



POSITION OF THE PATRIARCHATE OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST ON THE CRISIS IN SYRIA

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
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INTRODUCTION

“The world would assist both Christians and Moslems much better if it spreads the culture of dialogue in our East and wipes away the culture of the sword...” Patriarch John X

The ancient Church of Antioch was founded by the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul and according to church tradition, represents one of the earliest Christian communities in existence. The Patriarchate was established in Antioch two thousand years ago, and moved to Damascus in the fourteenth century, following the Ottoman invasion of Antioch.

The head of the Orthodox Church of Antioch is called the Patriarch. The present Patriarch of Antioch is John X (Yazigi), who previously presided over the Archdiocese of Western and Central Europe (2008–2013). He was elected as primate of the Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East as John X of Antioch on December 17, 2012.

The Patriarchate is the center for millions of Antiochian Orthodox faithful all over the world and includes the following Archdioceses:

In the Middle East:

Antioch and Damascus and Dependencies
Akkar and Dependencies
Aleppo, Alexandretta and Dependencies
Bosra, Horan and Jabal al-Arab
Baghdad, Kuwait and Dependencies
Beirut and Dependencies
Byblos, Batroun and Dependencies
Hama and Dependencies
Homs and Dependencies
Lattakia and Dependencies
Tripoli, Al-Koura, and Dependencies
Tyre, Sidon and Dependencies
Zahleh, Baalbek, and Dependencies

In Asia, Oceania, Europe and the Americas:

Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines
Germany and Central Europe
Buenos Aires and All Argentine
British Isles and Ireland
France, Western and Southern Europe
Mexico, Venezuela, Central America and the
Islands of the Caribbean Sea
New York and all North America
Santiago and all Chile
Sao Paulo and all Brazil

The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America was established in the U.S. in 1895, and is based in Englewood, New Jersey. The Hierarch is his Eminence, Metropolitan Joseph (Al-Zehlaoui), Archbishop of New York and all North America, who was elected by the Holy Synod of Antioch on July 3, 2014. The Archdiocese is one of the fastest growing in the country, increasing from 65 parishes in the mid-1960s to over 270 parishes as of 2015. There is estimated to be close to a million Antiochian Orthodox Christians in the U.S., coming from many different backgrounds. A significant number are second and third generation Syrian Americans, and the fastest growing segment is comprised of American converts.

With the crisis in Syria entering its sixth year, and with the catastrophic conditions of war, violence, and destruction touching every Syrian family, the Patriarchate of Antioch has looked on with profound sadness as its people continue to suffer. While the Patriarchate has mounted a tremendous humanitarian effort, aided by extraordinary NGO's and international partners, the scale of the crisis is unprecedented.



The Patriarchate of Antioch occupies a unique position in the ecosystem of culture and politics in the Middle East, and it possesses a critical viewpoint on how to move forward. The Church of Antioch, which serves as a stabilizing presence in the region, is firmly committed to non-violence and to employing dialogue, diplomacy and other peaceful means in finding a resolution to the current crises. It furthermore advocates for preserving the rich, pluralist, and intricate culture which has existed in Syria for thousands of years and for maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and all the countries of the Middle East. It strongly supports the maintenance of a secular State, even in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East, with widely popular multi-religious support, which guarantees religious freedom. It has continually implored all allies and Western leaders to consider that the best way to help Christians and Muslims in the East is by restoring peace through dialogue and political solution, and through practical rejection of all resources that nourish religious extremism.

The following is a compilation of official statements by His Beatitude, Patriarch John X, as well as a recent report produced by the Patriarchate regarding the position of the Church of Antioch on the crisis in Syria and the East. These have been written over the past several years in response to the mounting violence and destruction in Syria. As would be expected of a spiritual leader, there is an appeal for peace, reconciliation, harmony and fraternity, however there are very practical policy considerations to be found as well.

Out of respect for the sentiments and the message being delivered by His Beatitude, these statements have not been edited or culled down to policy points; rather they are being presented in his own inspired words. The reader should keep in mind that Patriarch John X has been personally impacted by the war in Syria, as in April 2013, his brother, Paul the Metropolitan of Aleppo was kidnapped together with Youhanna Ibrahim, Metropolitan of Aleppo of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Despite this, Patriarch John X maintains a position of peace and reconciliation. For those readers who share His Beatitude's faith, these statements will serve as an affirming, if sobering, message of love, peace and tolerance amid the most extreme violence and destruction imaginable. For those who do not share His Beatitudes beliefs, these writings will nonetheless provide a very clear message of recommended action which can be taken by partners and allies committed to finding a solution to the current crisis.

RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH OF ANTIOCH TO THE CRISIS IN SYRIA AND THE EAST

Presented at "Freedom of Religion or Belief of the Orthodox in the World"

Cyprus 8-10, October 2016

Introduction

The Church of Antioch was founded in the very early beginnings of Christianity, and in the City of Antioch "the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11: 26). The geographical boundaries of the Patriarchate of Antioch included "Syria, Arabia, Cilicia, Georgia, Mesopotamia and all the East", as stipulated in the historic "Phimi" of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. The headquarters of the Patriarchate moved, with the passage of time from Antioch to the city of Damascus, and Her pastoral horizon expanded during the past two centuries to include taking care of Her children in the Diaspora after the displacement of many of them from their homeland due to wars and economic factors that have been imposed on the Middle East.



The Church of Antioch has been struggling constantly, since the time of Her foundation and throughout history, to witness for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This witness continued through the times of the persecution under the Pagan Roman Empire, the Islamic Conquests, the conquests of the Persians, the Mongols, the Mameluk, the Ottoman and other foreign armies' invasions, and under the shadow of the conquerors and of all the religious oppression that followed, and did not stop in modern ages through the grinding ongoing war in Her Motherland generally, and especially, in Syria and Iraq.

This presentation does not aim to prepare a historical study of the results of this war and its effects in the region and the world and on the Church of Antioch and Her children, but to clarify the current situation that Christians in general, and the Orthodox Church of Antioch in particular, have to live in during the years of the crisis in Syria, and the huge difficulties they are straining beneath in the face of the repercussions of this violent war that is going on in the region.

Pluralism and Freedom of Religious Practice in Syria before the War

Syria occupies an area of 185,180 square kilometers, and its population reached 23 million during the pre-crisis years. Christians of various tradition make up 10 percent of the total population. The largest Church numerically is the Roman Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East. The majority of the citizens of Armenian origins belong to the Armenian Orthodox Church, which uses the Armenian ritual and the Armenian language, so does the majority of the citizens of Syriac origins who belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church and uses Syriac language and tradition. Syria, also,

includes other Churches, such as the Catholic Churches which recognize the authority of the Pope of Vatican, and the Protestant Churches.

The Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic provides religious freedom, and there is no official state religion, but the Constitution requires that the president be Muslim, and stipulates that "Islamic Shari'a is the main source of legislation". Churches and mosques receive some free utilities, such as water and electricity, and are exempt from real estate taxes and taxes on official cars. The government does not interfere with purely internal affairs of religions, and permits the use of religious language in public places, including the lifting of religious symbols.

The Syrian Government's policy officially disavows sectarianism of any kind. All schools are officially government-run and non-sectarian, although in practice some schools are run by religious groups. There is mandatory religious instruction in all schools, and religious instruction is provided on Islam and Christianity. Although Arabic is the official language in public schools, the government permits the teaching in foreign languages, and in Armenian, Syriac, and Chaldean in some schools. The Government has increased its support for the practice and study of moderate forms of Islam.



Religious groups are subject to their respective religious laws for matters dealing with personal status. Churches have their independent spiritual laws and Spiritual Courts, the decisions of which are in force in the State. And the Muslims, as well, have their own laws of personal status and their Islamic Courts, while, Civil and Criminal Courts have jurisdiction for criminal matters. The official Christian holidays, such as Christmas, Orthodox and Western Easter, are national holidays, and so are the Islamic holidays.

Although, the majority of Syria's population are Muslims, people of Syria do not live according to the logic of majorities and minorities, as citizens reject extremism and live moderate Islam. In Syria, the tradition of peaceful, brotherly coexistence among religions is a national trait of which all Syrian groups have always been proud.

Before the war, Syria was opened up to foreign trade, to tourism within the country and from abroad, to freedom of movement and of education for both men and women. Before the Crisis started, the number of women in the professional world had been constantly increasing, the university was open to all, and there was no discrimination on the basis of sex. The Country was at peace, prosperity was on the rise. A common home and fatherland to many ethnicities and different religious groups, Syria has always been a place where all were free to believe and live out their creed, all relationships were characterized by mutual respect. And freedom advocated by protesters in the beginning of the crisis, which is essentially a Divine Gift and a rightful demand for all people, has evolved into bigotry that steals this same freedom from the people of Syria, Iraq, and the countries of the region and the world.

Christians of the Orthodox Church of Antioch in the Face of the War in Syria and the East



The spark of the grinding war started in the year 2011 aiming to destroy Syria, the home to a unique and multi-religious society. And, in the year 2013, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) appeared on the scene, cutting through a third of Syria and Iraq and advancing rapidly, tragically, into the area with the strongest Christian presence in Iraq and Syria. And, since then, a shocked world has been witnessing the ghastly beheadings of innocent people, along with the displacement, raping, and murdering of the Christians of this region, with their brothers and sisters Muslims and Yazidis and

the people of all other religious groups, whose their only crime is that they live in these countries, and the world now is watching the looting and burning down of churches and mosques and the marking out of Christians' homes in support of continuing these heinous acts.

The Orthodox Church of Antioch, having understood the imminent danger that threatens, not only Syria and Iraq and the Middle East, but the entire World as well, She stood in the face of this brutal war, with her pastors and her entire flock, who have been paying, with their Muslim and Christian brothers, a heavy price with their lives and properties and their displacement. And the ways of Her witness to the Lord and the Homeland are varied and reflected in the following three points:

The witness of the Church of Antioch in the face of the dangers that threaten life:

- The serial of public killing and abducting Christians started in the year 2008 by kidnapping and murdering the Archbishop of the Chaldeans Mar Paulos Faraj Rahho in Iraq, and it is continuing during the war in Syria.
- In the year 2012, two Antiochian Orthodox priests were murdered, the first is Father Basil Nassar in Hama, and the second is Father Fadi Haddad in Damascus, who had been negotiating for the release of a kidnapped young man from his parishioners.
- In the year 2013, two priests were abducted on their way out of Aleppo, Greek Orthodox Father Isaac Mahfoud and Armenian Catholic Father Michelle Kayal, and there is no information concerning their fate right now.
- In the same year, Archbishops Paul Yazigi of Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo, Alexandretta and Dependencies, and John Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo, were abducted as well on their way back to Aleppo from a humanitarian mission to bring back the two kidnapped priests, with no definite information about their fate until now, while the World is watching their case with silence which is almost as dangerous as their abduction.
- Also, we must mention the kidnapping of the Nuns of St. Thekla Orthodox Monastery in Ma'aloula which lasted for 4 months, and the killing of the Jesuit Dutch Father Frans Van der Lugt who was murdered by gunmen in Homs despite the help he offered to all people there, and the murder of Father Francois Murad who gave his life in defense of the Latin Convent in Ghassaniya village in the countryside Idlib and of the elderly who took refuge in it.

- And, till now, the children of the Church of Antioch, along with their pastors, offer their lives daily on the altar of the Church and the Homeland dying by sword, bullets or shells in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Idleb and all parts of Syria and Iraq, following the example of their crucified Master and His Saints and Apostles, who offered their lives to spread the Gospel and the Church in the Levant and the entire world after witnessing the Light of the Resurrection.

The witness of the Church of Antioch in the face of economic destitution: This war destroyed churches, mosques, monasteries and people's properties in every place it entered.

- In 2013, the Monastery of St. Thekla in Ma'aloula was destroyed and the Nuns were abducted.
- The Archdiocese of Aleppo, Alexandretta and Dependencies, has the largest amount of destruction and devastation, and most of its churches and endowments, institutions and schools in Aleppo were destroyed by shells, so were its two parishes in the city of Idleb and the town of Tabqa in the countryside of Raqqqa.
- The unique Aleppian Icons were looted from the Church in Idleb, and the ancient Monastery of St. Symeon the Stylite, in the countryside of Aleppo, which dates back to the fifth century, was destroyed and vandalized as well.
- The same applies in Homs, the churches and schools of which were destroyed, and in other parts of Syria and Iraq.
- And many of the children of the Church of Antioch lost their homes and all their properties and possessions either by shells or by theft, especially in Aleppo and Homs, along with their hopes and dreams of a happy life.
- All of this was accompanied by the loss of jobs causing extreme poverty and huge needs even for essentials. And, in the face of this great economic destitution, the Church of Antioch is trying hard to support the steadfastness of the Church in the Levant, and to help Her children remain in their Homeland by all means and possibilities available.

The witness of the Church of Antioch in the face of the displacement of Christians:

- All these huge threats, along with the economic factor and the other multiple factors, led many of the children of the Church of Antioch to emigrate in search of security and a human life worth living, thereby increasing internal migration dramatically, especially from Aleppo and Homs to more stable and secure areas in Syria, which led to significant changes in the demographic structure.
- Some Orthodox Christians, also, formed, with many of the people of Syria and Iraq, a massive surge of legal and illegal emigration to the Americas, Australia and the European Countries.
- The Church of Antioch is trying hard to raise awareness among Her children of the importance of their attachment to the land of their ancestors, and that it is their responsibility in front of their grandchildren to keep the religious diversity and the inherent cultural heritage in the face of the threat of atonement, which seeks to draw a monochrome policy of sectarian entities.
- Christians have been authentic component of Syria for more than 2000 years, they are full-fledged Syrians, Syria is their home, and wherever they go they will be foreigners. However, the Church of Antioch strives to help the expatriates who reach their destination with all means and possibilities available, through Her Dioceses in the Diaspora, embracing them spiritually and materially.

Therefore, the Church of Antioch, through Her witness in Syria, Iraq, the Middle East and the whole World, emphasizes that the Church of Jesus Christ is Emmanuel within the World, and has a profound and intimate relationship with the Levant and the whole World, with Its pain and Its hopes, Its joys and Its sorrows, Its problems and Its crisis, and, at the same time, She offers Herself for the whole World, following the example of Her Master, without forgetting Her Eastern roots and identity. So, She calls for the preservation of world peace and the territorial integrity of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and all the countries of the Middle East, and seeks, in the midst of this violence and destruction, to maintain a secular State, even in the Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East, with widely popular multi-religious support, which guarantees religious freedom.

The Church of Antioch emphasizes, through Her long experience in witnessing for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, that countering the blind and takfiri intolerance which hits Syria cannot be achieved without vigilant and paying attention to the existence of a project to destroy its rich, pluralist, and unbelievably intricate culture, and replace it with a monochrome version of radical Islam, the repercussions of which will extend to affect the whole world, and history may come to judge very severely those who invest in this war for self-interests.

CONCLUSION



The conclusion of this presentation is best described by the inspired words of His Beatitude John X Patriarch of Antioch and all the East: "the Christians of the Levant are looking for someone to hear their call; but in vain. In our country, we are ones who call for peace; we call for reconciliation, for harmony and fraternity. We do not beg the powers of this world for mercy, but we rather shout at them: enough takfirism, terrorism, and garbling reality; enough exporting barbarism and displaying propaganda; enough of your fabricated statements that call nations to receive

Christians. The world would assist both Christians and Moslems much better if it spreads the culture of dialogue in our East and wipes away the culture of the sword... Release our country from the grasp of terrorism; stop the flow of weapons, and retrieve your ships! The vessels of war cannot protect us, nor can the ships of emigration! Only implanting peace in our mainland can protect us, for we have been rooted here for two thousand years now! We were born here, we have lived here, and here will we die... In Antioch, despite our agony, the many tribulations, kidnappings, dispersion, deprivation of the basics needs for a respectable existence, we still love our brothers and perceive any encounter and authentic dialogue as an image of hope, and as a witness to Him who conquered death and shone upon on the third day the Light of His Resurrection and great mercy. Glory to Him in everything. Amen."

STATEMENT BY HIS BEATITUDE JOHN X
Patriarch of Antioch and All the East - July 23, 2014

"We strongly condemn attacks on any segment of society in this Middle East and we especially condemn the attack on the Christians of Mosul..." - Patriarch John X

At a time when Syria's wounds have been bleeding for more than three years, amidst the wounds of Iraq, which has experienced conflict since the 1980's, amidst the unrest that is sweeping countries near and far, and amidst the world's indifference to Palestine's wounds, which have not healed in almost seventy years, these days in particular we are witnessing a multiplication of these wounds in the expulsion of Mosul's Christians and the all-out assault on Gaza amidst a disgraceful international silence.



The cycle of violence sweeping Iraq and Syria, expelling peaceful citizens has not let up, as recent events in Iraq and specifically in Mosul have completed the series of murder, religious prejudice, and terror.

We strongly condemn attacks on any segment of society in this Middle East and we especially condemn the attack on the Christians of Mosul and their being compelled by force of arms to change their religion under the penalty of paying the Jizya or abandoning their homes and having their property confiscated. These fundamentalist movements that are trying to become mini-states through force and terror with outside moral and material support are the greatest threat to people in the Middle East and to coexistence there. We ask the international community and specifically the United Nations and all global powers and organizations to take into proper consideration what is happening in Iraq, Mosul and the entire Middle East.

We call on them to deal with the current situation courageously, with a genuine language of human rights and not a language of interests that uses the principles of human rights and exploits them in the service of narrow aims and interests. We ask the countries that provide outside support to these groups, whether directly or indirectly, to cease immediately from all forms of material, moral, logistical and military support for these extremist groups and so cut off at its root the terrorism that is first of all a threat to the peace and peoples of those countries. We likewise call for an end to resorting to any form of violence as a means by which citizens deal with each other.



Because we in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East constantly affirm that Christians and Muslims are two lungs of a single Middle Eastern body that stands on citizenship and common life, we reject anything that would first of all hurt Islam's reputation for tolerance, brotherhood and peaceful life, which we have experienced, and secondly disrupts the right of citizens to have a civic presence free from sectarian or racial pressures.

As the world watches what is happening in Mosul, the chain of violence is repeated in the Gaza Strip under various justifications, amidst a frightening international silence. This is happening while the outside world is content to watch a bloodbath that has not spared women, children and the elderly. It is as though the Middle East has become a testing-ground for every sort of weapon and a fertile soil for every sort of plot. It is as though the people of the Middle East are a commodity created to be dough in the hands of the forces of evil, when they are created to be the image of the Lord's splendor and the focus of the Creator's good pleasure, with good relationships with their fellow citizens and fellow humans.

We in the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East understand the common fate that binds us to our Christian and Muslim brothers in Palestine. We implore the international community for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to the sinful siege on our brothers in Palestine, whose cause remains par excellence the cause of Humanity.

The attachment of the Palestinians to their land and their longing to return to it is a cause for hope for all those suffering in this Middle East and a mark of shame upon the faces of those for whom "human rights" end at the hills of Palestine while at the same time that they traffic in these "rights" in order to intervene in the affairs of other peoples.

We pray that God give peace to the world, that He give strength to all those in distress, that He cause peace to be lasting in the Middle East, so that humanity may enjoy well-being and tranquility.

STATEMENT BY HIS BEATITUDE JOHN X
Patriarch of Antioch and all the East - July 30, 2014

In the midst of all destruction which is taking place in the Middle East and with the recent events like killings and displacements which affected Christians and others, and in the midst of the conflicts in Syria and the attack on Gaza, we hear some officials of Western governments giving declarations from time to time or publishing some “studies” to express their unreal empathy with Christians of certain areas and showing their solidarity with them, describing their circumstances in a way that supports the logic of minorities. But the most recent of these declarations is that of the French government regarding its readiness to accept the Iraqi Christians and granting them a political asylum, in addition to the study issued by the American Ministry of Foreign Affairs that describes the presence of the Christians in the Middle East as “a shadow of its former status”.



We, in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, would like to confirm that the difficult circumstances in the East do not justify anybody’s attempt to misuse them as “Trojan Horse” to empty the East from its Christians, declaring that what Christians are confronting in the East is similar to what is happening to religious or ethnic minorities in other places of the world. We believe that helping the inhabitants of the East, Christians or Muslims, starts with uprooting terrorism from its homeland and stop nourishing the movements of extremism and Takfirism (religious prejudice) , whose financial resources are very well known as well as the states and the governments that offer them the ideological, logistic and military support through undeclared international alliances.

The best way to help Christians and Muslims in the East is by restoring peace through dialogue and political solution, and through practical rejection of all resources that nourish the reasons of this extremism, refusing the injustice towards Palestinians, adapting an honest Media that shows the active role of the Christians in the life of their homelands away from any statistical division of people.

We say it to all: the only embracing place for Christians and Muslims of this area is their homelands, in which they have been living together for many centuries, building a unique civilization recognized by a real partnership; a civilization that transferred to the West the human heritage and enriching it. We, the Christians of this land, will not accept to be treated through the logic of minorities which is imposed on us from abroad, and we reconfirm that we were and are still committed to the message of our Gospel, which has arrived to us from our ancestors 2000 years ago. Our forefathers carried and transferred this message to us enduring numerous afflictions. And we will keep this seed which we have received here in the East, growing it and being loyal to it.

HOMILY BY JOHN X, PATRIARCH OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST
“Blood of Martyrs, Seed of Communion” - Monastery of Bose, September 7, 2016

From the Apostolic Church of Antioch, where “the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11: 26), I send you the apostolic blessing, with sincere love and a brotherly embrace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

“For I think that God hath exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted, and homeless and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat...” (1Co4: 9-13).



These words of Saint Paul properly express the condition of the Church of Antioch and her constant struggle to witness for God and her Faith through the ages. In fact, shortly after the times of persecution under the Pagan Roman Empire, the Islamic Conquests reached the thresholds of our Levantine bishoprics. Again, there came times of witness and martyrdom, kindled by the conquests of the Persians, the Mongols, the Mameluk and other foreign armies' invasions. After these came the Ottoman tide that led to the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the Eastern World. It is as if our Church was doomed to exist under the shadow of the conquerors and of all the religious oppression that followed, together with the many historical violations that helped fragmenting the body of the Antiochian Church into diverse ecclesiastical entities...

However, the Church of the East has remained not only an open gateway to the inter-Christian dialogue, at any price, but also a friendly hand ever ready to reach for the others and provide care in evangelical love, and the hope “that does not put us to shame”. (Rom. 5:5)

Today, as you know, our children and our countries are tempest-tossed by wars that only fell upon us to tear our communities asunder, blowing away whatever remained of their characteristic simplicity, warmth, unhurriedness, and beautiful expectations. These are wars waged by strangers on our land; the wars of extremist movements that lack a minimum of humane feeling, sensibility and sense.

Dear Brothers, we are people that love and long for peace. We had enough of historical wars, and we abhor weapons, having realized, as ages went by, that violent confrontation only ends in destruction, dispersion and desolation. Indeed, we realize well that violence cannot build nations, nor can it establish democracies and any kind of freedom; it rather disseminates such plagues as animosity, enmity and division.

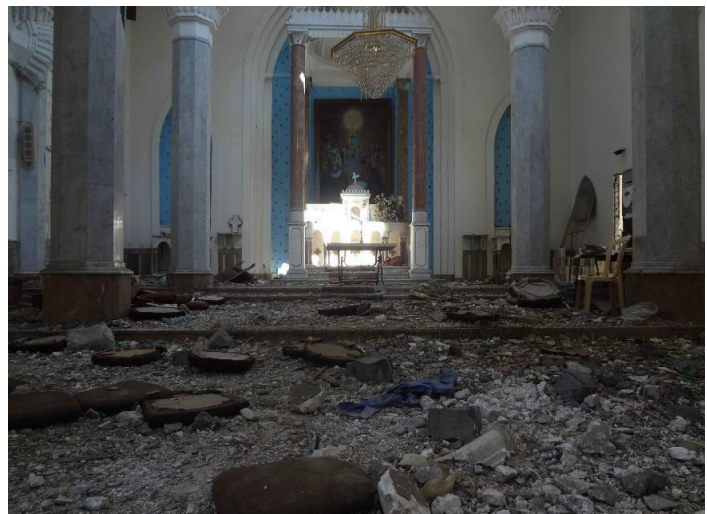


Hence, the Christians of the Levant are looking for someone to hear their call; but in vain. In our country, we are ones who call for peace; we call for reconciliation, for harmony and fraternity. We do not beg the powers of this world for mercy, but we rather shout at them: enough takfirism, terrorism, and garbling reality; enough exporting barbarism and displaying propaganda; enough of your fabricated statements

that call nations to receive Christians. The world would assist both Christians and Moslems much better if it spreads the culture of dialogue in our East and wipes away the culture of the sword... Release our country from the grasp of terrorism; stop the flow of weapons, and retrieve your ships! The vessels of war cannot protect us, nor can the ships of emigration! Only implanting peace in our mainland can protect us, for we have been rooted here for two thousand years now! We were born here, we have lived here, and here will we die.

Once again, we say: Is it not high time for the world to awake? Is it not high time for humankind to understand that the terrorism and takfirism targeting our people and Churches do not limit themselves in our East, but touch every part of the world? Is it not time for the lobbies of the nations to act for the case of the bishops John Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, and of so many priests and innocent people abducted over the last three years? Is it not time that the world community asks itself, even for one time: why does it blockade its markets against a hungry people, while striking more weapons' deals?

Our motherland lives a very painful reality. We are facing very hard times where many segments of society are systematically persecuted by extremist religious groups in utter discordance with our local concepts of religion. This extremist tide which promotes exclusion and rejection is an ideology that has nothing to do with religion. Undoubtedly, it directly stems from major unbridled political schemes that have sowed hatred and have led the whole humankind to reap terror and death.





The inhabitants of hundreds of villages and dozens of cities find themselves homeless now. Thousands of mothers lost their children, houses are being demolished, the places of worship are being defiled, and provinces are being emptied from their original inhabitants since the beginning of time.

Shall I say more? I lack time to tell you about the kidnapped, the captives, the enslaved and the hopelessly injured. Could I

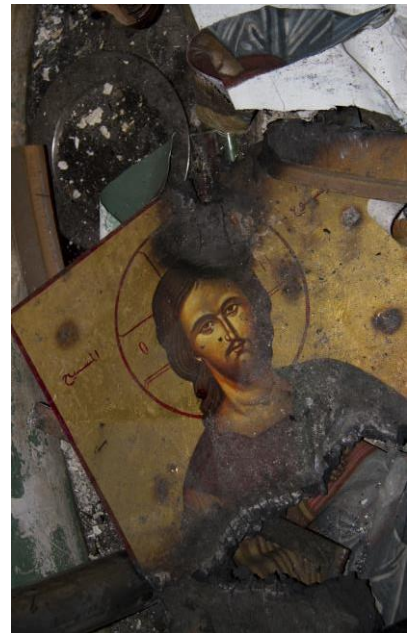
describe the condition of the tortured bodies, the misery of the enslaved women, or the strife of the children and of the people enrolled by force? What should I say about the parents of the kidnapped, spending sleepless nights waiting for their long gone children? Truly the biblical saying is fulfilled in our case: "Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they are no more". (Mt2: 18; Jer31: 15)

"We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men" (1Co4: 9-10). I really find it hard to fathom how the political leaders of this world can stand, crossing their arms, watching the bloody violence in our country, but only giving priority to the economic and strategic interests that serve their short-sighted inhumane politics.

My brothers, the world today stands aghast and in chaos, expecting from us Christians to be the icon of prayer, of true communion, and of a real unity that transcends historical obstacles, sins, and wounds. Today, the world is in dire need of a Christian witness based on convergence and accord. It seeks a unified and clear Christian discourse that gives one answer from the Gospel to questions that face modern man in all his crises of contemporary society.

Globalization may well unite our societies in the fields of economy, politics and communication; yet, when it comes to ethics, to human feelings, and to spiritual values, our societies are lost, confused. Without a common belief and a united heart, what witness could we bear, or what needs could we meet?

Has not the time come for our theological debates to transcend the obstacles and complexes of history; has not the time come for us to grasp that our schisms render our witness sterile in a barren land abused by materialistic and nihilistic values, where perverse models are promoted and self-imposed as the only basis, criteria and principle?





Confused as we are, how can we stand against the absurd exploitation and political subjugation of religion? How could we be heard as messengers of peace in a world that only sees in us schisms, conflicts and segmentation? If our mutual relationships do not emit the peace of God, can we give this peace to the world? How shall we testify that Christianity is liberation from all kinds of bondage and slavery, the very principle of true freedom, when we find ourselves enchained by our ancient discords, burdened by history, and bound to self-sufficiency?

Being the Churches of Christ, how is the verse “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2Co13: 14) mirrored in the reality of our dissensions?

The blood of martyrs has always been a leaven that ferments the whole dough. It regenerates the Church as Body of Christ, and renews in it the grace of the Holy Spirit. We share with our martyrs and brave confessors of faith unbearable pain, and yet we are ever comforted by their infinite divine glory. “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is glorified, all rejoice together” (1Co12: 26).

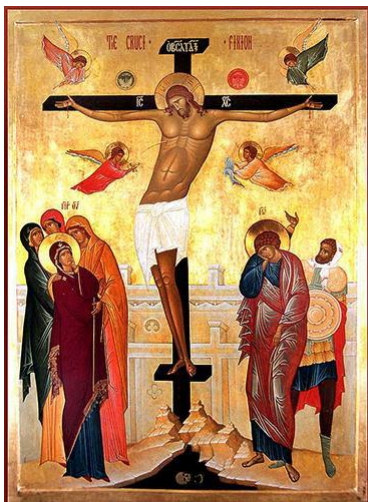
The martyr gives his testimony to the passionate love he died for. He is a martyr of love. The glory of the Church throughout history was wrought by the martyrs for Truth. It is from this testimony for Truth inscribed by the King of Glory on the Cross that we come to you in love, from a Church both wounded and glorious: wounded by the course of events, and resplendent in the glory of its righteous martyrs.

In our days, Christianity in the Levant bears an excellent witness to the Lord, our Resurrected Savior. This Christianity hangs on the cross of the Levant, and treads the path of Golgotha; yet, at her twentieth century, it looks up to the light of Resurrection, in full trust that the Resurrected Master abides in its midst, notwithstanding the strife. Although the crown of these present times stains its face with blood, it realizes well that it has Jesus for companion; that it is the daughter of The Thorn-Crowned, of the One slumbering in the tomb. It knows well that the slumber in the tomb



has been wiped away by the Resurrected Lord, Who shattered the locks of Hell, shining the faithful with the Radiance of Resurrection. Our Church in the Christian East realizes well that her sisters and brothers in the West are also affected by the flames of costly persecution. In fact, the evil of extremist ideologies does not differentiate between Eastern and Western Christians. In 2008, the language of violence and blood started by kidnapping the Archbishop of the Chaldeans Mar Paulos Faraj Rahho in Iraq, launching by his martyrdom a new tide of persecutions in our lands.

Moreover, we can only stand in reverence at the memory of Father Fadi Al-Haddad from Damascus and Father Basil Nassar from Hama, as well as the Jesuit Dutch Father Frans Van der Lugt murdered in Homs after a life offered in service and generous ministry. We can only bow in respect before the twenty-one Coptic martyrs slaughtered on the Libyan coast as they called upon Jesus our Lord and Savior, the thirty Ethiopian martyrs whose faith in Christ the Son of God cost them their life, and so many others who were killed for the name of our Lord and Savior. To these we combine the living martyrs who suffer physical and moral excruciating pain, only because they belong to the Lord Jesus. A short while ago, Father Jacques Hamel joined the martyrs, having been “murdered between the sanctuary and the altar”, as the Bible writes (Mt. 23: 35), not to mention the martyrs of Uganda, Armenia, Russia, Eastern Europe, Charles de Foucauld, Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe, Oscar Romero, Alexander Menn, and others. So many faces and names have testified and confessed that the love of Christ is not confined but “calls everyone to be united”.



The Church of the East understands that the contemporary martyrs are the premise of our unity in Christ. No matter what denomination they belong to, the martyrs have joined the Lord of Glory now. Their names are written in the Book of Life; but they await our struggle, here on earth, as we hope to please God by exerting a vigilant and ruthless effort to watch over God’s People and Holy Church. Indeed, the tortures of the Christian community in our days prompt us to think plainly of our Christian unity, and set this unity as a primordial goal to achieve.

The blood of the martyrs calls us to be united with the One Body of Christ, in such a way that history is ransomed and sanctified. The blood of the martyrs defies us to achieve a complete and real unity in the Church, having the Father’s will in the Church “on earth, as it is in heaven”. But shall we listen to this call? Shall we answer it? Or shall we only boast in the feats of these holy martyrs, praising them in hymns and lauds that touch neither our hearts nor our reality? The contemporary martyrs remind us that what we have in common widely exceeds our differences. But practically, how do we answer their call? Is each of us ready to admit his responsibility in multiplying the apples of discord between our respective Churches? Is any of us ready to reckon his mistakes throughout history, confessing sins by which the body of Christ was torn? Do we sincerely seek to heal the past wounds and do away with any reminiscence of enmity?

We need to walk in unwavering steps towards reconciliation with the blood of our new martyrs. History burdens each of us with disputes, misunderstandings, and harsh prejudices that consolidate the “wall of enmity” among the Churches. It is indispensable to find practical measures that would blow down this fence and ensure the full communion, at the example of the martyrs of this new era.

Indeed, the communion of suffering brings the Christians and the Churches closer together. Thus, we are given an opportunity to reconsider our priorities, and our various approaches towards the twenty-first century ecumenical work.

Hence, after being used in the past decade to talk about “spiritual ecumenism,” or the “ecumenism of blood,” I would like today to call for an “ecumenism of repentance”. We are in urgent need of a common ecumenism based on repentance, in the Pauline sense of metanoia, to renew our frame of mind by admitting our mistakes. We ought to get out of our ecclesiastical isolation in order to embrace the other. We heal the common ecclesiastical ego by reconciliation and heartfelt forgiveness. Otherwise we shall abrogate the powerful effects of the martyrs’ blood, depriving the world of the much needed witness of Christian unity, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn10: 10).

Christian unity is built and completed depending on our personal effort to be united with and drawn to Christ. I am united with my fellow Christian in as much as we both live a union with Christ unaffected by historical situations, a union that blows away the trivial and the superficial, that is braced and chiseled by the true dogma, and the faith transmitted for generations.

Let us pray for each other, soliciting the holy martyrs and saints to intercede for us and protect our peoples from evil, schisms and dispersion. Let us entreat the Divine Spirit to enlighten our hearts, and guide our steps so that we find peace, reconciliation and unity, let us beseech Him to give us strength to come closer to our brothers, so that we may find light by entering in His life-giving communion, where God is “All in all” (1 Cor. 15: 28).

Brothers, to venerate martyrdom and martyrs does not mean the least to despise human dignity and the sacred life on earth. We like to live; it is our right to find a peaceful living, but in case we are compelled to speak out against error, we shall do so, not fearing death.

“Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.” (2 Cor. 7: 2-4)

Indeed, my brothers. In Antioch, despite our agony, the many tribulations, kidnappings, dispersion, deprivation of the basic needs for a respectable existence, we still love our brothers and perceive any encounter and authentic dialogue as an image of hope, and as a witness to Him who conquered death and shone upon on the third day the Light of His Resurrection and great mercy.

Glory to Him in everything. Amen.

Holy Cross Church, Damascus - April 22, 2014

**A JOINT STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE TWO PATRIARCHATES OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST:
THE ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE SYRIAC ORTHODOX CHURCH**

One Year After the Abduction of the Two Metropolitans of Aleppo – John and Paul



One year ago, our brothers, Bishops John and Paul have been abducted, but they proved to the whole world that, in the likeness of their Lord, they are messengers of peace. They have been abducted to prove for the whole world, not only by words but also by deeds, that they are always beside their parish. They have been abducted to show that the storm, even if it lasts, does not spare a bishop or a Sheik, a Church or a Mosque, a child or an old man, one country or another. Today, our believers' hearts gather in the Church of Antioch, in Syria, Lebanon and the whole East, as they gathered previously praying in front of God and the pure Virgin for their safe return and the return of every abducted.

The two bishops, John and Paul, learned from the Lord that the power of His light is much stronger than the harshness of this world. Behold and listen what Bishop John's protector says: "God is love", while the protector of Bishop Paul, Saint Paul the Apostle, speaks about Jesus Christ's Cross that He held out of His love to mankind. Their tribulation today makes a part of the Cross of love, this love which gathers us today, Christians and Muslims, in the Church of the Holy Cross to pray to our God, Almighty, to keep His eyes on our brothers and all the abducted, and to compass Syria and all East with the light of His glorified Resurrection.

Trading with people's lives is an insult addressed to the Heavenly God Who created them free. Trading with people's lives, especially by abducting them, is a kind of enslavement and despising to God Who put in them the tendency to live free. "How to enslave people, while their mothers brought them forth free?" So, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear".

We said it to the international community and to all organizations and to everyone who has "the power for binding and loosing" as we call it in our ecclesiastical terms. We thank you for every word of solidarity and for the feelings of fraternity, and every condemnation and denouncement.

But, and after waiting a full year, we proclaim that the international community holds the responsibility of the silence that covers this case with all its aspects, and ask them to do deeds rather than saying words. We've got enough promises and condemnations, let's translate our words through deeds to show the good intention.

From here, from Damascus, we sent the peace of Resurrection to our children in Aleppo, from the Orthodox Antioch to all our children in the diaspora. To Aleppo which paid and still paying, like other cities, the tax of war's winter, we send the peace of Syria's resurrection, Syria which is bleeding nowadays and longs for safety, but at the same time beats with the power of hope in a better future that we will build by Syrians' arms.

No matter how hard the time will be, the future of this land belongs to her children. Strangers will not stay long. This is what history proves. In the twenties of the last century, Fares Al-Khury has been invited to the palace of General Gouraud at the beginning of the French mandate together with other men of the elite. Gouraud started the conversation asking: is this King Faysal's house? It is really beautiful! Fares Al-Khury couldn't hold his tongue, which found itself forced by the logic of history to answer. His words are ours today as they were at his time. He said: "Many stayed in this house. It was built by the governor Nazzem Basha and he left. Later, Jamal Basha came, and after Him King Faysal. All of them left, but we, the landowners, stayed". This was Fares (the knight's) message to Gouraud, and this is the Syrian's message to the whole world, we will stay in our land despite the misery of the history. Even if they abducted us and insulted us, we will put our hope in our Lord Who knows the secrets of our hearts. We, the Christians and the Muslims of East are a Godly pottery, made by Creator's hands. The hand of those who proclaim us unbelievers and destroy our life will be smite off by the history which reflects a true fraternity between the brothers who share the same land. Syria with its historical cities: Ugarit, Shahba, Palmyra and Maaloula should keep herself away of the ideologies which are strange of our civilization like: terrorism, abduction, bombs. Syria is an olive branch, don't burn the olive on her land.

As for our abducted bishops we say: you are two messengers of love walking in the shadow of the Cross. You are a lantern in the middle of the darkness, a lantern that feeds from the oil of our hearts lightening the darkness of this world. We are with you through our prayers to the Lady Virgin to protect Syria and the whole East from the tribulations, and to help all the abducted to get back to their families, and to cover with Her care those who were taken away by sudden death on the anticipation of the last Resurrection.

Be with us, O Lord, send your divine light upon us. Heal our wounds with the power of our anticipation in you. Be a port of salvation. Console the abducted. Stay with the sick, the displaced, give us strength to console by our turn our brothers. Have mercy, O God, on our martyrs and calm down the hearts of their mothers with the touch of your Holy Spirit.

From the Holy Cross Church in Damascus, we send Resurrection's peace to Syria, to Lebanon and East and to the whole world. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Patriarch Mar Ignatius Efraim II (Krayem)

The Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East

and

Patriarch John X (Yazigi)

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East

Damascus - April 22, 2015

A JOINT STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE TWO PATRIARCHATES OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST: THE ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE SYRIAC ORTHODOX CHURCH

On the Second Anniversary of the Kidnapping of the Two Metropolitans of Aleppo:
His Eminence Paul (Yazigi) and His Eminence John (Abraham) on April 22, 2013

THE DECLARATION OF THE TRUTH IN THE INIQUITOUS TRIAL

"It is for our hope in the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." (Acts 23:6)

Our bishops, Paul and John, are on trial; they were once put on trial at the beginning of the Christian kerygma, and now they are put on trial once again, in the same geographical spot, although bearing different names. It is a unique trial, not only in the East, but also in our contemporary world. The convoluted nature of their trial does not strike the terrestrials only, but the celestials also, since it is a struggle, where the Great Judge will prevail, for He has the final ruling in this case, **the case of the True Man and of the True God.**



Maybe this trial is unequal; most probably, the detainees are not able to plead their case. However, here is their statement, written by their own spirits, by their lives, by their constant witness, that rebounds in the wilderness of this world:

O brethren of the Word, our children of Aleppo, in you and among you we have planted the seeds of the word of truth, witness and service. Behold, the plant is growing! We see how it grows in you, and we feel proud by its fruits. We are astounded by your perseverance, which strengthens our perseverance. We exalt in your steadfastness, which sustains our steadfastness. We esteem your patience, which recompenses our patience. Why not? You are our "glory" and "pride" (1 Tess. 2:19; 20) **in this trial of preaching.**

O brethren of Faith, we are put on trial for what we believe in, preach of, and minister to, by hand, heart and conscience. We live today on earth, so that we may live hereafter in the Heavenly Kingdom; man has the right to believe in the True God and to faithfully minister to "his neighbor as to himself." Our belief in the true man leads us to minister to him wherever we are settled, and we are still where we have settled today. We will not deviate one iota from this determination, since it deserves from us every sacrifice in defense of human dignity, when he is oppressed and dehumanized by the contemporary human market, object of despise and wicked speculation and commerce. Now, the sting of dehumanization is broken **in this trial of dignity.**



O brethren of Hope, be not oblivious to the fact that we are on trial “for our hope in the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6). St. Paul attested once, and we declare it aloud: they want to eradicate the eternal at the expense of the perishable! However, they do not know that the Lord of heaven and earth, Who created them both, also provided that we may traverse the distance separating the two in the spirit of faith, and may attain

heaven with the God-given hope that He will fulfil His promise to us. The present life is transient, whereas the future one is eternal. We all look forward in great expectation, that you will remain steadfast in this hope in the face of death, which crouches close to destroy your bodies and souls. However, our hope in the resurrection of Christ has broken the sting of death **in this trial of endurance.**

O brethren of Love, it is undeniable that the only proper attitude to confront such a trial is to face it with the truth that belongs to our identity and our faith. Indeed, we cannot afford to betray the love of Christ towards us, and observe how hearts and consciences grow dim to the degree of conceding to the pursuit of the path of the passions and all the odious forms of selfishness: hate, immorality, infidelity, treachery, murder, intimidation, kidnapping and exploitation, etc. When we see you strong and consistent, brethren, our hearts rejoice with the sight of your love among the wreckage of fallen humanity, whose self-centeredness has truly reached the gates of Hades. By your love, you conquer everything, and by it, you overcome all forms of death, so that you may enter into the Kingdom of the God of Love. Amongst devastation, death and fatality, the edifice of your love rises higher and higher as a final judgment **in the trial of conscience.**

O brethren of blood, you who have been judged or will be judged, some of you have received the favorable judgment of God to be a martyr or a confessor, and some of you are living the witness of unsurpassed hope, in silence or under threat, in dishonor or in distress. However, by your perseverance you muzzled those who laid a wager for your betrayal, apostasy, and feebleness when facing weakness, enticement, or threat. Your blood, whether still pulsating or shed, is a balm to your families and to your brethren, and a seal of victory **in the trial of immortality.**

O brethren of truth, let them be turned back for a reward of their shame those who declared victory proclaiming an apparent truth, but, in reality, vain in its essence. With the eyes of the heart, we observe them, and ponder what they publish and do, as well as what they hide intentionally. No truth will supersede the right of God and the right of man, regardless of their proliferated sins. This is the cry of Saint John in all of us: “He that loves not his brother abides in death. Whosoever hates his brother is a murderer.” (1 Jn 3:14-15). We will not plea-bargain when falsely accused, and we will not yield to anyone but the Truth. We proclaim it with you, at the heart of your suffering, through your struggle, steadfastness, and courage. Thus, you have disclosed their evident guile **in the trial of the truth.**

O brethren in citizenship, your wound is ours, your pain is ours, your tears are ours, and your life is ours too. Our hands are extended to you, and our hearts have room for all of you. Let us shake hands, talk to each other, have peace, reconcile with one another, and build a mutual understanding, cooperation, and integration. The solution is not achieved by violence, in its multiform types, but through the multiple forms of dialogue. The real threat comes when man comes to extinction and civilization perishes if this trial is prolonged endlessly. With you, we raise the flag of fellowship **in the trial of unity.**



O brethren of same destiny, our East, we are the sand of its deserts, the soil of its camps, the rocks of its mountains, the water of its rivers, the roots of its trees. If they vanish, life will no longer exist, and it will have no meaning. Our East has become an open arena for all evils. The bargain of this trial is to demolish life in its cradle, shatter the radiation of its civilizations, remove the fingerprints of its historical patrimony, displace its people out of their history, and disfigure the identity of God in its religions. Our victory of truth on earth is derived from heaven, but not by calling upon God in order to exploit Him, for the pleasure of our passions, of which heaven is completely innocent! We are aware that we are consecrated to remain in the East, to which we belong, of which we are, in which we bear witness to our faith, from which our kerygma starts out, and on which we build the edifice of our humanity. The one God was not for us a subject of dispute, or a reason for fighting, or a cause of division. We learned to address Him as “Our Father” (Mt 6:9), so we are all “brethren.” We are able to speak to everyone in truth and love, and “to lay down our lives for them” (1 Jn 3:16); we are also able to petition them, since we share a common destiny, either we all hold tight to it together, or we all lose it! No believer or nonbeliever, whoever he is, whether from the East or outside it, may bear a false witness, with his silence, or neutrality, or fear for himself, or carelessness or blindness to what is going on here. With you, we raise the banner of brotherhood, with which we confound the false witnesses **in the trial of man and religion.**

O brethren in humanity, our cause has become greater than one that belongs only to a definite group or nation, and wider than one that belongs only to a specific region. Our ordeal has a sole object: preserving humanity in the modern world, which is being exploited, distorted, smashed, enslaved, put at the service of different interests. We are thankful for all those who are aware of these perils and are striving to contain them, resolve them and prevent them. We will not turn to be the title of a cause to which we ask to be resolved and decrypt its mystery. We are not like this, since you are our cause! We are vigilant, from our dwelling place, over the consciences of those who willingly continue to eradicate our cause: the cause of the true man and the true God. Is it not plausible for roles to be interchanged, so that the sentenced might become a judge, even if he is in a cell, and the judge to become sentenced, even though he is sitting on the judgment seat?



O our Brother in completeness, He Who was incarnate for us, carried our nature, endured an unjust sentence, ascended the Cross, went to Hades and then arose to heaven, taught us that we are your “brethren,” unworthy though we be, and that “your Father is our Father and your God is our God” (Jn 20:17). Our peace and joy in you have reached to a level whose height and depth we are unable to attain in our spiritual life, and whose length and width we are

unable to measure in our material life! It is a joy and a peace, which are according to measure of the Giver: “My Peace I leave with you, My joy I give unto you... no man takes from you.” (Jn 14:27; 16:22). **You have sentenced us to have the joy and peace that are Yours!** How great is our victory, and how benevolent is Your judgment!

These are the ten categories of the brethren, and the “book” of our complete defense, which we “took out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne.” (Rev 5:7). This is our good news to you; “listen” to it (Acts 2:14), as our consolation in you is great.

We are all aware that the trial is not over yet, as we have yet many rounds, as much as wills the Holy One. “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid... What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory...” (Rom 9:14; 22-23).

This is the victory of the right hand of the Most High, accomplished through you and through us! So our constant entreaty is to be found in prayer for all, the prayer that we lift up with you to the One unto Whom belongs glory, power, worship, and dominion forever! Amen.



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Cover Image: Mosaic of the Mother of God and Emperor Justinian,
Our Lady of Saydnaya Patriarchal Monastery, Syria