور، أطلقوا النار بداية على إطارات السيارة لمنع الأتوبيس من التحرك ثم على السائق وظنوا أنه مات وعندما نزل أحد الركاب ليستوضح الأمر قتلوه على الفور وأطلقوا النيران على رؤوس الناس ثم صعدوا للسيارة وأطلقوا على أعناق ورؤوس الرجال ثم أقدم السيدات لشل حركتهم وأصيب عدد من الأطفال، واستولوا على حلى السيدات وإذ بحضور سيارتين محملتين بالعمال للدير وكانوا من قرية دير الجرّنوس وأيضًا استشهد ثلاث بالسيارة الأخرى من بنى مزار.

وكانوا طلبوا من الشهداء إنكار إيمانهم فرفضوا. ولما تعطلت سيارتهم أشعلوها وبذا صار إجمالي شهداء جبل القلمون في هذا اليوم ٢٨ شخصًا وأصيب ٢٣ مصابًا.

كما زار الكنيسة المستشارة الألمانية انجيلا ميركل وفخامة الرئيس الفرنسي ماكرون والعديد من زعماء العالم، والكنيسة بما أصابها من التفجير شاهد لعظمة إيمان الأقباط.

تفجير كاتدرائية الشهيد مار جرجس بطنطا

ولم تمضي سوى ثلاثة شهور حتى يتم في صباح ٩ ابريل ٢٠١٧ التفجير المروع لكاتدرائية مار جرجس بطنطا (في يوم أحد الشعانين) والذي راح ضحيته ٢٨ شهيداً وشهيدة وبلغ عدد المصابين ٤٦ مصاباً.

فبينما كان الشمامسة يرددون لحناً مفرحاً احتفالاً بتذكّار دخول السيد المسيح إلى أورشليم (لحن افلوجيمينوس) تمتد يد أئمة فتقتل ٢٨ من نخبة ممتازة من الشمامسة والشباب بكاتدرائية مار جرجس مما ترك أسوء الأثر في نفوس المصلين واسر الشهداء، ولكن ليتحقق قول الكتاب: «إني أحسب أن آلام الزمان الحاضر لا تقاس بالمجد العتيد أن يستعلن فينا» (رو ٨: ١٨).

لقد بدأت الصلوات في السادسة صباحاً بفرح وبعد الإنتهاء من قراءة الأبركسيس (سير القديسين) بدأ خورس الشمامسة في ترديد لحن الشعانين (افلوجيمينوس) وكانت التاسعة وأربعة دقائق صباحاً، وإذ يدوي انفجار هائل يهز الكاتدرائية وأشلاء أدمية وشظايا ومشهد دموي لجثث وأشلاء، والمصلون لا يفهمون ما حدث وفي محاولة لفهم ما يحدث كان المشهد مرعباً ومخيفاً وعند استجلاء الأمر إتضح سقوط مجموعة من الشمامسة شوهدوا ملقين على الأرض بملابس الخدمة ممزقة، وأعضاء مبتورة، وأشلاء ملقاة هنا وهناك وسقوط شهداء بلغ عددهم ٢٨ ومصابين بكثرة خاصة من الجلوس في مقاعد الرجال والسيدات في الصفوف الأولى. وبتفريغ أجهزة المراقبة اتضح أن إرهابي فجر نفسه وقد أتى من وسط أماكن الرجال حتى وصل إلى مقربة من خورس الشمامسة.

وقد ألغت الكنيسة تقبل تهاني عيد القيامة وانتقل قداسة البابا تواضروس ليكون مع أسر الشهداء صباح عيد القيامة. وكان نياقة الأنبا بولا مطران طنطا قد صلى ليلة عيد القيامة في قداس خاص لأسر الشهداء بمطرانية طنطا.



شهداء ليبيا من الأقباط

وفي فبراير ٢٠١٥ قدم واحد وعشرون شابًا أرواحهم شهداء للسيد المسيح في ليبيا (واحد منهم من غانا)، على يد عناصر تنظيم الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام (داعش) وذلك في يوم الأحد ١٥ فبراير ٢٠١٥ وقد عرفت قصة إستشهادهم من خلال فيديو صادم، وإذ بعد أن خطفوا قتلوا لأنهم لم ينكروا إيمانهم، وكان هناك متسع من الوقت ليساوموهم. ولكن شهداؤنا الأقباط لم يتخلوا عن إيمانهم قيد أئمة. وكانت كلماتهم الأخيرة (يا رب يسوع) وهم شاخصون للسماء قبل ذبحهم.

شهداء الكنيسة البطرسية

وتتابعت الأحداث المؤلمة، وفي نهاية عام ٢٠١٦ وفي يوم ١١ ديسمبر تحديدًا تم تفجير كنيسة القديسين بطرس وبولس الرسولين المجاورة للكاتدرائية المرقسية مقر الكرسي البطريركي للأقباط الأرثوذكس ولقد استشهد في هذا الحادث المؤمن عدد ٢٩ شهيدًا وشهيدة أغلبهم سيدات، إلى جانب عدد ٣٠ من المصابين.

ولقد تجلت مظاهر الوحدة الوطنية إذ أمر السيد الرئيس عبد الفتاح السيسي أن تكون جنازة رسمية للشهداء من أمام المنصة مقام النصب التذكاري للجندي المجهول وتقدمها فخامته وإلى جواره قداسة البابا تواضروس الثاني الذي قطع زيارته للكنيسة اليونانية وعاد لمصر فور سماعه الخبر.

وقد قامت الدولة بأعادة ترميم الكنيسة البطرسية خلال أقل من عشرين يومًا ليحتفل بناؤها ببداية عام ٢٠١٧ في أحضان هذه الكنيسة والتي زارها لاحقًا قداسة البابا فرانسيس بابا الفاتيكان خلال زيارته لمصر وعُقد بها لقاء ضم قداسة البابا تواضروس وقداسة البابا فرانسيس وقداسة البطريرك المسكوني برثلماوس ومعهم غبطة البطريرك ثيودورس الثاني بطريرك الإسكندرية للروم الأرثوذكس وغبطة البطريرك ابراهيم اسحق بطريرك الأقباط الكاثوليك وغبطة البطريرك غريغوريوس الثالث لحام البطريرك السابق للروم الكاثوليك بالإسكندرية وجناب القس الدكتور اندرية زكي رئيس الطائفة الإنجيلية ونيافة المطران منير حنا مطران الكنيسة الأنجليكانية.

شهداء الكنسية القبطية الارثوذكسية في القرن الحادي والعشرين

جرجس ابراهيم صالح

موضوع الإستشهاد هو قصة المسيحية المبكرة في أبهى صورة لها، حينما قدم المسيحيون ذواتهم نماذج للحب والبذل والإيمان والإحتمال ومحبة الأعداء وكل فضيلة.

وقصة الإستشهاد هي قصة الكرازة بالإنجيل للعالم أجمع، وللخليقة كلها. فالإيمان المسيحي كان ينتشر سريعًا ويضرب بجذوره في أعماق البشرية ويمتد داخلها طولًا وعرضًا وعمقًا بشهادة الدم أكثر من إنتشاره بالوعظ والتعليم.^{١٠}

إن قيل هذا عن شهداء المسيحية الأوائل فأنا في العصر الحالي نجد التاريخ يعيد نفسه فلقد قدمت الكنيسة القبطية الأرثوذكسية عددًا من الشهداء خلال القرن الحادي والعشرين في أحداث عنف متتالية، وقد إختارنا أن نتكلم عن هذه الأحداث بدء بتفجير كنيسة القديسين بالإسكندرية والذي راح ضحيته عشرون شخصًا مع أول شعاع نور عام ٢٠١١.

ولقد كان لهذا الحادث صدى كبير في العالم كله واستنكرته مختلف الدول في العالم بأسره وسائر الكنائس والمرجعيات الإسلامية.

(١٠) مثلث الرحمت نيافة الأنبا يوانس الإستشهاد في المسيحية ص ١٣.



- ضعفاء ولكن أقوياء بالتمسك بكلمة الحياة... ونحن هل كلمة الله مصدر إلهام وقوة لنا؟
 - عاشوا الإنجيل وأصبحوا إنجيل مفتوح ومعاش، أساس لوحدة الكنيسة... كيف نعيش الإنجيل وهل هو في الوسط؟
 - قديمًا كان يقال: دماء الشهداء بذار المسيحية. اليوم يمكننا القول: دماء الشهداء بذار الوحدة المسيحية.
 - كيف تساعدنا الاضطهادات والضغوط لتحقيق وحدة أكبر بيننا كمسيحيين؟ أليست الاضطهادات فرصة ودعوة لنا لنعيش خدمة تضامن أفضل بيننا كمسيحيين على تنوعنا؟
 - أبناء شعبنا بحاجة إلى إجابات واقعية. عملنا المشترك ككلية مع جمعية الكتاب المقدس في حمص، بالحقيقة كلمة رجاء وفرح كبير بعد الحرب الدامية.
- شكرًا.

يقول اوسابيوس المؤرخ عن إيريناوس كان ما يعنيه اسمه صانع السلام. بالحقيقة اشتغل للوحدة والمصالحة بين البابا بروما وأساقفة كنيسة آسيا الصغرى. يعود، كما كان يقول، إلى ذكرياته مع بوليكر بوس معلمه والذي كان تلميذ يوحنا الشاهد ليؤكد على أهمية الأمانة إلى التعليم.

إيريناوس هو قبل كل شيء رجل إيمان وراعٍ. عنده هاجس تبشيري خلاص. وقد اتّبع في كتاباته هدفًا مزدوجًا: الدفاع عن العقيدة الحقيقية أمام هجمات الهرطقة، والإعلان بوضوح عن حقيقة الإيمان؛ كما يقول لنا البابا بندكتوس في تعليمه عنه.

كتاباته تفتح لنا أفاق في سعيها نحو الوحدة المسيحية. من الأهمية بمكان التمييز بين ودیعة الإيمان والتعابير المتعددة، أضف الى ذلك عنصر أساسي للوحدة: يجب ألا يفرض أي أمر ليس بضروري. الوحدة في الأمور الرئيسية المهمة: الحرية في التنوع والمحبة في كل الأمور.

هذه الشخصية، دعوة لنا للتمسك بكلمة الله المنقولة وإعلان المسيح كمخلص للإنسان والنظرة الإنجيلية للإنسان.

من المؤكد أن هناك شخصيات كثيرة يمكننا أن نعرضها، عاشت التزام مختلف في الكنيسة الأولى. كما قلت لا أقصد بعرض هذه الشخصيات أن تكون المقاربة archéologique للماضي بقدر ما هي الإضاءة على بعض ما قاموا به: تكييفهم... استعمالهم للغة... إجابتهم على أسئلة اجتماعية... إعطاء كلمة خلاصية.

في صلاتنا، بحسب طقس الكنيسة السريانية المارونية: «أذكر، يا رب، المعلمين الحقيقيين، الذين رقدوا على الإيمان الحق، لا سيما بطرس وبولس، ومرقس وإقليموس واغناطيوس وديونيسيوس ويوليوس، هؤلاء الذين احتملوا، من أجل ثبات بيعتك، كل عذاب واضطهاد...»

أختم ببعض الأفكار عن النماذج الواردة أعلاه:

- أعلنوا المسيح وشهدوا له وكلفهم الأمر حياتهم ... ونحن كيف نعلن المسيح وماذا يكلفنا؟

- الكنيسة الأولى أعطت شهودًا ومناذجًا متعددة في الاضطهاد، بشر من لحم ودم مثلنا... ونحن أي نموذج نقدم لعالم اليوم وفي تفاصيل حياتنا؟



الآباء شرقاً وغرباً اعتبروها مثلاً للعدارى القديسات

نقرأ في طروبارية القديسة تقلا باللحن الثالث: أَيْتَهَا الْمَجِيدَةُ تقلا، يا رَفِيقَةَ بولسَ الإلهي، لَمَّا التَّهَبْتَ بِحُبِّ خَالِقِكَ مِنْ تَعَالِيمِ الْكَارِزِ الإلهي، إِزْدَرَيْتِ الْأَرْضِيَّاتِ الزَّائِلَةَ، وَقَدَّمْتَ نَفْسَكَ لِلَّهِ ضَحِيَّةً مُقَدَّسَةً مَقْبُولَةً، غَيْرَ خَائِفَةٍ مِنَ الْعَذَابَاتِ ...

وهذا ما نجده في طروبارية القديسة تقلا باللحن الثاني: أَيْتَهَا الْكَلْبِيَّةُ المديحِ تقلا التي فَقَّهَهَا اللهُ، بِمَا أَنَّكَ تَتَلَمَّذْتَ لبولس، وَثَبَّتَ فِي إِيمَانِ بطرس، ظَهَرَتْ بَيْنَ النِّسَاءِ أُولَى الشَّهِيدَاتِ وَفِي الْمُجَاهِدَاتِ. فَقَدْ وَطِئَتْ اللَّهْيَبَ كَأَنَّكَ فِي مَرَجٍ نَضِيرٍ، وَخَافَتْ مِنْكَ الْوُحُوشُ وَالثِّيْرَانُ لَتَسْلُجِكَ بِالصَّلِيبِ. فَيَا رَفِيقَةَ الرُّسُلِ تقلا، تَشَفَّعِي إِلَى الْمَسِيحِ الإلهِ فِي خَلَاصِ نَفُوسِنَا.

طروبارية للقديسة تقلا باللحن الرابع: نَعَجْتُكَ يَا يَسُوعَ تَصْرُخُ نَحُوكَ بِصَوْتٍ عَظِيمٍ قَائِلَةً: يَا خَتَنِي إِنِّي أَشْتَاقُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَجَاهِدُ طَالِبَةً إِيَّاكَ، وَأُصَلِّبُ وَأُدْفَنُ مَعَكَ بِمَعْمُودِيَّتِكَ، وَأَتَأَلَّمُ لِأَجْلِكَ حَتَّى أَمْلِكُ مَعَكَ، وَأَمُوتُ عَنْكَ لِكَيْ أَحْيَا بِكَ.

يُوحَنَّا فَمِ الذَّهَبِ، عَادَ إِلَى تَقْلَا فِي عَظَمَتِهِ لَشَعْبِ الْقِسْطَنْطِينِيَّةِ: «هَا إِنَّ الْقَدِيسَةَ تَقْلَا فِي ابْتِدَاءِ تَنْصُرِهَا قَدَّمَتْ مَا عِنْدَهَا مِنَ الْجَوَاهِرِ عَلَى وَجْهِ الْإِسْعَافِ لِبُولُسَ الرَّسُولِ وَأَنْتُمْ الْقُدَمَاءُ فِي هَذِهِ الدِّيَانَةِ وَالْمُفْتَخِرِينَ بِالْإِسْمِ الْمَسِيحِيِّ لَا تُسَاعِدُونَ الْمَسِيحَ بِشَيْءٍ تَتَصَدَّقُونَ بِهِ عَلَى الْفُقَرَاءِ».

إيريناوس من ليون (٢٠٢+)

ولد إيريناوس في الشرق وذهب إلى الغرب إلى زيمير في تركيا الحالية بين سنتي ١٣٥ و ١٤٠، وتلمذ على يد الأسقف بوليكاربوس الذي كان بدوره تلميذاً ليوحنا. لا نعرف متى انتقل إلى آسيا الصغرى، إلى ليون...

عاش التزامه المسيحي من خلال نقل الإيمان الصحيح والدفاع عنه في صراعه مع الغنوصية، همه الأول أن تصل رسالة الخلاص الإنجيلية، حماية المعمدين من الأفكار الخاطئة. نجح في هداية الكثيرين إلى الإنجيل.

تميز النموذج الذي عاشه بخدمة الفقراء والتواضع في طريق الأمانة لرسالة المسيح.

بالرحمة ولنحاول أن نتشبهه بالسيد ولنتبارى في حمل الظلم والمهانة والاحتقار حتى لا يكون للشيطان في قلوبكم مكان ينبت فيه عشب» (أفسس ١١). «اهربوا من الشقاكات لأنها رأس الشرور» (إزمير ٧).

«يستودع الشهيد الله كنيسته المترملة ويطلب من الكنائس المحلية أن يولوها العناية والصلاة والمحبة: «اذكروا في صلاتكم الكنيسة التي في سوريا التي يراها الله عوضاً عني. ولن يكون لها أسقف غير المسيح ومحبتكم» (رومية ٩). يطلب بوضوح في رسالته إلى أهل روما: «... أخشى أن تظلمني محبتكم... لن تتاح لي فرصة كهذه للذهاب إلى الله... لا أطلب منكم شيئاً... فقط أن تتركوني أقدم دمي ضحية على مذبح الرب... أرجو أن تسألوا الله ليعطيني القوة الداخلية والخارجية لأكون إنساناً مسيحياً لا باللسان فقط بل بالقلب، لا بالاسم بل بالفعل... ليست المسيحية إلا قوة الله عندما تُضطهد في العالم ويتجه ضدها مقت البشر. أكتب إلى الكنائس كلها لأعلن لها أنني أموت بمحض اختياري من أجل المسيح... أضرع إليكم راجياً أن تضعوا عطفكم جانباً لأنه لا يفيدني. اتركوني فريسة للوحوش. إنها هي التي توصلني سريعاً إلى الله. أنا قمح الله أطحن تحت أضراس الوحوش لأخبز خبزاً نقياً للمسيح... اضرعوا إلى المسيح حتى يجعل من الوحوش واسطة لأكون قريباً لله... أتوق للوحوش التي تنتظرنني... أرجوكم أن تتركوني وشأني. إني أعرف ما يوافقني. لقد ابتدأت أن أكون تلميذاً للمسيح... قربت الساعة التي سأولد فيها. اغفروا لي يا إخوتي، دعوني أحياء، اتركوني أموت... اتركوني أقتدي بآلام ربي...».

القديسة تقلا (حوالي ٩٠+)

شخصية معروفة في شرقنا، آمنت بالمسيح بكراسة بولس. خطبت لكنها رفضت الزواج وأرادت التكرس للمسيح وتخلت عن الكثير وخاصة عائلتها الميسورة.

تعرضت للعنف البيتي، ضغوط الأم والأب: فتاة صغيرة ولكن قوية.

لم ترسخ أمام ضغوط السلطات الرومانية وتهديدات الوالي. رفضت عبادة الأصنام، فضلت الشهادة، كنمط جديد في الحياة طرح تساؤلات. لم تهتم بمشاكلها، فالخطر دائم، لم تنغل بل انطلقت. التحقت ببولس في انطاكية... بشرت بالمسيح.



أغناطيوس الأنطاكي، المتوشح بالله (١٠٧+)

أسقف وراع لكنيسة، تعرض لضغوط من الخارج وواجه صعوبات في الداخل. اهتم بتشجيع المؤمنين للتمسك بالايان والحفاظ على الوحدة.

يدعو القديس إغناطيوس نفسه «الحامل للإله» أو «المتوشح بالله». والحوار المحاكمة الذي حفظته أعمال إستهاده يتضمّن معنى كونه حاملاً للإله. «كل من يؤمن بالله وبأن المسيح يسوع هو ابن الله، ويعمل الصلاح لأجل الله وحباً بالله، يحمل الله في قلبه... وأنا أحمل الله في قلبي لأن المسيح، جلّ اسمه، هو قال لنا: من كانت عنده وصاياه وحفظها فهو الذي يحبني والذي يحبني يحبه أبي، وإليه نأتي، وعنده نجعل مقامنا (يوحنا ١٤: ٢١-٢٣).

بطريقه نحو الإستشهاد في روما، استفاد من الفرص ليشهد للمسيح ويعلم الكنائس.

الرسائل التي كتبها تعبر بامتياز عن التزامه المسيحي والنموذج الذي اعطاه. بالحقيقة ترك لنا سبع رسائل، تعتبر «تحفة من تحف الكتابات الآبائية لما تنضح به من روح الرب والإيمان الراسخ بيسوع المسيح والغيرة على الكنائس، وكذلك المعلومات القيّمة عن الكنيسة الأولى وبعض صعوباتها واهتماماتها ومواقفها».

الملفت وصفه للشهيد بقوله لأهل أفسس: «أنا ضحيّكم المتواضعة أيها الأفسوسيون. إني أقدم ذاتي من أجل كنيستكم (أفسس ٨). ولأهل إزمير يؤكد: «إن روحي وقیودي... هما فدية لكم» (إزمير ١٠). الشهادة لإسم الرب يسوع كشراف وهدف واقتداء بآلام المخلص الذي هو الحياة. «القريب من السيف قريب من الله... أن تكون وسط الوحوش يعني إنك مع الله شرط أن يكون ذلك باسم يسوع المسيح. إني احتمل كل شيء لأتألم معه...» (إزمير ٤). القيود هي الجواهر الروحية (أفسس ١١).

يعبر بإنسانية كبيرة عندما يطلب كشهد محبة الكنائس وصلواتها في كل مكان. لأهل أفسس يقول إنه يرجو بصلواتهم أن يوفّق في مصارعة الوحوش في رومية ويؤهل للتلمذة الحقيقية (أفسس ١).

تمسك بخدمة التعليم خلال اسره وبعث بإرشادات كنسية للحفاظ على الوحدة في المحبة. «رؤس الأشرار وأخضعهم بالوداعة» (بوليكاربوس ٢). «كونوا... إخوة

عندما طلب مني الصديق مايكل المشاركة من خلال هذه المداخلة وبعد استيضاح مع الأخ العزيز عيسى دياب. بالحقيقة لضيق الوقت وبغية استيضاح رأي العامة ودس النبض والحس الموجود عند الناس حول الموضوع.

طلبت من المؤمنين في الكنيسة حيث أخدم، البقاء بعد الصلاة لبضعة دقائق، وسألتهم: ما هي إجابتكم وبماذا تفكرون عندما نتكلم عن: «نماذج التزام مسيحي من العصور المبكرة للكنيسة»، كيف عاشوا المعاناة والاضطهاد وكيف قاوموا. الأجابة واضحة ومباشرة، ابونا نحن مغنجن بلبنان، الكنيسة الأولى عانت كثيرًا... ومباشرة انتقلوا بمقاربتهم لإعطاء أسماء: مثلاً اغناطيوس الأنطاكي، القديسة تقلا...

المقاربة ليست لاهوتية ولا بحث تاريخية، انها محاولة بسيطة لعرض بعض نماذج الالتزام كما هو عالق في الذاكرة التاريخية لأبناء كنيستنا. لذلك فالمقاربة محدودة وتهدف ان تكون كلمة تشجيع لحاضرنا ومستقبلنا وتسلط الضوء على هذه الناحية من الكنيسة الاولى.

الشخصيات التي نحن بصددھا عاشت التزامھا المسيحي وجسدت توجّه عام مقاوم، ليس بالسلاح بل باللحم والدم والفكر وكلمة الله والروح القدس. شخصيات متنوعة، من الجنسين (رجال ونساء، كبار وصغار، صبايا وشباب) ... أظهروا موقف الجماعة الكنسية الأولى تجاه الاضطهادات والضغوط.

نقرأ في التاريخ ليس للتغني بالألم وتشجيع التضحية أو لنبجل أبطال. بالحقيقة يمكننا الحديث عن «عبقريّة المقاومة». بالإضافة لحب سيد الحياة رغم الموت المحيط بهم. ما سأقوله، لا يهدف إلى التقليد، تقليد هذا الشخص أو هذا الشخص من الماضي ولكن ما عاشه هؤلاء الأشخاص يحمل لنا بعض الإجابات. انهم يطرحون تساؤلات كبيرة علينا وعلى ردات فعلنا. انه انطلاق إلى الأمام مع العلم ان الظاهر الذي عاشوه لم يقدّم إلا الموت والاضطهاد. لقد شاهدوا نور المسيح رغم السواد المحيط بهم. تعرضوا لجنون الكراهية، كما تعرّض لها يسوع والتلاميذ ومن اختار المسيح.

سأتوقف عند ثلاث شخصيات: أغناطيوس الأنطاكي والقديسة تقلا وإيريناوس ليون (مبادرة المجوس: شرق وغرب موجود، شرق اعطى اثنين منهم للغرب: شهيد وأسقف ... والثلاثة أعطوا الكنيسة)

نماذج التزام مسيحي من العصور المبكرة للكنيسة

الخوري
طانيوس خليل

أصحاب السيادة....
أخواتي أخوتي

اسمحو لي ان ابدأ بصلاة المزمور ٥٥ (٥٤)

أصغ يا الله إلى صلاتي، ولا تتغاض عَن تَصْرُعي. ^٣أَنْصِتْ إليَّ وَاسْتَجِبْ لي.
أرودُ مُسرِعًا وأهيمُ على وجهي هَرَبًا مِنْ صوتِ العَدُوِّ وجورِ الأشرار. يجلبُونَ
عليَّ الشَّقَاءَ ويحقِّدُونَ عليَّ غاضِبِينَ. ^٥قلبي يتوجَّعُ في داخلي، وأهوالُ الموتِ
وقَعَت عليَّ. ^٦الخوفُ والفزعُ حَلَا بي، والرَّعْشَةُ اسْتَوَلَتْ عليَّ. ^٧فأقولُ: «ليتَ
لي جناحًا كالحمامة، فأطيرَ بعيدًا وأستريحَ. ^٨أبتعدُ في طيراني هارِبًا، وفي البرِّيَّةِ
أبيتُ. ^٩هناكَ أُسرِعُ إلى النِّجاةِ مِنَ الزَّوابعِ والرِّياحِ والعاصفةِ». ... ^{١٧}أما أنا فإلى
اللهِ أصرُخُ والرَّبُّ الإلهُ هوَ الذي يُخلِّصُنِي. ^{١٨}مساءً وصباحًا وظُهْرًا أشكو وأنوحُ
فيسمَعُ صوتي. ^{١٩}يفتديني بسلامٍ إذا اقْتربوا ووقفوا بكثرةٍ حولي... ^{٢٣}ألقي على
الرَّبِّ هَمَّكَ وهوَ يَعولُكَ لا يدْعُ الصَّدِيقَ يَضْطَرِبُ إلى الأبدِ.... أما أنا فعليكَ
أَتَوَكَّلُ.

كلمات هذا المزمور وغيره رُددت في الكنيسة الأولى ومؤخرًا في العراق وسوريا...
في بلدان شرقنا.

هنا تبرز الحاجة إلى بلورة مثال يفهمه عالمنا ويقبله. نحن بحاجة إلى بلورة لاهوت *théologie* هو بالأحرى *téologie* «علم الهدف النهائي» علم الـ *Télos* الغاية الأخيرة. فإن كان الصليب حماقة للوثنيين (١ كور ١: ٢٣)، فذلك لأنّه حكمة لا يمكن فهمها عند من لا يرى الغاية منها وإلى أين يمكن أن تؤدّي. فالحكمة الحقيقيّة هي بالأحرى «لا حكمة» عند من لا يفهم أن بعد الموت حياة أهمّ من الحياة البيولوجيّة، وخلص ليس لذّة أرضيّة بل خير أبدي.

إنّ المطلوب هو سماع الكلمة للشفاء من الجهل. أما الجاهل الذي يقول في قلبه «لا إله» (مز ٥٣: ١)، فهو من لا يأخذ كلمة الله بالحسبان ولا يتصرّف إلّا على هواه. إنه من لا يعطي الله أهميّة في قراراته وتصرفاته؛ لأنّ الله بالنسبة إليه ليس مرجعيّة يعود إليها لقيادة حياته، عكس ما يفعل الحكيم لأن «الحكيم عيناه في رأسه، أما الجاهل فيسير في الظلام» (جا ٢: ١٤) ودواء الجهل واحد معروف: كلمة الله.



يمكن سلوكه في أوقات الأزمات، ليعطي معنى للوجود، مع احترامه للإنسان صورة الله ومثاله.

في العهد الجديد مثل ملهم لنا عن عذارى حكيما وعذارى جاهلات (مت ٢٥: ١-١٣)، لأنه يكشف جوهر الحكمة المطلوبة للقاء العريس والعيش بسعادة على ما قال سفر الأمثال «إن كان قلبك يا ابني حكيما... فلا بد لك يا بني من آخرة ورجاؤك لا يُنكر عليك» (أم ٢٣: ١٥-١٨). الحكمة هنا مرادفة للأمانة لله والطاعة لوصاياه. هي ليست وصايا إجبارية بل قاعدة للفكر السليم، وطريق الحياة، فإن تبعها الإنسان كان عاقلاً ربح الحياة والسعادة. إنها حالة العذارى الحكيما اللواتي عرفن كيف يحافظن على أمانتهن لله، فاتبعن طريقه المؤدّي إلى الحياة؛ أمّا الجاهل فهو من لا يختار الحكمة، فيعارض الله ولا يسمع كلامه، ويحصد بالتالي النتائج الوخيمة على ما فعلت الجاهلات، اللواتي لم يحفلن بوصايا الله فعشن لا مباليات بنتائج موفقهنّ هذا.

إنّ المهمّ في الحكمة هو الاستباق والعمل نظراً للمستقبل، وليس التوقف عند الحاضر وحسب. حضّرت الحكيمات الزيت فكنّ حاضرات للمستقبل الإلهي. فهمنّ أن الحكمة هي ما تؤدّي إلى الخير الحقّ النهائي الأبديّ، على ما بشّر بولس الرسول في رسالته الأولى إلى كورنثوس «ما يعتبره هذا العالم حكمة هو في نظر الله حماقة» (١ كور ٣: ١٩) و«ما يبدو أنّه حماقة من الله هو أحكم من حكمة الناس» (١ كور ١: ٢٥). يمكن لحكمة الله أن تبدو للناس حماقة لأنهم عاجزون عن فهم ما سيؤدّي إليه مشروعه. فما يظهر للبشر حماقة اليوم، يرمي في الحقيقة إلى أبعد ممّا نراه من خير وشرّ.

الحكمة تتخطّان نحن المحدودون بالفكر والزمن، لذلك نبقي بحاجة إلى وحي يوجّهنا لنشارك في عمل الله في قيادة الإنسان والخلقة. في هذا الإطار جاء المسيح مثلاً للخلقة الجديدة والإنسان الجديد، يمكننا اتّباعه والسير في خطاه واثقين أنّه الطريق والحق والحياة. وما الإيمان سوى الانضمام إلى مشروعه. هو حكمة الله (١ كور ١: ٣٠)، لكنّه يبدو حماقة في عالمنا المادّي الأناني. فأن يعطي نفسه، ويخدم، ويغفر، ويقاسم الغير ليس مشروعاً «منطقياً» في عالم المصالح الشخصية والاستهلاك والقوّة والسلطة والمال... حيث يضع الإنسان نفسه محوراً ومصلحة فوق كلّ اعتبار. إنّهُ بالفعل حماقة.

شرّ كلّها» وفي العبارة «الأيام شرّ كلّها» كناية، تعبّر عن الشرّ المستشري والذي صار مفضوحاً واضحاً، في كلام البشر الفارغة وتصرفاتهم الجاهلة؛ هي الأيام التي يسود فيها أشخاص سيّئون، ومجموعات تتلاعب بالناس، وجماعات ضغط متغترسة علناً، أيام يسيطر عليها البؤس والصعوبات والألم الذي يطال المؤمنين. لا تستنتج الرسالة إلى أفسس دعوة إلى التهرّب من الالتزام، بل تدعو إلى ردّة فعل مقاوم، عكس التيار الجارف. إنّه الوقت الذي يجدر فيه بالمؤمن معرفة كيفيّة ترجمة إيمانهم بقدرتهم على المقاومة، بإعلان التزامهم بالإنجيل وبحق الفقراء دون مساومة. فزمن الأزمات هو في الوقت عينه زمن العمل المسؤول يضطلع به المؤمنون أمام الشرّ العامل في المجتمع، فعليهم تقع المسؤولية فضح حقيقة الأشرار، ومجابهتهم بأعمال مسؤولة. في نص الرسالة إلى أفسس تتكرّر على ثلاث مرّات عبارة «لا... بل» في وصف ما على المسيحي القيام به عكس تصرفات العالم، ولو بدا أنّه الرابع (أف ٥: ١٥، ١٧، ١٨) المطلوب إذاً السهر، والانتباه، والوضوح، والوعي والتمييز. فزمن الأزمة هو وقت التعمّق بالحكمة المسيحيّة وإعلانها؛ هو وقت عيش اللحظة الحاضرة بالشهادة للاختلاف المسيحي. هكذا «نغتني الفرصة السانحة» (أف ٥: ١٦) أو نفتدي الوقت. نحيا الوقت الحاضر ولو ساد فيه الشرّ على حساب طريق الإنجيل. نفتدي الزمن بأن نعطيه معنى إيجابياً مغتنمين الفرصة باعتبارها مناسبة للحقيقة ولتمييز إرادة الله في تفاصيل الحياة: في الحب والغرام (نشيد الأناشيد)؛ في الألم (أيوب)؛ في الموت واللامعنى (الجامعة)؛ في العمل والصدقة واستعمال الأملاك، والغضب والفرح، والكرهية والرغبة... (أمثال) وفي الصلاة (مزامير). نعم عالمنا المعاصر بحاجة ماسّة إلى إعادة تعلّم القواعد الإنسانيّة وإعادة اكتشاف الطابع الخلاصي لحدوده وضعفه. على هذا المستوى، لنا في الأدب الحكمي طريق خصب يمكننا اتّباعه. وقت الأزمات الذي تمرّ فيه اليوم يفسح لنا في المجال لإعطاء الأهميّة لتعليم الأدب الحكمي المتمحور حول قطبين: الأوّل هو الانتباه للإنسان وموقف البحث المتنبّه إلى الخبرة والوعي لطابع الواقع المتغيّر والغامض، والذي يبقى أحياناً دون أجوبة «من يعرف ما هو الأفضل للإنسان» (جا ٦: ١٢)، و«ما هو الإنسان» (مز ٨: ٥؛ ١٤٤: ٣) وكلّ الأسئلة التي نجدها في كتابي أيوب وأمثال. فيترك الأدب الحكمي الباب مفتوحاً أمام حوار الحضارات والثقافات؛ والقطب الثاني يدلّ على طريق روحي



الكوني، بعلاقته مع الله ومع أخيه الإنسان. من هنا نفهم كيف أن تطبيق الإرادة الإلهية تعطي الفرح، ذلك أنها تعكس وحدة الإنسان، وتعزز وحدة المجتمع في انسجامه مع الله.

أما اليوم فنحن نعيش اليوم في عالم معلمن، صارت فيه العودة إلى الله، بالنسبة إلى العديد من معاصرنا، في سعيهم إلى العيش بفرح، أمراً غير مفهوم أو غير منطقي، وفي حين تبدو لهم النصوص البيبلية في كتب الشريعة، كما أصوات الأنبياء، مطبوعة بتقليد يخص شعباً معيناً، محكوماً بحقيقة تدخل الله في التاريخ، فإن النصوص الحكمية تلاقي بصورة أكبر مفاهيم عالم اليوم ومنطقه. فهي تنطلق من الخبرة المعاشة يومياً، في مسيرة بحث لتكتشف العالم الإنساني آثار إرادة إلهية، والوحدة الأساسية بين هذه الإرادة والكون والإنسان.

النصوص الحكمية مصدر إلهام للكنائس المعاصرة

لطالما شكّلت كلمة الله استفزازاً للعقل البشري وللحقيقة الإنسانية والتاريخية. فكم من المرات أعلن الوحي الإلهي، بواسطة الأنبياء، أن ما يمكن للناس أن يحكموا بأنها حالة سلم وازدهار، هي في الحقيقة حالة أزمات حرجة. هذا ما كان عليه الحال مثلاً في حقبة يربعام الثاني (٧٨٦-٧٤٦) المزدهرة اقتصادياً، حيث أتت نبوءة عاموس لتشجب اللاعدالة الاجتماعية التي تجعل من كل الممارسات الطقسية والدينية عبادات فارغة.

صوّرت البيبليا طريق شعب العهد مطبوعة بخيانات البشر التي واجهها الله بالأمانة، والدعوة إلى التوبة. فما هو أزمة عند شعب الله ليس محكوماً بمعايير اجتماعية أو اقتصادية، بل بكلمة الله المحيية. فالكتاب المقدس هو في غالبته تاريخ أزمات الشعب وشهادات في موضوع كلمات الله تحت أشكال عدّة، في حقبات مختلفة.

فكيف يمكن أن يكون الأدب الحكمي مصدر إلهام لأيماننا الحاضرة ولكنائسنا؟

نقرأ في رسالة القديس بولس إلى أهل أفسس ٥: ١٥-١٧: «انتبهوا جيداً كيف تسيرون سيرة العقلاء لا سيرة الجهلاء، واغتنموا الفرصة السانحة، لأن هذه الأيام

فهم الكلمة الإلهية. وهكذا اصطدم منطق ثواب الأنقياء بخبرة الألم والموت، ما نقرأ صداه في كتابي أيوب الثائر والغاضب من عدم فهمه؛ والجامعة الحائر والخاضع أمام حكمة إلهية غير عادلة تفتقر إلى الترابط، فكان الحلّ في نظره كالتالي: إن كان لا معنى للحياة، وإن كان لا جديد تحت الشمس، لا يبقى للإنسان إلا أن يفهم بأن «العيش» الآن هو السعادة التي يمكنه الحصول عليها فنقرأ: «افرح أيها الشاب في صباك وليبتهج قلبك في أيام شبابك، أسلك طريق ما يهواه قلبك وما تراه وتشتهي عينك»، فليس لنا سوى حياة واحدة... ولا أحد يعلم ما يخبئ له الغد. هناك وقت للحياة ووقت للموت ولكن لله وحده العلم به (جا ٣: ١-١١). فلنفرح بأوقات السعادة القصيرة التي يمنحنا إياها الرب. أليس هذا منطق عالمنا اليوم؟

في كل الأحوال، يمكننا الاستنتاج بأن الحكمة البيبليّة ليست تياراً فكرياً متناسقاً وموحدًا، بل هو تيار فكري بحثي، ونهج تفكير ونقاش. فإن كان قد بدأ كمعرفة عملائية **savoir-faire**، فقد تحوّل إلى نهج حياتي **savoir-vivre**، يقود إلى نهج كينونة جديدة **savoir-être**. يتأرجح هذا التيار بين قطبين: مراقبة الواقع من جهة والعقيدة من جهة أخرى. بدأ في مراقبة الواقع الاجتماعي، فعمّم الملاحظات وحاول استنتاج الدروس للحصول على السعادة؛ بعد ذلك،

- خضعت هذه الحكمة العملية للنقد باسم التوراة الموحاة إلى موسى، ثم باسم لاهوت الثواب والعقاب المنفصلان عن الخبرات الواقعية.

- و خضعت العقيدة هي أيضاً للمساءلة انطلاقاً من الخبرة الحياتية.

فإن كان صحيحاً أن الحكمة هي طريق السعادة، فإن البحث عن هذا الطريق لم يُغلق.

فماذا نفهم اليوم؟

انطلقت الحكمة البيبليّة من المادي إلى الديني؛ لكنها أخذت الوقت الطويل للعبور من المادي الواقعي إلى الله وعلاقته بالإنسان والمجتمع؛ من فهم الخبرة دون العودة إلى المرجعية الإلهية، إلى تفكير تلعب فيه العلاقة بإله العهد الدور الأول فتحكم التصرفات في الحياة اليومية. فهتمت هذه الحكمة بأن الله هو من خلق العالم وهو من يحكمه. فأن يحفظ الإنسان الشريعة وفرائضها العملية في العديد من مجالات الحياة الشخصية والعامة، هو أن يأخذ مكانه في الترتيب



الطبيعية لتنشئة كوادرات الإدارة السياسية والدينية في البلاد مستنديين إلى الحكمة الشعبية كما إلى الحكمة الملكية والدينية.

منذ حقبة الملوك كان هناك كتبة وضعوا التقاليد الشفوية في نصوص فصارت أساساً للتواراة، وهم من سيجمعون بعد ذلك كل الأقوال الشعبية في مجموعات مبنية لأهداف تعليمية تربوية وأخلاقية، وما سفر الأمثال إلا ثمرة لهذا العمل. في المنفى أخذ عمل الكتبة أهمية كبرى ومكاناً مهماً في تطور الديانة اليهودية التي، إضافةً إلى الطابع الجماعي للإيمان، اغتنت ببعدها شخصي داخلي، فصارت الصلاة في غياب الهيكل، أهم من الذبائح الطقسية: «ذبيحة الأشرار يمجتها الرب وصلاة المستقيمين تخطى برضاه» (أم ١٥: ٨). أعطيت الأهمية للفهم الشخصي للدين على أنه نبع الحكمة، من خلال درس النصوص والتأمل بها والصلاة. لكن هذه الحكمة ذات البعد الشخصي لم تمرّ دون صعوبات. فما يعلنه سفر الأمثال يشكل تعارضاً ما بين التشجيع على الفهم والتحذير من الفطنة والحكمة الشخصية:

«بكل قلبك اطمئن إلى الرب ولا تعتمد على فطنتك. أينما سرت تعرف إليه فيسير كل طريقك. لا تكن حكيماً في عينيك واثق الرب وانصرف عن الشر» (أم ٣: ٥-٧). وهو ما حذر منه أشعيا: «ويل للحكماء في أعين أنفسهم، العقلاء في نظر ذواتهم» (أش ٥: ٢١)، «فها أنا أصنع مرة أخرى عجائباً بهذا الشعب، فتبديد حكمة حكمائه وينكسف عقل عقلائه» (أش ٢٩: ١٤).

ولكن هل تتعارض حكمة الرب وحكمة البشر؟ وهل تتماشى مخافة الرب مع جهود العقل المتحرر من كل سلطة وخضوع؟ يصور سفر الأمثال خضوع الإنسان لشريعة الله كخضوع سعيد، لأن المعرفة بعد يقارب اللذة على ما يصف سفر الأمثال الأمانة الزوجية (أم ٥: ١٥). فمع البعد الشخصي الذي أخذه الإيمان أثناء السبي، تحول العهد الذي أقامه الله مع شعبه، إلى عهد يجدر بكل مؤمن الحفاظ عليه من خلال علاقة شخصية بالرب. هذا ما أدى إلى تيار تقوي كبير في حقبة ما بعد السبي. لكن السعادة الموعودة لمن «يتقي» الرب، لم تتحقق دائماً. فقد رأى المؤمنون أن الأشرار يعيشون الرفاهية في حين يتلقى الأبرار المآسي. ولكن على الرغم من كل شيء تتخطى الخبرة الإنسانية هذه الرؤيا الشعرية.

صحيح أن الأنبياء برّروا آلام الشعب بأنها نتيجة لترك كلمة الرب، لكن سفر المراثي يعلن أنها مصائب لا تتناسب مع الذنوب المرتكبة، ويعلن بالتالي صعوبة

في طريق الفطنة» (أم ٩: ٤-٦). ويذهب ابن سيراخ إلى حدّ اعتبار الحكمة امرأة على الرجل أن يبحث عنها ويتزوَّجها (سي ١٤: ٢٠). وكأنّ الحكمة هي الصورة الأنثويّة لله، الذي أراد منذ الخلق أن تكون السعادة للإنسان: «طرقها تقود إلى النعم وجميع مسالكها سلام. شجرة حياة للمتمسّكين بها، ومن يتمكّن منها فهنيئاً له. الرّب بالحكمة أسّس الأرض وبالفهم ثبّت السماوات. بمعرفته تفجّرت البنايع وأمطرت السحاب ندى» (أم ٣: ١٧-٢٠). إذاً ليست الحكمة البشريّة في جوهرها سوى «مخافة الله»: «بدء الحكمة أن تخاف الله وتبيّن معرفة القدوس» (أم ٩: ١٠)، وهي الحكمة التي تحرّر الإنسان من كلّ خوف: «إذا جئت لتنام فلا ترتعب، بل تنام ويحلو نومك. لا تخف من رعب مفاجيء ومن إساءة تأتي من الأشرار، لأن الرب يكون سنداً لك ويحرس قدمك فلا تعثر» (أم ٣: ٢٤). وهكذا يحيا العالم في نور الحكمة فيما يغرق الجاهل الفاسد بالظلمة (أم ٤: ١٨-٢٣). المعادلة الأخلاقيّة إذاً واضحة: فعل الخير يقود إلى السعادة، وفعل الشر يقود إلى التعاسة: «لعنة الرّب في بيت الأشرار، وبركته في بيوت الصديقين» (أم ٣: ٣٣).

لكن دون هذه المعادلة صعوبات جدية!

تطور مفهوم الحكمة بعد السبي

مع الأنبياء، انفصلت الحكمة عن السلطة، فكانوا أوّل من جهد لفصل الدين عن السياسة. في بابل، انطلق التفكير الحكمي، حتى حلّ الحكماء رويداً رويداً مكان الأنبياء. فالحكمة، نظراً لالتصاقها بالله هي القادرة على إغناء فهم من يبحثون عنها، وبالتالي فإنّ الدرس والبحث الفكري ضروريان لنمو الحكمة للوصول إلى الله، وهما شرطان أساسيان للحياة ولا يجوز أن يكون ذلك اختيارياً. فهذه الحكمة هي العقل الخالق ضابط الكون (أم ٨: ٢٢-٣٥)، إنها الكلمة الخالقة (سي ٢٤: ٣) ولا بدّ للإنسان من لقائها ليتعلّق بها ويحيا.

في مقابل الكهنة، حافظي المؤسّسات الدينيّة والمسؤولين عن الطقوس والرتب في الجماعات اليهوديّة في بابل والاسكندريّة وأورشليم، ولّد هذا التيار الحكمي فئة جديدة هي مجموعة الكتبة. اجتمع فيهم مصدرا الحكمة الإلهيّة والشعبيّة، فأخذوا على عاتقهم مهمّة تعليم الكتابة والقواعد وعلم الحساب والعلوم



من خلال الآلهة القادرة وحدها على قيادته نحو هدفه. أعطت الآلهة البشر ملكاً يحكم باسمها، ويقود شعبه ويميّز بالعدل والاستقامة، وهو ما طالب به الشعب اليهودي صموئيل بقولهم «أقم علينا ملكاً يقضي بيننا كما هي الحال في جميع الأمم» (١ صم ٨: ٥). ولكي يستطيع الملك أن يقوم بهذه المسؤولية الملكية، كان عليه أن يحيط نفسه بأشخاص قادرين أن يميزوا الإرادة الإلهية (عرّافون، حكماء...) على ما يقول سفر الأمثال: «بي (الحكمة) الملوك يملكون والحكام يحكمون بالعدل» (١٥: ٨).

الحكمة من الرب بالذات

أخذت هذه الحكمة الملكية، التي كانت مشتركة بين كل الحضارات، خطأ مميزاً مع الأنبياء الذين أعلنوا بأنّ حكمة الملوك تتعلق بمقدار تطبيقهم لشريعة الله. ولم يتوان الأنبياء عن التهكم بقسوة من حكمة الملوك الذين يغتنون على حساب الفقراء؛ هؤلاء الذين تركوا الحكمة الحقّة أي «مخافة الله» لحسابات سياسية فاسدة. وقد أدّى العنف هجومات الأنبياء على السلطات الملكية إلى تبديل عرش الحكمة من الملك إلى الرب نفسه: «هذه الحكمة ومثيلاتها جاءت من عند الرب القدير وهو عجيب المشورة وعظيم الفهم» (أش ٢٨: ٢٩).

على مثال المنّ الذي غدّى الشعب المحرّر من مصر، ستلد شريعة الله الشعب وتغذّيه. مع هذه الشريعة المتعالية ستتمّ المواجهة مع الحكمة البشرية المنبثقة من الإنسان. فهذه الحكمة الإلهية الآتية من علّ ليست ملك الملوك والحكام المحكومين برغباتهم المتغيّرة بحسب مصالحهم، بل هي حكمة الله التي تعطي الناس شريعة واضحة، يفهمها الجميع وتغذّي فهم الجميع. لا تتعامل هذه الحكمة مع الناس بالإكراه، ولا تجبرهم على اتّباعها، للخضوع للإله وتلقّيه لكسب رضاه؛ بل على العكس من ذلك، تبدو هذه الحكمة في النصوص البيبلية كينبوع يوصل الإنسان إلى الكمال والفرح. هكذا يعلن سفر الأمثال بأنّ السعي إلى الفهم، والبحث عن الوعي هو أمر حيوي، ولذلك فالحكمة تحت الإنسان على ذلك كما الأم التي تشجّع أولادها على الغذاء الصحيح: «اسمعوا لي أيها الأنبياء... (أم ٨: ٣٢)، تنادي حيّد إلى هنا يا جاهل، وتقول لمن يعوزه الفهم تعال كل من طعامي واشرب الخمر التي مزجت. أتركوا الجهالة فتيوا، وسيروا

(عزرا ونحميا ومكابيين). فالأدب الحكمي على عكس الأدب النبوي، لم يولد في البيبليا وليس خاصاً بها، فقد وُجد في كل حضارات الشرق في الحقبة البيبليّة. عُرف يوسف طبعاً بحكمته في مصر (تك ٤١: ٣٩)، وفي القرن العاشر ق. م. قُدّم سليمان كمثال للحكمة، ولكن ملكة سبأ أيضاً عُرِفَت بالحكمة، ولقد كشفت الآثار عن كنوز حكميّة عند الحضارات المجاورة في سومر وبابل ومصر، تدلّ على جهد الفكر البشري لمواجهة الحقائق الحياتيّة اليومية، وتمييز ما يجب وما لا يجب فعله لخير الأفراد وتماسك المجتمع. هي نصوص تعبّر عن مهارة عمليّة، وأدب حيائيّ أُعدّت للتناقل عبر الأجيال وتحتوي على أخلاقيّات التصرف العائلي والمجتمعي والسياسي، دون التوقّف عند الاهتمامات الفرديّة، وهذا ما نقرأه في سفر الأمثال، ما يدلّ على الطابع المسكوني للحكمة، الذي يبدو وكأنّه مسوّدَةٌ للحركة الإنسانيّة المُعاصرة. ولكن هل نفهم بذلك أنّ الحكمة كانت منذ البدء مستقلّة عن الدين؟

مسيرة الحكمة وتطوّرها

تتجذّر حكمة الأقدمين التي تمحورت حول الممارسة العمليّة -pratico-pratique والتي تناقلوها من جيل إلى جيل بشكل أقوال شعبيّة، وتعاير صوريّة، ورموز يمكن للعقل حفظها، في الأرض والعمل الزراعي: «العاقل يحصد في الصيف والمعتوه ينام في الحصاد» (أم ١٠: ٥)؛ وتطال الحياة الشخصية الحميمة: «أكلة من البقول مع المحبة ولا عجل مسمّن مع البغض» (ام ١٥: ١٧)، لكنها تحوّلت مع الوقت إلى بحث ما ورائي، أبعد من الأشياء الملموسة والأحداث الماديّة والتاريخيّة، وصارت عند اليونان philosophie منبثقة من الفهم الإنساني المستند إلى العقل وحده دون العودة إلى أي وحي خارج عن الإنسان. بالفلسفة تحرّر الإنسان من الدين، وبحسب اللغة المُعاصرة، انفصلت الفلسفة تماماً عن اللاهوت. لكن هذه الحكمة اليونانيّة تُعتبر متأخّرة، ولم يكن الأمر كذلك في الحضارات الشرقيّة التي كانت متديّنة بكاملها.

العلاقة بين الحكمة والسلطة الملكيّة

كان مصدر الحكمة في العصور القديمة يُعتبر إلهيًّا. فالإنسان الباحث عن السعادة عرف عدم قدرته للوصول إلى طريقها، واستنتج أن لا أمل له بذلك إلا



الذين يريدون الوصول إلى غاية ما: «من منكم إذا أراد أن يبني برجًا لا يجلس أولاً وبحسب النفقة... وأي ملك يخرج إلى محاربة ملك آخر لا يجلس أولاً ويتشاور...» (لو ١٤: ٢٨-٤١).

وهكذا فإن تميّزت الشريعة والأنبياء بلاهوت تاريخ الخلاص، فإن الأدب الحكمي يقدم لاهوت الخليفة، وهو ما يُترجم باختلافات على الصعيد الإنساني. ففي لاهوت التاريخ، الله هو من يملئ على الإنسان ما يفعله وكيف. فالتوراة هي وحي إلهي أُعطي لموسى (خر ٢٠: ١)، والأنبياء هم من يعلنون كلمة الله ويقولون للشعب ما ينتظره الله منهم (مي ٦: ٦-٨)، ليبقى الإنسان في حالة من الأمان لأنّ لا إمكانية للإنسان أن يخطئ إن كان الله هو من يسيّره. مع أنّ الإنسان يبقى حرّاً في القبول أو الرفض، وهو ما يسمّيه الكتاب المقدس الطاعة لله أو عدم الطاعة أي الخطيئة. أما التيار الحكمي فيقدم مقاربة مختلفة لحياة البشرية. فبما أنّ الله خصّ الإنسان بالفهم، ووثق به لدرجة توكيله إدارة الخليفة، فعلى الإنسان أن يميّز بنفسه ما عليه أن يفعل، مع ما يتضمّن ذلك من خطر إمكانية الخطأ. وفي كلّ الأحوال ليس في الخطأ خطيئة لأنّ الإنسان يتعلّم من أخطائه. فالإنسان الذي يراقب ما يجري في الحياة اليومية وكيف يتصرّف الناس من حوله ويعرف كيف يستخلص النتائج، يتعلّم كيف يجد الأفضل، ومع الوقت يكتسب خبرة ويصبح حكيمًا، فيتطلّع أحيانًا إلى مشاركة خبرته مع الآخرين وبخاصّة مع أولاده، لكي يجدوا سريعًا النهج الذي عليهم أن يتبعوه في الحياة؛ وقد شكّلت نصائح هؤلاء الحكماء الأسس الأولى لبعض القصص والكتب الحكمية.

يمكننا إذا أن نقول بأن المبدأ الأوّل الذي تقوم عليه الحكمة هو: «أنظر، أحكم، تصرّف». على هذا المستوى يبقى الإنسان حرّاً، فلا نتكلّم عن طاعة أو خطيئة بل عن حكمة وجهل؛ فمن يرفض المشورة الصالحة لا يرتكب خطيئة بل هو جاهل يخطئ، أما من يقبلها فهو حكيم. وهكذا فلا حدود للحكمة لأنّ الحكيم قادر أن يزداد حكمة على الدوام.

لا يقتصر الأدب الحكمي في العهد القديم على الكتب الحكمية، من كتب صلاة (مزامير ومراثي)؛ وتعليم (أمثال والحكمة والجامعة وابن سيراخ)؛ وشعر الذي يمجّد الحب (نشيد الأناشيد)؛ إضافة إلى كتاب أيوب وفلسفة الثورة على الألم وعدم الفهم؛ فهناك القصص التاريخية (راعوث وأستير وطوبيا) والسجلات التاريخية

أدب الحكمة مصدر إلهام الكنائس المعاصرة

الأخت باسمه الخوري

مقدّمة : عن أية حكمة نتكلّم ؟

نقرأ في نبوءة إرميا الفصل ١٨ الآية ١٨ ما يلي: «فقالوا: تعالوا نكيد لإرميا مكيدة، فالشريعة لا تُحرم من كاهن، ولا المشورة من حكيم، ولا الكلمة من نبي. تعالوا نتهمه ولا نُصغي إلى كلمة من كلماته. تقدّم هذه الآية فئات المسؤولين الروحيين الثلاثة في شعب الله، كلّ فئة بحسب مهمّتها: الكاهن يعلن الشريعة الإلهية، والنبي يوصل كلمة الله، فيما يضطلع الحكيم بتقديم المشورة. وبين هذه المسؤوليات الثلاثة قُسم الكتاب المقدّس العبري إلى التوراة (الشريعة) والأنبياء والكتب الحكيمّة.

لطالما وُضعت كتب الشريعة والكتب النبويّة على مستوى واحد محوره الله سيّد التاريخ والأحداث، لأنّ التوراة أو كتب الشريعة هي كلمة الله التي أُعطيت للبشر. صرخ الشعب إلى الرّب فوعده بالتدخّل (خر ٦: ٥-٦) وحقّق وعده، وما مهمّة الأنبياء الأولى سوى إعلان كلمة الله وتشجيع الشعب على الثقة بالرّب والأمانة له (أش ٧: ٩). في كتب التوراة والأنبياء الإنسان هو الوثائق بالله المتّكل عليه. أما في الكتب الحكيمّة فالأمر يختلف ليُصبح الإنسان محور هذا الأدب، بحيث يضع الله ثقته به. فالله وضع في الإنسان الفهم والحكمة ليهتمّ بالخلقة، على ما نقرأ في سفر التكوين (١: ٢٧-٢٨)، وعلى ما طلب يسوع من



خاتمة

بالعودة إلى نصّ حزقيال، أعجز عن تحديد موقع مسيحيّ الشرق فيه، في هذه الآونة الصعبة، ولكنّي أتمسّك بإيماني المسيحي، إذ إنّي على ثقة بأنّ الرجاء يولّد من رحم اليأس، وبأنّ الحياة تولد من حشا الموت. فكما أوكل الربّ الى حزقيال أن يشاركه في إعادة الحياة إلى المقتولين، هكذا يظلّ يختار مَنْ سيُعيّنه في عمليّة الإنقاذ هذه.

ما يبعث فينا الرجاء هو أنّ الربّ أمين في كينونته، فكما بثّ الحياة في العظام المبعثرة لتتلاحم وتقف على رجلها، هكذا وهبَ روحَه القدّوس للتلاميذ المحبّطين على إثر صلب سيّدهم وموته. وهو نفسه ما زال يعمل لترميم ما تهدّم من حياتنا الجسديّة والمعنويّة والروحيّة، منتظرًا من كلّ شخصٍ ممّا أن يكون كحزقيال، وكيلاً له ليساعده في منح الروح المحيي لإخوته، الذين لا ذنبَ لهم سوى كونهم دُعوا باسمه.

فهل من أمرٍ يُعجزُ الله (تك ١٨ : ١٤)؟ وهل عليه أمرٌ مستحيل (إر ٣٢ : ١٧)؟

نافذة تأويّنة

عندما كنت أتأمّل بحزقيال ٣٧، سألت نفسي، هل يمكنني أن أحصي المرات التي تكرّر فيها هذا المشهد بالنسبة إلى مسيحيي الشرق، فعجزت عن ذلك، لذا سأكتفي بالشهادة لما رأيته بأمّ العين مع إخوتي العراقيين الذين غدوا، بتهجيرهم القسري من أرضهم، «عظاماً يابسة»، مع الفرق بأنّ مسيحيي حزقيال توجهوا نحو بابل، في حين أنّ مسيحيي العراق تركوا «بابل». لقد رأيتهم شهداء أحياء، متروكين، مُهمَلين، لا عمل لربّ البيت ليُعيد أولاده، لا بل لا مجال له لنيل إجازة عمل ليزاول مهنته، لا إمكانية لتسجيل الأولاد في المدارس اللبناينة التي تتبع برنامجاً آخر، لا مجال للاستشفاء مجاناً حتّى ولو كانوا بحالة خطيرة، بل عليهم تأمين المبالغ المستلزمة قبل الدخول إلى المستشفيات. هؤلاء هم الآتون من حياة العزّ والرفاهية، وجدوا ذواتهم في حالة مزرية، بحيث قال لي أحدهم إنّّه كان ينعم برغد العيش في بلاده، ولكنّ مرض ابنه المستجدّ في لبنان ألزمه أن يضحّي بكلّ ماله لينقذه، وها هو أصبح اليوم مستعطيّاً. ولكم تفتّر قلبي عندما طلبتْ منّي أمّ بعض معونة لتشتري الحليب لابنتها الرضيع، وكم شاهدتُ الدموع تنهمر على وجنتي رجل آخر عندما كان يُريني منزله الفخم الذي لم يبقَ له منه اليوم سوى صورة له في هاتفه الخليوي، وعندما كنت أحاول أن أعزيهم بأنّهم ظلّوا على قيد الحياة، وبأنّ داعش لم يسلبهم النساء والبنات كسبايا حرب، كانوا يوافقوني الرأي، ولكنّهم كانوا يضيفون بأنّهم سلبوهم معنى الحياة، سلبوهم كلّ جنى عمرهم.

والأعس من كلّ الأمور، أنّ مسلسل تهجيرهم القسري ما زال ساري المفعول، إذ عندما تحرّرت قرة قوش من هذه المنظمة الإرهابية، تجرّأ أحدهم وعاد إلى بلده، علّه يمكنه أن يرمّم منزله، فقبل له إنّّه لا يمكنه أن يزاوّل مهنته، هو الذي كان موظّف دولة، لأنّه ترك أرضه، بل عليه أن ينتظر أقلّه سنة ليبدأوا بالتحقيق معه، إذ ربّما يكون قد انتمى إلى داعش، يا للسخرية! ها أبناء دولته يكملون مخطّط تهجير المسيحيين، ولكن بصورة ضمنية. على كلّ حال، حتّى الذين بقوا في العراق، لم يتلقّوا درهماً واحداً من دولتهم لإعادة إعمار منازلهم التي تهدّمت وترمّدت.



لتكوّن هياكل عظمية، فتتضارب ببعضها لتأخذ مكانها. ومن ثم، راحت تتحوّل تدريجيًا إلى أجساد.

آ ٨: لقد انتهينا من الجزء الأول من عملية إعادة الإحياء. فالأجساد ينقصها الروح لتكتمل فيها الحياة الجديدة.

آ ٩: «فَقَالَ لِي: «تَنَبَّأْ لِلرُّوحِ، تَنَبَّأْ يَا ابْنَ الْإِنْسَانِ وَقُلْ لِلرُّوحِ: هَكَذَا قَالَ السَّيِّدُ الرَّبِّ: هَلُمُّ أَيُّهَا الرُّوحُ مِنَ الرِّيَّاحِ الْأَرْبَعِ، وَهُبِّ فِي هَؤُلَاءِ الْمَقْتُولِينَ فَيَحْيُوا»»؛ يستدعي الربّ الرياح من سائر أقطار المسكونة لتوجّه كلّ طاقتها نحو الجثث الموضوعة في السهل. المعروف أنّ الريح تتّجه من منطقة الضغط المرتفع نحو المنخفض، لكنّ الغرابة هنا، أنّ إنطلاقة الريح تبدو وكأنّها تتّجه في كلّ الاتجاهات في الوقت عينه.

بدأت تتّضح هويّة أصحاب الجثث. إنهم «مقتولون» في إحدى المعارك الكبرى. يُكلّف النبي بالقاء الأمر على الروح ليحيي المقتولين. بالرغم من أنّ الخلق هو عمل الله المباشر، ولكننا نرى هنا أنّ الله يجعل من الانسان شريكاً له فيه. «فَتَنَبَّأْتُ كَمَا أَمَرَنِي، فَدَخَلَ فِيهِمُ الرُّوحُ، فَعَاشُوا وَقَامُوا عَلَى أَقْدَامِهِمْ جَيْشًا عَظِيمًا جِدًّا جِدًّا» (آ ١٠). ما زال النبيّ يعمل كوكيل لعملية إعادة الإحياء.

«لِذَلِكَ تَنَبَّأْتُ وَقُلْتُ لَهُمْ: هَكَذَا قَالَ السَّيِّدُ الرَّبِّ: هَاءَ نَذَا أَفْتَحُ قُبُورَكُمْ وَأُصْعِدُكُمْ مِنْ قُبُورِكُمْ يَا شَعْبِي، وَآتِي بِكُمْ إِلَى أَرْضِ إِسْرَائِيلَ،^{١٣} فَتَعْلَمُونَ أَنِّي أَنَا الرَّبُّ...» (آآ ١٢-١٣). خبرة المنفى تشابه المكوث في القبر، والعيش من جديد يحتّم العودة إلى أرض الوطن.

«وَآتِي بِكُمْ إِلَى أَرْضِ إِسْرَائِيلَ»: يتضمّن خطاب الخلاص خروجاً جديداً. علماً أنّ هذه العودة إلى الوطن هي رمز للعودة إلى العيش تحت نظر الله وتجديد العهد معه.

«وَأَجْعَلُ رُوحِي فِيكُمْ فَتَحْيَوْنَ، وَأُفَرِّكُمْ فِي أَرْضِكُمْ، فَتَعْلَمُونَ أَنِّي أَنَا الرَّبُّ» (آ ١٤). تكلّمتُ وصنعتُ، يقولُ الربّ» (آ ١٤).

نصّ من أدب السبيّ

المفارقة أن يظهر في ظلّ هذا الجوّ المكفهر الأدبُ الأكثرُ تعزية ورجاء، اخترتُ منه سفر حزقيال ٣٧: ١-١٤، علّه يكون معيناً يُروي النفوسَ الظمأى إلى «الماء الحيّ».

نحن أمام مشهد مروّع لسهل ملآن بالعظام البشريّة اليابسة، منظر مُحزن وصاعق، يجعل الانسان يشمئزّ، ومما يعزّز النفور هو عندما جَعَلَ الربُّ النبيّ يمرّ عليها ومن حولها، بالرغم من إمكانيّة تنجّسه من الاتّصال بالأموات. وبعدها، يأتي سؤال الربّ غير المتوقع لحزقيال: «أُتري تخيا هذه العظام؟» ولكنّ النبيّ لم يعطِ أيّ تأكيد، لا إيجابيّ ولا سلبيّ، لأنّ الإيمان بالقيامة لم يكن واضحاً آنذاك بالنسبة إلى اليهود.

لقد قَذَفَ الكُرة إلى ملعب الربّ ليجيب هو نفسه. ولكنّ الربّ يعيدها إليه، إذ يطلب منه أن يشارك شخصياً في إعطاء الجواب: «تَبَنَّا على هذه العظام وَقُلْ لَهَا: أَيَّتُهَا الْعِظَامُ الْيَابِسَةُ، اِسْمَعِي كَلِمَةَ الرَّبِّ» (آ ٤)

يوذّ الربّ أن يفعل المستحيل

«هكذا قَالَ السَّيِّدُ الرَّبُّ لِهَذِهِ الْعِظَامِ: هَاءَئَذَا أُدْخِلُ فِيكَ رُوحًا فَتَحْيَيْنَ» (آ ٥). يمثّل الروح القوّة الإلهيّة المحيية والتي بدونها ما من إمكانيّة للحياة. فقط الله الذي منه تنبع كلّ حياة، يمكنه أن يعيد الحياة لهذه العظام. «أَجْعَلْ عَلَيْكَ عَصَبًا وَأُنْشِئْ عَلَيْكَ لَحْمًا وَأَبْسُطْ عَلَيْكَ جِلْدًا وَأَجْعَلْ فِيكَ رُوحًا» (آ ٦). تمرّ عمليّة الإحياء بأربع مراحل: وَصَلُ الْعِظَامِ بِالْأَعْصَابِ، ثم كَسَاءُ الْعِظَامِ بِاللَّحْمِ، ثم تركيبُ اللَّحْمِ مع الجلد، ثم نفث الكلّ بالروح. «فَتَحْيَيْنَ وَتَعْلَمِينَ أَنِّي أَنَا الرَّبُّ» (آ ٦). الغاية من إعادة إحياء العظام، ليست فقط الحياة البيولوجيّة، بل يريد الربّ إحياء الحياة الروحيّة، وذلك لإنعاش العلاقة معه، وتجديد العهد معه.

آ ٧-١٨: امثّل حزقيال لإرادة الربّ وقام مهمّته الخارقة. ولدى خطابه، راحت الأمور تتّجه من الفوضى نحو الانتظام، فالعظام راحت تترتّب وتتقارب

أدب السبي كنموذج للمسيحيين في الأزمنة الصعبة

الأخت روز ابي عاد

مقدمة

إخوتي، أطلب منكم أن تنتقلوا معي بفكركم إلى بابل، إلى ما بعد ٥٨٧ ق. م.، حيث كان يجري مشهد مبني على التناقض: فمن جهة، يتمتع البابليون، بقيادة نبوخذ نصر، بسكرة الانتصار، بعد أن تمكنوا من بسط نفوذهم على عدة مناطق، بما فيها اليهودية وبالتحديد أورشليم، ومن جهة أخرى، يحاكي يأس اليهود المنفيين الشعور بالهوت.

يا لهول الكارثة! بين ليلة وضحاها، استفاق الشعب على واقع أليم، هو أشبه بكابوس مروّع. ها هم على بُعد آلاف الكيلومترات عن الأرض التي وعدهم بها الرب: أسوار أورشليم دُمّرت، الهيكل هُدم، وتابوت العهد فُقد.

وهل من عجب أن تتدفق الأسئلة الوجودية: هل كانت وعود الرب لنا وهمًا؟ هل كان الرب صادقًا معنا؟ البابليون يعبدون مردوك، وهم على خير ما يرام، في حين نحن، الذين نعبد الرب، نتكبد الآلام والمصائب والمشقات، فمن هو الأقوى مردوك أو الرب؟

لقد فقد الشعب كل أمل بالمستقبل وبالرب، ويحتاج إلى الخلاص ليس فقط من المنفى في بابل، بل أيضًا من اليأس.

وأريد أن أقول لك شيئاً آخر: لا تطيل الجبل كثيراً، إذ، حاشى، يمكنه أن ينقطع. التجربة التي تعرضنا لها هي شديدة جداً لدرجة أنك مضطر، إنه واجب عليك أن تغفر لمن ابتعد عنك من شعبك في مصابهم ومذلتهم.

«يا إله إسرائيل، هربت إلى هنا لأتمكّن من خدمتك دون أن يعوقني شيء، لأطيع شرائعك وأقدّس اسمك. أمّا أنت، فإنك تفعل المستحيل حتّى لا أوّمن بك. إنّما إذا كنت تعتقد أنّك من خلال هذه التجارب ستنجح في إبعادي عن الطريق المستقيم، أنبّهك، يا إلهي وإله آبائي، أنّ ذلك لن يجديك نفعا. تستطيع أن تهينني وأن تضربني وأن تنتزع منّي أئمن وأغلى ما عندي في الدنيا، وأن تعذبني حتّى الموت، سأوّمن بك دوّمًا. دوّمًا سأحبّك، دوّمًا متحدّياً إرادتك نفسها».



في إحدى خرائب غتو^١ فرسوفيا، بين الحجارة المحروقة والعظام البشرية، وُجدت هذه الوصية، مقفلة بعناية في زجاجة صغيرة، وقد كتبها أحد اليهود، اسمه يوسل ركوفر، في الساعات الأخيرة من حياة الغتو:

فرسوفيا، ٢٨ نيسان ١٩٤٣

من خلال أشعة الشمس التي تخترق غرفتي كالرماح، محمّرة، من خلال النافذة الصغيرة، ونصفها مسدود، التي أطلقنا منها النار على العدو لأيام وليال، أفهم أنه لا بدّ قد حان وقت المساء، قبل الغروب بقليل. الشمس لا تعرف، على أغلب الظنّ، كم قليلاً يؤسفني أنني لن أستطيع رؤيتها بعد اليوم.

ملايين البشر في العالم الواسع، المغرمين بالنهار، بالشمس وبالنور لا يدرون أبداً، ليس لديهم أدنى فكرة كم من الظلمات والمصاب حملت لنا الشمس. تحوّلت إلى أداة بين يديّ الجزائريين، استخدموها كالضوء الكشاف لإكتشاف آثار الفارين. حين لجأت إلى الغابة مع زوجتي وأولادي - كانوا أصلاً ستة - الليل، فقط الليل كان يسترنا في عبّه: النهار كان يسلمنا لمضطهدين.

لا أستطيع القول، بعد أن شاهدت الكثير، أنّ علاقتي بالله لم تتغيّر. لكن يمكنني أن أؤكد بثقة مطلقة، أنّ إيماني به لم يتغيّر البتّة. قبلاً، عندما كنت أعيش في بحبوحة، علاقتي به كانت مع محسن لا يتعب، وكنت دوّماً مدين له. أمّا علاقتي به الآن فهي مع من لي عليه الكثير.

أؤمن بإله إسرائيل، رغم أنّه حاول بشتّى الطرق أن يجعلني لا أؤمن به. أؤمن بشريعته، وإن لم أتمكن من تبرير أفعاله. علاقتي به لم تعد علاقة العبد مع سيّده، بل علاقة التلميذ بمعلّمه. أحنّي رأسي أمام عظّمته. إلّا أنني لن أقبل القضيب الذي به يضربني.

أريد أن أقول لك بصراحة ووضوح أنّه الآن أكثر من أيّ مرحلة سابقة من مسيرة عذابنا التي لا تنتهي، نحن، المعذبون، المهانون، المخنوقون، نحن المدفونون أحياء والمحروقون أحياء، نحن المصابون، المضروبون، المحتقرون، نحن المقتولون بالملايين، لنا الحقّ أن نعرف: أين هي حدود صبرك؟

نصوص تشبه الخلاصة، ولقد أتت من أجمل النصوص الإنجيليّة. فمثل «الإبن الضال» (لو ١٥: ١١-٣٢) الشهير، هو على الأغلب من تأليف لوقا، وضع فيه خلاصةً عن التعليم حول المحبة والمغفرة. لم يعتبر الرسل هذا التصرف خارجاً عن المؤلف. فرسائل بولس، كما رأينا، هي من تأليف بولس نفسه، وهي كتاب مقدّس وهي «بالحقيقة كلمة الله». والضامن لصحة هذا التعليم هو المسيح نفسه الباقي مع كنيسته حتّى منتهى الدهر، والروح القدس الذي يذكر الجماعة ويفهمها كلّ ما قاله وعلمه يسوع.

إذاً، فهمت الكنيسة أنّ الكتاب المقدّس ليس كتاب يخبرنا عن يسوع أو عن حياته ولا عن أعماله. هو بالحقيقة كتاب للمؤمنين ولحياتهم. هذا المفهوم يغيّر اتجاه القراءة. ففي قراءتنا للنصوص الموحات نحن لا نبحت عن يسوع التاريخي، بل نبحت عن أنفسنا وعن مقومات إيماننا وخلصنا. الإنجيل هو كتابي أنا ويتكلّم عني أنا اليوم. الكتاب المقدّس هو إذاً «دستور حياة المسيحي»، يضع له المفاهيم الأساسيّة والخطوط العريضة التي توصله إلى ملكوت السماوات.

خاتمة

الإنجيل دستور حياة المؤمن

ليس قصة حياة يسوع

دوّن الكاتب الملهم الإنجيل وهو يفكر في أنا

لذلك عندما أقرأ الإنجيل أبحث عن صورتي

من أنا في هذا النصّ.

«أؤمن بالشمس، حتّى عندما لا تشرق.

أؤمن بالحبّ، حتّى عندما لا أحسنّ به.

أؤمن بالله، حتّى عندما يصمت»

(هذه العبارة وُجدت مكتوبة على حائط قبو في مدينة كولونيا حيث اختبأ

بعض اليهود طيلة فترة الحرب).



بأخلاقه ويتصرفوا على مثاله ويسيروا بحسب تعاليمه. لم يكتب الإنجيليون «خبر حياة يسوع»، لم يكن اهتمامهم ذو طابع «تاريخي». بل كتبوا في مواجهة المشاكل التي عانى منها المؤمنون. والهدف من الإنجيل لم يكن «ذكرى» يسوع، بل مساعدة المسيحيين ليعيشوا إيمانهم بشكل سليم. ويشير يوحنا صراحةً في آخر إنجيله إلى هذا التوجّه في كتابه، فيقول: «وصنع يسوع آيات أخرى كثيرة أمام تلاميذه، لم تُكتب في هذا الكتاب. أمّا هذه فقد كُتبت لتؤمنوا أنّ يسوع هو المسيح ابن الله، ولكي تكون لكم، إذا آمنتم، حياة باسمه» (يو ٢٠: ٣٠-٣١). إذن اختار يوحنا ما يراه مناسباً لإيمان الجماعة المسيحية. ويكرّر هذا التأكيد مرّة أخرى، بقوله: «وأشياء أخرى كثيرة صنعها يسوع، إن كُتبت واحدة فواحدة، لست أظنّ أنّ العالم نفسه يسع الكتب المكتوبة» (يو ٢١: ٢٥). كما أنّ لوقا الإنجيلي، يستهلّ كتابه بهذا الإعلان نفسه، فيقول: «لمّا أخذ كثير من الناس في تدوين خبر الأمور التي جرت عندنا، (إذاً هناك من يكتب خبر حياة يسوع ولكن ليس لوقا، هو يريد فعل شيء آخر) كما سلّمها إلينا الذين كانوا منذ البدء شهود عيان وخداماً للكلمة. رأيت أنا أيضاً، بعد أن تقصّيتها واحدةً واحدةً من أصولها، أن أكتبها لك مرتبةً أيّها العزيز تاوفيلوس، حتّى تتيقن صحة التعليم الذي تلقّيته» (لو ١: ١-٤). هذا ما يبغيه لوقا وسائر الإنجيليين، أن يضعوا نصّاً يثبت الإيمان. لذلك كتبوا عن يسوع ما يفيدهم لإيمانهم وأهمّلوا كلّ الأشياء الأخرى. من هنا نفهم مباشرةً سبب إهمال الأناجيل لأخبار طفولة يسوع بين عمر الـ ١٢ وعمر الـ ٣٠ سنة. أهمل الإنجيليون هذه المرحلة لأنهم لن يجدوا فيها ما يفيدهم للتعليم.

وهكذا نفهم أيضاً الفروقات الموجودة بين الأناجيل الإزائية حول خبر حدث ما. فالإنجيلي لا يهتمّ بالحدث كحدث بل بالمعنى اللاهوتي الذي يستشفّه من هذا النصّ. لذلك لم يتوجّه انتباه الكاتب إلى التفاصيل بل إلى التعليم. وتدلّ الدراسات على أنّ بعض النصوص التعليمية في الأناجيل ليست من أقوال يسوع بل من تأليف الكاتب الملهم نفسه. لماذا تصرّف الإنجيليون على هذا المنوال؟ يواجه الكاتب مسألة إيمانية في الجماعة التي يتوجّه إليها بكتابه، ولا يتذكّر تعليمًا مباشرًا من يسوع حول هذه النقطة بالذات. فيسأل نفسه: لو كان المسيح مكاني الآن، ماذا كان سيقول للجماعة؟ فيستخلص نصّه من وعيه لتعليم يسوع. هي

أعطاهم الله إِيَّاه في العنصرة، والذي يَعْلَمهم كلَّ شيء ويذكرهم بكلِّ ما قاله يسوع^٨. من هنا، يرى بولس أنَّ ما يقوله هو للكنيسة ليس إلَّا كلام الله: «نشكر الله بلا انقطاع لأنَّكم إذ تسلَّمتم منا كلمة الله التي أخبرناكم بها، قبلتموها لا ككلمة بشر، بل كما هي بالحقيقة كلمة الله» (١ تس ٢: ١٣).

إذًا، هناك توالف ما بين كلام الرسول وكلام الله. فما يقوله بولس بفمه هو وبشخصه، وإنطلاقاً من مسؤوليته تجاه الكنيسة، هذا الكلام الذي هو شكلاً «كلمة بشر»، يرى فيه الرسول والمؤمنون معه أنَّه «بالحقيقة كلمة الله»، يعيها الرسول كنور إلهيٍّ في داخله. هو الروح القدس الذي يصبُّ هذا النور في قلب الكاتب الملهم. ولكنَّ الكاتب يُخرج هذه الحقيقة الإلهية، ساكباً إِيَّاه في كلماته هو. إنَّها حقيقة إلهية في قالب بشريٍّ.

٤. تدوين الأناجيل

إذًا، النصوص الأولى من العهد الجديد كان الهدف منها تثبيت إيمان الجماعة وحلَّ المشاكل الإيمانية التي وقعت فيها الكنيسة. من هنا نفهم أنَّ الكتاب المقدَّس لم يُرد بشكلٍ أساسيٍّ أن ينقل إلينا أخبار يسوع أو حياته ولا حتَّى أقواله. الإنجيل ليس «أمانة سرٍّ» تكتب تقريراً عن أقوال وأفعال يسوع؛ بل هو امتداد للرسائل البولسية.

كان بولس الرسول يجاوب على كلِّ مسألة إيمانية يطرحها المؤمنون برسالة يُعطي فيها التعليم المناسب لهذه الحالة بالذات. إلَّا أنَّ المساءلات الإيمانية كانت تزداد طبعاً مع توسُّع الكنيسة وإزدياد عدد الجماعات المسيحية. عندها، وعت الكنيسة، ومعها الرسل، أنَّه لم يعد بالإمكان معالجة المشاكل بهذه الطريقة الفردية. فولدت فكرة أن يضعوا نصّاً عاماً، يطرح الأسس الإيمانية ويشكِّل مرجعاً تحتكم إليه الجماعة لتتوضَّح «صحة الإيمان» والتعليم القويم. فمن هو المرجع الصالح لوضع هكذا تعليم؟ طبعاً هو المعلِّم الأكبر أي يسوع المسيح نفسه. لذلك، عمد الإنجيليون إلى تذكُّر ما قاله وما علَّمه يسوع وكيف تصرَّف وكيف واجه المشاكل؛ كلَّ ذلك بهدف أن يقتدي المؤمنون به فيخلقوا



الإنسان إلى الأفضل. ففي الحضارة اليونانية كثر استعمال هذه الكلمة للدلالة على خبر ولادة طفل جديد في العائلة. فإن كان الوالد في الحقل مثلاً، يترأض الصبية إليه صارخين «إيوانغيليون، إيوانغيليون» وكلهم أمل أن يعطيهم الوالد الجديد بعض حلويات أو قطعة نقود، جزاء هذه البشري السارة. وهكذا في المسيحية، اعتبر الرسل، وجميع المؤمنين معهم، أن كلامهم عن «المولود الإلهي»، عن يسوع، عن أن الله تجسّد وأنه ولد في وسطنا ليخلصنا وليغيّر لنا كلّ حياتنا الماضية، هي أفضل بشري وأفضل ولادة.

وأيضاً إن كان الرسل فقدوا كلّ أمل لهم بسبب موت يسوع على الصليب، فإنهم عاشوا اختباراً يفوق كلّ تصور ويتخطّى كلّ العقول بقيامة المسيح من بين الأموات. هذا الإنتصار على الموت رآه الرسل ولادة هائلة لهم وللعالم أجمع. فانطلقوا في كافة أنحاء المعمورة حاملين «إيوانغيليون» واحدةً ووحيدةً، صرخة فرح فاضت بها قلوبهم وصاحّة بها ألسنتهم: «المسيح مات وقام». هذه العبارة، التي أطلقت عليها الكنيسة اسم «الكراسة الرسولية» (Kerygma)، كانت بالنسبة لهم «كامل الوحي»، لقد انتصر يسوع على الموت، عدوّ الإنسان الأكبر، وداس رأس الشيطان بقيامته من بين الأموات. هذا الوحي لم ينالوه لا من ملاك ولا من بشر، بل رأوه بأعينهم وسمعوه بآذانهم ولمسوه وأكلوه^٧.

كانت هذه الحقيقة كافية لتغيّر كلّ حياة الرسل ومن معهم. فأخبروا الجميع بها ودعّوهم لقبولها، فتغيّر لهم حياتهم وتعطيهم هم أيضاً ولادة جديدة. وهكذا نشأت الكنائس الأولى. وكان على الرسل أن يتابعوا المسيرة لتثبيت المؤمنين في حياتهم الجديدة، كما لم تخلو حياة هذه الكنائس الفتية من الصعوبات والأسئلة والخلافات. لذلك اعتبر بولس أن كلّ كلامه مع المسيحيين لتشجيعهم ولتأنيبهم ما هو إلا جزء أساسي من هذا الإنجيل. فليست ولادة المسيح ولا موته وقيامته وحدها كافية للخلاص. على الإنسان أن يؤمن بيسوع أنه ابن الله وأن يقبله كمخلص شخصي له وأن يقرن هذا الإيمان بالأعمال الصالحة وبالمحبة لسائر الأخوة. وهكذا يرى بولس أن تلك التعاليم التي يوجّهها للكنائس هي من الله نفسه، لأنها تأتي من اختبار الشخص يسوع القائم من بين الأموات الذي وعد كنيسته بأن «يبقى معها إلى الأبد» (مت ٢٨: ٢٠) ومن الروح القدس الذي

(٧) لقد رافق يسوع كنيسته ٤٠ يوماً بعد قيامته وقبل صعوده إلى السماء.

إياكم في صلواتي» (أف ١: ١٥-١٦)٤. ونراه أيضًا يتحرى بتدقيق عن أحوال أهل تسالونيكي: «أرسلنا إليكم تيموتاوس... ليثبتكم ويعظكم... وأرسلت لكي أعرف إيمانكم... أما الآن فلقد جاء إلينا تيموتاوس من عندهم وبشرنا بإيمانكم وحببتكم» (١ تس ٣: ٢-٦). أو يكتب أيضًا لتأنيبهم على أخطاء وقعوا فيها: «أطلب إليكم أيها الإخوة، باسم ربنا يسوع المسيح، أن تقولوا جميعكم قولاً واحداً، ولا يكون بينكم إنشقاقتان، بل كونوا كاملين في فكر واحد ورأي واحد. لأنني أخبرت عنكم يا إخوتي، من أهل كلوي، أن بينكم خصومات» (١ كور ١: ١٠-١١). ويصل الحال في بعض الأحيان إلى درجة عالية من التأنيب، ككلامه مع أهل غلاطية، قائلاً: «عجبت لسرعة ارتدادكم عن الذي دعاكم بنعمة المسيح إلى إنجيل آخر، وليس هناك أنجيل آخر. غير أن هناك قوم يزعمونكم ويريدون أن يحولوا إنجيل المسيح. فإن بشرناكم نحن أو ملاك من السماء بغير ما بشرناكم به، فليكن محروماً. كما سبقنا فقلنا أقول الآن أيضاً: إن بشركم أحد بغير ما قبلتم، فليكن محروماً» (غل ١: ٦-٩)٥.

نستنتج ممّا تقدّم، أنّ الكتابات الأولى في العهد الجديد لم تكن نتاج جلسات تأمل صوفي ولا نتيجة ظهور إلهي فائق الطبيعة. بل هي نابعة من حسّ المسؤولية الرسوليّة التي يتحلّى بها بولس؛ وهمّه الأول أن يثبت المؤمنين في إيمانهم وأن يصلح من أحوالهم وقت الإعوجاج. ولكن، يلفتنا أيضاً أنّ بولس يسمّي هذه الرسائل نفسها إنجيله الخاص، وهي نصوص موضوعة قبل كتابة الأناجيل الأربعة المعروفة. إذًا، كلمة إنجيل، لا تعني بالنسبة للكنيسة لا كلاماً خرج من شفطي يسوع البشريتين ولا خبراً عنه أو عن حياته. بل الإنجيل هو التعليم الذي يقود المؤمنين إلى الخلاص الأبدي «الذي أعدّه الله لمحييه» (١ كور ٢: ٩).

وكلمة إنجيل نفسها تحمل تمامًا هذا المعنى. فالكلمة هي من أصل يوناني «إيوانجيليون» (εὐαγγέλιον) وتعني «البشرى السارة». وهي بشرى تغيّر حياة

(٤) راجع أيضًا كور ١: ٤؛ فيل ١: ٥.

(٥) راجع أيضًا ١ طيم ٣: ٧.

(٦) راجع رو ١٦: ٢. لا أريد أن أدخل هنا في نقاش ما كان يقصده بولس الرسول في استعماله لعبارة «إنجيل» في هذه الآية. إلّا أنّ ما هو واضح هنا أنّ بولس يستعمل هذا التعبير ليشير به إلى نصوص مختلفة عن نصوص الأناجيل الأربعة. وهذه النصوص البوليّة لا تتكلّم عن «حياة يسوع المسيح».



٢. الفترة الشفهية

ما يُلفت نظرنا أساسًا أن يسوع لم يكتب ولا كلمة واحدة من كلمات العهد الجديد. فهو، وبحسب نصوص الأناجيل نفسها، قضى حياته في التجوال بين مدن الأرض المقدسة، واعظًا ومعلّمًا وشافيًا المرضى^١. إذًا، لم يكتب يسوع ولا كلمة واحدة من الإنجيل. لا بل أكثر من ذلك، فهو لم يأمر تلاميذه يومًا بأن يكتبوا. بل أرسلهم إلى العالم ليبشّروا الناس ويخبروهم بما رأوا وبما سمعوا: «إذهبوا وتلمذوا جميع الأمم وعمّدوهم باسم الآب والابن والروح القدس، وعلموهم أن يحفظوا جميع ما أوصيتكم به» (مت ٢٨: ١٩-٢٠). لم يكن هناك أيّ إرادة في الكتابة. وهكذا نجد أنّ أول عمل رسولي قامت به الكنيسة، بعد حلول الروح القدس على تلاميذ يسوع، أنّ رئيس الرسل، بطرس، خرج من العلية وأخذ يخطب في الحشود ويبشّرهم بالمسيح^٢. ويخبرنا سفر أعمال الرسل أنّ الجماعة المسيحية الأولى كانت مواظبة على سماع تعليم الرسل^٣.

٣. الكتابات الأولى

تدلّ الدراسات النقدية على أنّ أولى الكتابات المسيحية لم تكن الأناجيل، بل رسائل بولس الرسول. وهذه الرسائل تعالج مشاكل الجماعات المسيحية الموجهة إليها. فالرسالة تأتي في أغلب الأحيان جوابًا على رسالة وجهها المؤمنون لبولس أو أنّ بولس نفسه استعلم عن أحوال الكنيسة فوجّه إليهم رسالة لتشجيعهم على الإلتزام، ككلامه مع أهل أفسس: «لقد سمعت بإيمانكم بالرب يسوع ومحبتكم نحو جميع القديسين. لا أزال شاكرًا لأجلكم، ذاكرًا

(١) يذكر لنا إنجيل يوحنا مرة واحدة فقط أنّ يسوع خطّ بإصبعه شيئًا ما على الأرض؛ عندما كان اليهود الفريسيّون يسألونه حول رجم المرأة الزانية. لا نعرف ما الذي كتبه يسوع. البعض يعتقد أنّه خطّ على التراب خطايا أولئك الذين أتوا بالمرأة ليرجموها، فلقد أجابهم: «من منكم بلا خطيئة فليرجمها بحجر» (يو ٨: ٧). وفي جميع الأحوال، مهما كان ما كتبه يسوع فلقد كتبه على رمل الطريق ولقد زال إلى الأبد.

(٢) راجع أع ٢: ١٤.

(٣) راجع أع ٢: ٤٢. ونذكر هنا خبر الشاب الذي كان جالسًا على حافة نافذة العلية حيث كان بولس يعظ ويعلم. ولمّا أطال بولس الكلام إلى ما بعد منتصف الليل، غلب النعاس ذلك الشاب، فوقع من النافذة من الطبقة الثالثة وفارق الحياة. فما كان من بولس إلّا أن نزل إليه وأعاد له روحه. راجع أع ٢٠: ٧-١٢.

الواقع على ضوء كلمة الله، وهل لكلمة الله دور أو تأثير في مجريات الحياة العادية واليومية.

أول ما يجب علينا أن نعرفه هو أنّ الكتاب المقدّس لم يُكتب في جوّ من الطوباوية الروحية النازرة فقط إلى الملكوت الآتي. هو ليس كتاب رهبان أو نساك قرّروا التخلي عن العالم من أجل عالم آخر. والحال أنّ من يعيش الطوباوية لا يكتب لأنّه يتنعم حينها، غير عابئ بأيّ شيء آخر.

١. العهد القديم كُتب في السبي

الحال أنّ الكتاب الملهمين لم يكن هدفهم الواضح لهم، أنّهم يكتبون «كلمة الله» إذ لا يمكن لبشر مهما كان، أن يتجرّأ على مثل هذا الإدّعاء.

هم بالأحرى قرأوا واقعهم واستقرأوا فيه الخلاص المعدّ، ليس لهم وحدهم، بل لكلّ العالم. ونقلوا هذه «القراءة» للناس، لوعيتهم أنّهم يشكّلون سويّاً «جسد يسوع السريّ»، لذلك فهم يرتبطون بحال ومهصر كلّ عضو في الجماعة المؤمنة. من هنا نفهم لماذا نادى بولس الرسول جميع من كتب إليهم رسالة بـ «يا إخوتي». ولذلك فهم قدّموا لنا النصّ الملهم، لا ليخبرونا عن أحداث سالفة مضت ولا ليزيدونا معرفة فلسفية بالأمور. بل ليدلّونا فعلاً على المخرج الذي وجدوه هم قبلنا والذي ما يزال مفتوحاً أمام جميع طالبيه. هكذا يمكننا أن نفهم بعمق معنى قول يسوع: «أنا هو الطريق والحقّ والحياة».

اختبار الفرخ في عمق الأزمة. ليس هناك حلّ «للعالم» إنّما هناك حلّ «لي»

لذلك فأنا أهمّ عند الله من العالم أجمع

إختبار إبراهيم والإله الأذن

الكتاب المقدّس هو ميراث الآباء للأبناء

معنى الفترة الشفهية الإيمان حيّ

هو الميراث الوحيد (يوسل راكوفر)

قراءة الأحداث على أساس كلمة الله

المطران
جوزيف نفاع

مقدمة

لطالما اعتبرنا أن الكتاب المقدس كتاب صلاة أو تمجيد للرب يسوع المسيح، الذي بقيامته أضفى على حياتنا الفرح بالخلاص الآتي. قد نجد تعبيرًا عن هذه الفكرة في الصرخة الختامية لكامل الكتاب المقدس أي في نهاية رؤيا يوحنا، حين تتوجّه الكنيسة إلى المسيح المخلص صارخة: «ماران أتاه» تعال أيها الرب يسوع. وكأنّها تنتظر بفارغ الصبر أن ينتهي هذا العالم الفاسد والميؤوس من وضعه، لينتقلوا إلى عالم آخر، تتحقّق فيه أحلام السلام والمحبة الكاملة. توجه كهذا، جعل الكتاب المقدس في فكر السواد الأعظم، أنه كتاب ضمانة «للمستقبل» الآتي بعد الموت. به ندخل إلى ملكوت السماوات هربًا من هذه الدنيا التي عبّرت عنها النصوص الوسطية واصفة إياها بأنّها «وادي الدموع».

بهذه القراءة لن نجد أي رباط يجمع الكتاب المقدس وعالمنا المحسوس. هو فقط للملكوت، أمّا الواقع الحياتي والسياسي وحال الدنيا فذلك متروك لزعماء العالم الذين لا يقدر أحد عليهم. كثيرًا ما نسمع تردد ليقول ليسوع: «الشيطان هو سيّد هذا العالم».

ما أقوله هنا، لو سمعه الإنسان المؤمن سيصعب عليه الإقرار به، ولكنّ الحال أنّنا في أعماق قلوبنا، جميعًا نمرّ في هذه التجربة ولا نعرف كيف نقرأ

عنا يسوع حين قال: «إن لم تتوبوا تهلكوا جميعاً» (لو ١٣: ٣). الفرد إذن أولاً ثم الجماعة.

العلوم النفسية تمكنت من تشخيص مرض «اضطراب الوسواس القهري» لدى الفرد منذ قرن من الزمان، لكن أفلت زمامه في عصرنا عندما صار مرض «اضطراب الوسواس القهري» جماعياً، وأصيب به قادة السياسة والدين والأدب والإعلام... فأعطوا عن الله صورة تشبههم: مخيفاً ديناً حاكماً جباراً... في الشرق خصوصاً تعودنا على الخلط بين أفكارنا وأفكار الله فجاءت الصدمات التي يتعرّض إليها الناس، مما جعلهم فترة طويلة تحت ثقل المعاناة والتعبان يُتعب، وينشر العدوى. فرصة الحلّ ستأتي بالاعتراف بميراث التاريخ الثقيل وعدم اعتباره قدراً محتوماً. هذا التاريخ هو مجرد درس لا ينبغي أن ننساه، إذ لا يمكن استعادة أجواء الثقة المفقودة في أحيان كثيرة، إلا بالحقيقة. اليوم صار لدينا وسائل التعامل بجدية مع الذكريات المؤلمة. والشفاء ممكن بالرغم مما تعرض له الإيزيديون والمسيحيون وبقية اللاجئين من أهوال الحرب، إنها المرونة والقدرة على التجاوز (resilience) التي صار لها مختصون كبار مثل بوريس سيرولنك (المولود في عام ١٩٣٧) الذي فقد في سن ست سنوات على يد النازيين، والديه، ثم أصبح من أشهر النفسانيين في فرنسا ممن تناولوا هذا الموضوع.

الخاتمة: إذا لم تكن شعوب هذه المنطقة قادرة على إدراك معنى ما حدث لها من موت مشترك لم يسلم منه أحد لن تستطيع (هذه الشعوب) أن تقف كرجل واحد للعمل معاً، لبناء المستقبل وقبول التصديّ بالصراع ضد الأفكار التي تسببت بكل هذه المآسي منذ عقود. لقد خضنا أشكال الحروب من أهلية ومع الجيران، وكادت في بعض الأحيان تقضي علينا. لكن الحكمة لدى جماعات محلية جُتبتنا ذلك. وهذا يجب أن يؤخذ الآن كذاكرة مشتركة، وكأساس تاريخي مشترك، للعمل الآن معاً للتغلب على نزعة الموت وإسكات كل من يدق طبول أشكال الحروب. صحيح، أصبحنا جميعاً بنات وأبناء لأشكال الحروب، لكن لدينا طريق واحد فقط للمستقبل: التوجه معاً لتحرير أنفسنا منها ومسبباتها وذاكرتها في أجسادنا وجروحنا. وأفضل ما قد نفعله كخطوات أولى بين المسلمين والمسيحيين والإيزيديين هو أن نصلي معاً، ومن أجل بعضنا البعض، فردياً وجماعياً، ونقول كما في القداس الكلداني حين نصلي: «فرّق يا رب الشعوب المنقسمة التي تحبّ الحرب!».



نتصفح عبر الإنترنت لكي نفهم أن كلمة «الموت» أكثر انتشارًا من «الحياة»، أو المشاكل والممارسة أكثر من الإيجابيات والفرح وحلاوة العيش.

ما أكثر من يعاني من اضطرابات متوارثة مثل «اضطراب الوسواس القهري» (obsessive compulsive disorder)، الذي تنتقله بعض الجماعات في جيناتها. وقد سألت أطباء نفسيين فأخبروني أنه ناتج عن بقايا الحروب، وما أكثرها بالنسبة لأجيالنا في الشرق منذ الأعوام ١٩٤٨، ١٩٦٧، ١٩٧٣، ١٩٨٠-١٩٨٨، ١٩٩١، ٢٠١٣. وهلم جرا، حيث كان الرعب في كل مكان والنتيجة تنطبع على الأطفال الذين يتعاملون مع أب عنيف أو أم عنيفة. المشكلة الكبرى تبدأ في ضغوط منذ الأسرة والشارع ومشاكل الاقتصاد ونقص الخدمات ومآسي صعوبات المعيشة...

ينتقد النبي إرميا في كتابه المثل السائد في زمانه: «يأكل الآباء الحصرم (العنب الحامض) وأسنان أبنائهم تضرس» (إرميا ٣١: ٢٩) ويشير بقيام جيل جديد لن يعود مجبراً على أن يرث كل مساوئ الأجيال السابقة. وفي هذا الاتجاه بدأ الكثيرون في زماننا يتحررون من ضغوط مجتمعاتهم فوصلوا أولاً إلى «شرعة حقوق الفرد» إبان الثورة الفرنسية (١٧٨٩)، ثم إلى شرعة حقوق الإنسان (١٩٤٨)، وهذا كان قبلاً يعد أمراً مستحيلاً.

صار الإنسان أكبر من أن يكون تابعاً لكل التقلبات والخوف والخبيل. صار يجرؤ أن يقول بصوت عالٍ موقفه من ذكريات تمجد الحزن والمرارة والموت، وإن لم يستمعوا إليه، لكن في نهاية النفق ضوء. لا يحتاج بعد إلى أن يهرب من ذلك المجتمع، ويهاجر إلى مجتمعات أخرى، لكنه مدعو أن يقاوم بالثقافة والمعرفة فقط ألا يعود إلى الوراء ولا يندمج مع أفكار مفروضة بل بالعكس يحق له أن يحلم لأبنائه بمجتمع سليم، بالسلام لا بالحرب، وليس مثل كل انتحاري زماننا الذين قالوا مع شمشون: «علي وعلى أعدائي»، هو «الذي قتل في موته أكثر مما قتل في حياته (قضاة ١٦: ٣٠) لأنه كان أعمى وفاقد الأمل!

مرض «اضطراب الوسواس القهري» الجماعي الذي تعاني منه بعض مجتمعاتنا. يدفعنا أن نفهمه ونشخصه لدى الجميع. لنساعد على قيام شكل جديد من المجتمعات، يسمع كلمة «التوبة» (ميتانويا = تغيير العقلية) في الإنجيل. بها يخاطبنا «الله»، ليقول لنا من هو، تحت ملامح صورته الموجودة في الآخرين كأشخاص مختلفين، وإن لم نفهم ذلك سندفع الثمن باهظاً وهذا ما

الفتح الشهرستاني ١٠٨٦-١١٥٣م) - ظواهر تتعاقب في كل زمان ومكان، وتتفشى بحسب ضعف السياسات أو استغلالها للدين.

إنها إذن حاجة لازمة إلى هذا النوع من التحليل لإيجاد طريق للخروج من دوامة الحلقات السلبية التي نحن فيها منذ عقود وهي التي تدغدغ كل جيل بالرغبة في الحرب للتخلص من هذا «التهيج» المتكرر، وكأن العالم بأسره يرتاح إلى تسليح هؤلاء المرضى محبّي القتال، ثم يعود ليعاقبهم بالحصار والتجويع وموت الأطفال بلا دواء.

منذ عقود، وخصوصًا منذ عام ٢٠٠٣، في عموم الشرق الأوسط، نشهد قيام أجيال لا تعرف سوى الحرب أو قرع طبولها باستعداد قوم على آخر. لقد أصبحت الحرب داخل الناس كمسألة عادية. أصبحت في نفوسهم، في أجسادهم، في قلوبهم، وفي أذهانهم. وصار الله يستعمل في هذا المنطق الأعوج، فبدل أن يكون إله السلام صار هو أيضًا يدعو إلى الحرب، والناس العاديون من غير المثقفين يتبعون هذا الشكل من قادة المجتمع. كلهم يصابون بالعدوى. وكأن هذا ما يوحدهم فقط، وكأن مسألة الهرب نحو الموت هي السبيل الوحيد المتبقي للمجتمع بأكمله: فالحرب بداخلهم جميعًا، وهذا ما شعر به أهل الموصل عندما زرتهم في نيسان ٢٠١٧، قالوا لي: «لقد جُئنا، نحن أخرجناكم وأنتم تأتون لنا بالطعام والدواء، لقد دفعنا ثمن هذا الجنون بما فيه الكفاية!...».

بهذا الصدد أتذكر شخصًا كان يضرب زوجته. قال لي عنها: «لا يمكنها أن تفهمني، لأنها لم تكن في الحرب. لقد انتقلت الحرب إلى منزلنا، وصارت تنام معنا في السرير!»، إنها ضغوط ثقيلة تثقل بكاھلها على أبناء جيل صار كله ضحية.

علينا إذن أن نكتشف أن المسألة التي نعاني منها في الضغوط التي تتعرض لها المجتمعات المسيحية، تدور في دوامة العنف الذي يفلت من أيدينا فالكُل من حولنا يعاني مما يختلج في نفسه أو لدى الآخرين. وليس هناك من يساعده أو يتحدث معه عن هذا الأمر، لعله يشعر بالعار، قد لا يكون لديه أصدقاء أو لا يشعر أن أحدًا يريد مصلحته، بالنسبة إليه يصبح الاختلاف مشكلة بين مسلمين ومسيحيين أو مسيحيين ومسيحيين أو مسلمين ومسلمين أيضًا ثم تصغر الحلقة بحيث تصل إلى الفرق بين الرجال والنساء فيعاني الكل من هذا أيضًا، يكفي أن

نظرة عامة على الضغوط التي تتعرض لها المجتمعات المسيحية، والفرص المتاحة

المطران
الدكتور يوسف توما

هل أصبحنا جميعًا أبناء وبنات الحرب ؟

نحتاج اليوم إلى تحليل معمّق للحالة النفسية التي تمر بها شعوبنا عامة وشرقنا خاصة كما نحتاج إلى الاعتراف بالواقع، حتى نفهم أنفسنا وليس فقط كما تروج له وسائل الإعلام التي تبقى عموماً خارج الموضوع. كذاك نحتاج إلى وسائل جاءت بها العلوم الإنسانية النفسية منها والاجتماعية وحتى السياسية، لكي ندرك ما فعلته «غواية الموت» (la pulsion de la mort) بل كأنها «تجربة الموت» لدى بعض معاصرنا في هذه البلاد خصوصاً بحيث وإن قارنوها مع (الكاميكاز) الانتحاريين إبان الحرب العالمية الثانية في اليابان، إلا أنها بعيدة جداً عما حدث ويحدث لدينا. وهذا الجو أعتره كأساس للتفكير والعمل إزاء الضغوط التي تتعرض لها مجتمعات المسيحيين، واستبعادهم من القدريّة على التأثير حولهم بسبب تناقص أعدادهم وضعف فاعليتهم وعدم إعطائهم فرص العمل ضد التيار السائد والجو المشحون بأيديولوجيات «طائفية وبدعوية» (sectarian) تغلغل في المجتمعات الإسلامية بشكل لم يسبق له مثيل، لأن البدع - أو «الملل والنحل» التي حللها (أبو

الشرق، رغم الظلمة المنسدلة علينا، نسير نحو المسيح على ضوء نور كلمته ومجد قيامته، ونؤمن أنه يولد في كل يوم في كل بقاع شرقنا وفي خفاي النفوس الصامتة المؤمنة. هلمّ نسير معاً الى حيث يولد المسيح في تلك البقاع وتلك النفوس، فنأتي ونجسد له ونمجده.

أيها الحفل الكريم،

اسمحوا لي أخيراً، مع جمعية الكتاب المقدس، أن أشكر المحاضرين على تلبيتهم الدعوة وتشريفنا في الحضور والمداخلات القيمة، متمنية النجاح لهذا اللقاء،

شكراً

الندوة الافتتاحية

الدكتورة ثرايا بشعلاني

كلمة الأمانة العامة لمجلس
كنائس الشرق الأوسط

أصحاب القداسة والغبطة والسيادة،

قدس الآباء والقساوسة،

أيها الأخوة والأخوات،

إن مجلس كنائس الشرق الأوسط يرحّب بكم جميعًا ويشكر لكم تلبيتكم الدعوة للمشاركة في هذا اللقاء المشترك مع جمعية الكتاب المقدس الموقرة، شاكرًا الجهود التي قامت بها في هذا الإطار.

يطيب لي أن أنظر إلى هذا اللقاء، الذي يجمع أبناء الكنيسة في الشرق والغرب، كعربونٍ للشركة الكنسية (koinônia) وكتجسيدٍ للكنيسة الواحدة الجامعة المقدسة الرسولية. فهذا اللقاء هو محطة لتلقي ونصلي ونفكر ونعمل معًا حول معنى الحضور المسيحي في هذا الشرق، على ضوء كلمة الله. فكلمة الله قادرة على الهامنا على ما هو من الله، هذا ان ارتضينا الاصغاء لها والعمل بحسبها.

أيها الحفل الكريم،

تعالوا، كما المجوس، نضع أنفسنا في حالة إصغاء للروح القدس وفي ترقب لضيء النجم ليدلنا الى حيث يولد المسيح لنأتي ونجسد له. نعم، نحن في هذا

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