



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 14 May 1997

A mission of openness and tolerance

1. The long-awaited visit to Lebanon finally took place on 10-11 May, during the time when the Church, after the Lord's Ascension into heaven, is preparing for the Solemnity of Pentecost. She relives as it were the Christian community's first great novena to the Holy Spirit. Before ascending into heaven, Jesus ordered the Apostles to return to Jerusalem and to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Obeying the Lord's command, the Apostles returned to Jerusalem and, as is written in the Acts of the Apostles, "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (Acts 1:14). They remained together in the same Upper Room where the Eucharist had been instituted; where Christ had appeared to them after the Resurrection, showing his wounds, the signs of his Passion, and where he had breathed on them, saying: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). The Upper Room, witness to the institution of the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation, is the place where the Church returns in spirit, invited by the liturgy in these days following the Ascension into heaven. How could I fail to thank God that precisely at this time I was able to meet the Lebanese nation, a meeting I desired for so long a time?

2. The primary reason for this visit was the solemn conclusion of the Synod of Bishops for Lebanon, whose sessions were held in Rome in November and December of 1995. The results of this assembly were gathered into a Post-Synodal Exhortation, a document which I had the joy of signing during my pilgrimage to Lebanon. This very significant event took place at the meeting with

young people on Saturday evening, 10 May. The document, which is the *Magna Carta* as it were of the Church in Lebanon, was signed in the presence of the young people. The fact that it was signed precisely on that occasion has an eloquence all its own. The presence of young people always makes us think of the future. By entrusting the post-synodal document precisely to them, I wished to emphasize that the fulfilment of the tasks indicated by the Synod of Bishops will depend in large part on Lebanese youth. The future of the Church and of the Lebanese nation depends on young people. It is young people who must cross the threshold of the third millennium and lead their country and Church into this new era of faith.

3. Lebanon is a biblical land, with a past reaching back for several millennia. Its symbol is the cedar tree, which recalls the cedars brought by King Solomon to Jerusalem for the building of the temple. Lebanon is a land where Jesus of Nazareth walked. The Gospel speaks of Christ's visit to the region of Tyre and Sidon, and within the borders of the so-called Decapolis. Christ taught there and worked a number of miracles. Most memorable of all was the cure of the Canaanite woman's daughter, when Jesus answered the mother's request in admiration of her deep faith (cf. Mt 15:21-28). The Lebanese are very aware of the fact that their ancestors heard the Good News from the mouth of Jesus himself.

Down the centuries the Gospel was proclaimed in various ways. Decisive in this regard was the mission of the holy monk Maron, after whom the Maronite Church is named, the Eastern Church most closely linked to the Christian tradition of Lebanon. Maronites however are not the only community. Lebanon, particularly its capital, Beirut, is a place where the faithful of other Patriarchal Catholic Churches reside: Greek Melkites, Armenian Catholics, Syrian Catholics, Chaldeans and Latins. This enriches the Christian life of that country. In a certain sense Lebanon's vocation is precisely this universal openness and, since Orthodox Churches are found there, its vocation is ecumenism. Having had occasion in the past to meet the representatives of these Churches and Christian Communities in Rome, my visit to Beirut also served to renew those ties of mutual knowledge and friendship.

This was particularly apparent at the solemn Eucharistic celebration on Sunday, 11 May, which spiritually gathered all of Lebanon and the whole Church in that country. It is said that not only did Catholic and Orthodox Christians take part, but many Muslims as well. Lebanon is also the homeland of many expressions of the Muslim community: Sunni, Shiites, Druze. Everyone knows how Lebanese Muslims have lived for centuries in profound harmony with Christians, and during my visit great stress was put on the need for this coexistence if the national and cultural identity of the Lebanese nation is to be preserved.

4. The purpose of my pilgrimage was also to support the commitment to this social harmony, as we prayed at the same time for peace. In recent years Lebanon has been the scene of a terrible war, whose entire workings would be hard to explain: a war between Lebanese brethren, which was decisively affected by external forces and influences. The fact that the war has finally ended

and the time of reconciliation and reconstruction has begun is extremely important, not only for Lebanon itself but also in the more general perspective of the situation in the Near East.

Lebanon is a small country located in the heart of the Middle East. During my pilgrimage, as on many occasions in recent years, I addressed both the entire Middle East region and all the countries of the international community, asking that they would provide effective guarantees for peace in that country which has already suffered so much. In a certain sense, peace is Lebanon's basic mission. If it is to fulfil this mission, which stems from its cultural and religious complexity itself, the country has the right to be supported in that task by all who can promote peace in its territory. Only under these conditions can Lebanon be itself, that is, a country where various cultural and religious communities coexist and live together with mutual respect for each other's identity.

All fundamentalism is foreign to Lebanon's spirit. It is precisely this which distinguishes it from other countries, where social and political life is strongly influenced by extremism, which often makes unwarranted appeals to religion. Lebanon is an open society. I hope that its citizens, as well as the neighbouring countries, can continue to work together in fostering this openness. Only in this way can Lebanon fulfil its mission, within its own territory and in the great family of nations and societies of the Near East. I entrusted these hopes to the President of the Republic, to all the authorities and to the Churches in Lebanon, as well as to the various communities of Islam, thanking everyone who contributed to the success of the apostolic visit for the great hospitality I received.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors, especially the pilgrims from England, South Africa, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, the Philippines, Canada and the United States. I thank the Bambanani Choir from Pretoria for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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