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Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

**Great Lent Message
The Fruit of Repentance**

By His Beatitude and Eminence,
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Mar Bechara Boutros Rai
Through the Grace of God
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East
And Cardinal of the Universal Church

To Their Excellencies, our brothers, the Bishops, the Superiors General and Mothers Superior, the Priests, Monks and Nuns, and all the Sons and Daughters of our Maronite Church in Lebanon, in the Patriarchal Doman and in the Countries of Expansion.

Peace and Apostolic Blessing

1. The time of **Great Lent** is a spiritual journey in which we prepare to "pass over" with the Passover of Christ to a new life through repentance of heart and its fruits. When John the Baptist began his mission to prepare the hearts and souls for the coming of Jesus Christ, baptizing with water for repentance, he said to those who came to him, seeking the blessing: "**Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance**" (Matthew 3: 8). These fruits are four: walk in the light of truth, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Repentance and its fruits make Great Lent acceptable to God. Thus, Lent renews us with the nature that, after being stripped of the old during winter time, wears the robes of spring for the seasons' benevolence.

This message is composed of three sections; repentance, its fruits, and pastoral guidelines.

First: Penance

2. **Penance** is a virtue and a sacrament. It is a virtue based upon a return to God with all our heart, an end of sin and its condition; with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life with hope in God's mercy, and trust in the help of His grace¹.

It is a sacred sacrament built upon personal confession of sins to the priest who has the divine power to give the repentant absolution from sins. This sacrament is called the "Sacrament of Penance, or confession or reconciliation." **The**

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 1431

sacrament is the means to achieve repentance of heart by divine grace that cleanses all sins.

It affords the repentant a new heart and supports him/her in his/her intentions lest he/she fall again, enabling him/her to triumph over the wiles of the devil and the temptations of life, especially if the Sacrament of Penance is associated with that of the Eucharist, for it is the sacrifice of Christ that is in our favor with God, and which nourishes and strengthens us with the life of Christ. **Penance is a remedy to free us from our daily faults and to preserve us from mortal sins².**

3. Repentance of the heart calls for the grace of the sacrament to attain its purpose, and the sacrament requires repentance of the heart to bring forth its fruits. **True repentance** is based on three elements: the heartfelt regret for our sins, guilt, and imperfections; the confession by its nature, number, and circumstances, and the atonement for them through the appropriate penance, for there is no forgiveness without justice.

These are elements that the Lord Jesus Christ taught us by the clear example of the return of the prodigal son to his father. For when he became deeply aware of his sin, and regretted his wretched state by returning to himself, he returned to his father, acknowledged his sin, and imposed fair penance upon himself (Luke 15: 17-21).

4. True and fruitful repentance **is the realization of sin in its essence, in its causes and consequences.** Sin appeared in the conduct of the prodigal son as a misuse of the bounties of the world, and the excessive exercise of personal freedom devoid of any contact or communion with God the provider. It connects the heart, mind, and will to God's gifts and forgiveness. For the son, taking his share, left his father and his family, severing all ties with them, by traveling to a distant land. And there he squandered his wealth with frivolity, becoming poorer and poorer until he could but become a keeper of pigs, competing with them for their food. He had thus descended to the abyss of human and social degradation. It was here that he returned to himself, to the voice of his father in the depths of his conscience, the voice of God, and realized the truth of his bitter reality and his sin (Luke 15: 2-17).

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 1436

5. After recognition of the sin and its mortal consequences, and feeling the regret from deep within the heart, comes the time to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. This manifests the **repentance - the sacramental mystery** that Jesus had established for all members of his Church who, after their baptism, fell into sin, thus losing the grace of their baptism and damaging their communion with the Church, which had made them dwellings for God and temples of the Holy Spirit. In the practice of this sacrament, God, who alone forgives sins, gave the Church, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the power to forgive sins by the love of the Father, the grace of the redemption of the Son, and the action of the Holy Spirit.

6. The **reconciliation** between the prodigal son and his father was manifested splendidly. For the father had been waiting for his son; waiting with great love, tenderness, and pain. And while he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him long and dearly, and exchanged his sin with the honor of his repentance and return to the fold, and his return to the state of grace that he lost, as was symbolized by the white robe. And he restored to him the state of sonship with the ring on his finger, and he opened a new road before him so that he may follow a new path in the shoes which he had placed on his feet. He brought him back into full communion with himself and the Church with the feast of the fattened calf, which symbolizes the Passover lamb, the feast of the body and the blood of Christ (Luke 15: 20-32).

7. Repentance is necessary and indispensable for the salvation of man. **The Lord Jesus had called for it in His first sermon** his baptism and fasting for forty days (Mark 1:15 and Matthew 4:17). For he said: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Refer to Matthew 4:15; 4-17). And on another occasion He said: "If you do not repent, you will all perish" (Luke 13: 5).

Also, **Peter the Apostle, in his first sermon** in which he explained the death of Jesus, crucified, to save everyone who prayed in his name, when the crowd moved by his words asked him: "What are we to do?" He replied: "**Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**" (Acts 2: 14, 37-38).

Paul the Apostle also addressed the people of Athens, saying: "God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent because he has established a day on which he will judge the world with justice" (Acts 17: 30-31).

8. In the face of all this, the bishop and the priest cannot neglect serving the Sacrament of Penance, which he was entrusted by virtue of his ordination. He is responsible if sinners die in their sins, for the Lord had warned **through Ezekiel the prophet**: "I have appointed you as a sentinel for the house of Israel; when you hear a word from my mouth, you must warn them for me. When I say to the wicked, "You wicked, you must die," and you do not speak up to warn about their ways, they shall die in their sins, but I will hold you responsible for their blood. If however, you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, but they do not, then they shall die in their sins, but you shall save your life. And though I say to the wicked that they shall die, if they turn away from sin and do what is just and right, none of the sins they committed shall be remembered against them. If they do what is right and just, they shall surely live" (Ezekiel 33: 7-9, 14-16).
9. We send a warm invitation to our brothers the bishops, parish priests, and monks to reinvigorate the Sacrament of Penance in order to save the sons and daughters of our Church, to free them from the state of sin, and give them the grace of the Sacrament that sanctifies them. This responsibility is our first and foremost, for sins have multiplied, evil has propagated in our society and in the world, and we must assume our episcopal and ministerial responsibilities.

We are obliged by Canon Law to ensure that believers can practice the sacrament of penance at a time convenient to them, and on the days and the times that are suitable to them (CCEP n. 735 #1). The Church asks us to provide the greatest facilities possible in order to hear confessions, and to be visibly available in places of worship during the specified times and beyond, and always be ready to meet the needs of the faithful before, during, and after Divine Liturgies³.

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Second: The Fruit of Repentance

I.- Walk in the Light of Truth

10. Lent is the time to hear the Word of God, through spiritual retreats held in parishes, monasteries and religious institutions, spiritual programs broadcasted by Catholic and civil media, Scripture readings, as well as individual and group

³ Congregation of the Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Instructions 37 (2001) pp. 259-260 and Pope John Paul II Encyclical on Divine Mercy #15

meditations. As we seek this message, we pray: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path" (Psalm 119:1). For the Word of God nourishes our minds and hearts with the light of the revealed truth, and awakens consciences so that we may hear God's voice from within, guiding us to do good and avoid evil."⁴

Thus, we fast and experience mortification, sacrifice, and self -denial, so that we may be nourished by the Word of God,⁵ as we sit at the table of the Word of God, which teaches us the truth that enlightens our mind, giving freedom its framework, that we may know God and His love⁶. With this sense we pray with the psalmist: "Lord show us the light of your face." (Psalm 4:7)

11. When we know God revealed to us through Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God, we know that: "**The mystery of man** who does not exist except in the mystery of the incarnation, when God revealed himself to man in his fullness, and revealed to him the glory of His calling⁷; We know how to distinguish between good and evil, and are aware of what we must do; and the face of the Church is made clear to us, as if illuminated by the light of the face of Christ; and we finally understand the meaning of life and its purpose⁸." And so we ask the fundamental question in our lives as the young man asked Jesus: "What good must I do to gain eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16).

12. Great Lent is the time to listen to the voice of God, who speaks to us in the person of Christ and through his teachings, deeds, and miracles. As St. Bernard said about Him: "He is the word heard by the ear, seen by the eye, and felt by the hand." The Word of God emanates from his heart, seeking to reach the heart of man. For as it was said by the prophet Ezekiel: "Then he said to me, Son of man, take into your heart all my words that I speak to you; hear them well."(Ezekiel 3:10). Thus, the Lord Jesus requires three conditions, in order for it to be accepted and done unto us: **Hear the Word** from the heart, and not just the ear and the mind; **remember the Word** as if it were the yeast in the dough and the planting in the good soil; and

⁴ Vatican II, The Church in today's world, #16

⁵ Vatican II, The Liturgy #51

⁶ Pope John Paul II Encyclical: Splendor of Truth 1993, Introduction

⁷ The Church in Today's World #22

⁸ Pope John Paul II Encyclical: Splendor of Truth 1993, para. 1 and 2

do good deeds, say words, and take initiatives that reflect its interaction with our inner being (Luke 8: 19-21, 11:28).

13. Indeed, **the Word of God is like rain and snow**, for they do not return void to heaven, but rather they water the earth so that plants and food may flourish. For as God said by the Prophet Isaiah: "Yet just as from the heavens, the rain and snow come down, and do not return there, till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows, and bread to the one who eats. So shall my word be, that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55: 10-11). And it is like **a sharp two-edged sword** (Revelation 1:16). It is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), where it enters and cuts like a sickle in the bush, and like an axe on the root of the tree, and cuts off all that is arid. In this sense, the Lord Jesus tells us: "You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you." (John 15: 3).

In light of all this, James the Apostle calls upon us: "Do not merely listen to the word, lest we deceive ourselves. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like."(James 1: 22-24).

II- Prayer

14. Prayer is the fruit of hearing the Word of God as we form our prayers from his words. He who does not hear the Word of God does not know how to pray. Prayer is the elevation of mind, heart, and thought to God, leaving behind all else. Is that not what we do when we address a prominent figure? Therefore, the worshiper needs some type of seclusion, removed from the sounds of his surroundings and his worries and concerns in order to facilitate his prayers. For how often did the Lord Jesus "withdraw to deserted places to pray." (Luke 5:16). And the Spirit says by the Prophet Hosea: "Therefore, I will allure her now; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak persuasively to her." (Hosea 2:16). "Does not the lamp shine in solitude and is extinguished by the wind? (Blessed Abouna Yaccoub).
15. Great Lent, and along with its spiritual retreats, fasting, sacrifices and repentance, is the great time of prayer. Our prayer must not be mere words coming out of our lips, while our thoughts and heart are distracted and far away from God. (Matthew

6: 5-6). Nor must they emanate from boredom, for the Lord commands us: "**Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test.**" (Matthew 26:41). It is prayer with faith that achieves its purpose. Therefore, the Lord urged us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7: 7-8). **St. Augustine** tells us that the Lord urges us to pray, "because He prays with us, as a leader and responds to us as God."

16. Some think that prayer is a waste of time! On the contrary, St. Monica won the return of her son Augustine with her years of tears and prayers – and he became one of the greatest saints and theologians. And it was he who said: "Prayer is the key to all the treasures of heaven." For with two words from the heart combined with repentance, the thief on the right was granted salvation: "Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23: 42-43).

The tax collector who worshiped with repentance at the door of the temple: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner," I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the Pharisee." (Luke 18:14). St. Louis IX, the King of France, was criticized for devoting a long time to prayer, thus neglecting the affairs of the kingdom. The Saint replied: "If my prayer time had been dedicated to hunting and entertainment, as some people of the court do, then no one would have criticized me!"

III- Fasting

17. Fasting, with its abstinence from food, along with sacrifices, and self-denial, are **external expressions of repentance of the heart**, otherwise it loses all its value. God said, by **Joel** the Prophet: "return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God." (Joel 2: 12-13). And by the Prophet Isaiah: "Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil."(Isaiah 1:16).

Fasting is a **divine obligation** rooted in the Scriptures. It is an attitude of modesty and humility before God, an atonement and purification of sins (Leviticus 16: 29-31), and openness of the heart to the divine light (Daniel 10: 2), and an anticipation of the divine grace that is necessary to complete the Word (Acts 13: 2-3). Fasting is surrendering to the Father with complete confidence by following

the example of Jesus (Matthew 4: 1-4), and placing the self before God with faith and acceptance of His will and work, as did Moses (Exodus 34:38) and Elijah (1 Kings 19: 8).

18. His **Holiness Pope Francis** wrote in his Lenten message (2018): "Fasting weakens our tendency to violence; it disarms us and becomes an important opportunity for growth. On the one hand, it allows us to experience what the destitute and the starving have to endure. On the other hand, it expresses our own spiritual hunger and thirst for life in God. Fasting wakes us up. It makes us more attentive to God and our neighbor. It revives our desire to obey God, who alone is capable of satisfying our hunger."

IV- Almsgiving

19. Almsgiving is closely related to fasting. We deprive ourselves of food and drink in order to help the poor and needy instead of ourselves. This is the wisdom of fasting and almsgiving, which is rooted in the Scriptures. The fasting which pleases God, and which he proclaimed by the Prophet Isaiah means: " Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh." (Isaiah 58: 7), as well as other acts of mercy, such as: "releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed." (Isaiah 58: 6).

20. We read in the letter of Pope Francis on Lent this year that "almsgiving sets us free from greed and helps us to regard our neighbor as a brother or sister. What I possess is never mine alone. But I am required to share it with the needy, as did the apostles and believers in the emerging Church" (Acts 2: 44-45).

Within this context, the Church's official public charity, ***Caritas Lebanon***, will launch its campaign in parishes, churches, and institutions as well as on the streets from February 11th to April 22nd. This is in addition to the fundraisers of other charitable organizations, all of which are appreciated, as are all other individual and community initiatives.

Pope Francis adds: "When we give alms, we share in God's providential care for each of his children. If through me God helps someone today, will he not tomorrow provide for my own needs? For no one is more generous than God."

We would like to say that the practice of charity in the time of the Lent is an invitation, an attempt, to make social charity a part of our daily life, as laid out in our Fifth Apostolic Letter entitled "The Ministry of Social Charity." (2017)

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Third: Pastoral Guidelines

I- The Great Lent

21. Lent lasts seven weeks leading up to and in preparation for Easter. It begins on Ash Monday, and ends at noon on Holy Saturday. It is abstinence from eating from midnight till noon, it is also refraining from eating meat, dairy products, and eggs.

Breaking the fast is permitted on Saturdays and Sundays and the following feasts: Saint John Maron (March 2), the Forty Martyrs (March 9), Saint Joseph (March 19), and the Feast of the Patron of the Parish. Fasting and abstinence remain obligatory at the start of Passion Week, from Monday to Holy Saturday.

22. In general, the sick and the elderly who need to eat should be exempted from fasting and abstinence, especially those who are taking medications associated with chronic illnesses, and who are in critical health conditions, as well as patients undergoing temporary or periodic hospitalization. It is customary that children start fasting in the year following their first communion, while taking into consideration their circumstances during school days.

Those who are exempted from the laws of fasting and abstinence are invited to eat sufficiently to take the medicine.

Given life demands and to alleviate the burden of the faithful, the law of fasting and abstinence are mandatory during the first week and the last week of Lent. Those unable to comply may compensate for fasting and abstinence with good deeds and acts of charity during other weeks.

II- The Fast of the Apostles Peter and Paul and the Twelve Apostles

23. This fast is known as "The **Apostles' Fast** ", during which the faithful abstain from eating meat, dairy products and eggs, from June 17 to 28.

III- The Fast of the Virgin Mary

24. This fast is known as the "Fast of the Virgin" and is based on abstaining from meat, dairy products and eggs from August 7 after the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord until August 14.

IV- The Fast of Christmas

25. This fast is based on an abstinence from meat, and dairy products through the Christmas novena that starts from December 16 and ends December 24.

V- Abstinence on Fridays

26. Refraining from eating meat and dairy products continues on every Friday all year round. Exceptions include Fridays that fall on the following feasts: The Circumcision of the Lord Jesus (January First), Feast of St. Anthony the Great (January 17), Presentation of the Temple (February 2), Saint Maron (February 9), St. John Maroun (March 2), the 40 Martyrs (March 9), St. Joseph (March 19), The Annunciation (March 25), the Apostles Peter and Paul (June 29), The Transfiguration (August 6), The Assumption of the Virgin Mary (August 15), the Beheading of John the Baptist (August 29), Birth of the Blessed Mother (September 8), Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14), The Immaculate Conception (December 8), Christmas (December 25), the Patron Saint of the Parish and the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

VI- The Eucharistic Fast

27. Abstaining from food at least an hour before the Divine Liturgy, an hour before receiving Communion, in addition to prepare ourselves to be in a state of grace, wear decent clothes, and appreciation of the presence of Christ in the form of bread and wine.

Conclusion

28. The time of Great Lent is the holy annual occasion in which we renew our trilateral relationship: first with God through repentance, prayer and enlightenment by His Word; second with ourselves by fasting and freeing the will from its weaknesses and enslavements; and third with our brothers and sisters who are in

need, not with a spirit of superiority and impatience, but with a spirit of sharing and love.

Thus, through this restorative trinity, we prepare for the "passing over" of Christ, who is our Passover by the grace of His death and the redemption of our sins, and by the grace of the Resurrection of him, "who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for our justification." (Romans 4:25).

From the bottom of our heart, we wish you all a blessed Lent and glorious Easter.

With my love, prayers and apostolic blessing.

From Bkerke, on the Feast of our Father, Saint Maron, February 9, 2018

Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Rai

Patriarch of Antioch and All the East