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Press Conference to present the Day of Reflection and Prayer for Lebanon

At 10.30 this morning, a press conference to present the Day of Reflection and Prayer for Lebanon, which will be held in the Vatican on 1 July with the participation of the main leaders of the Christian communities in the country, took place via live streaming from the Holy See Press Office.

The speakers were His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches; Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States; and Bishop Brian Farrell, L.C., secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The following are their interventions:

Intervention by His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri

The Holy Father Francis's acceptance of the proposal to convene a day of reflection and prayer on Lebanon is part of a process of attention to the Land of the Cedars that comes from afar.

At the beginning of his Apostolic Exhortation "A New Hope for Lebanon", Saint John Paul II wrote: "When I convened a Special Assembly for Lebanon of the Synod of Bishops on 12 June 1991, the situation in the country was dramatic. Lebanon had been profoundly shaken in all its parts. I invited the Catholics present in that land to undertake a journey of prayer, penance and conversion, which would enable them to question themselves before the Lord about their fidelity to the Gospel and their effective commitment to following Christ. It was necessary for the Pastors and the faithful, through a clear awareness made in faith, to discern and better define the spiritual, pastoral and apostolic priorities to be promoted in the current context of the country.

From the beginning, I asked the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities to join in this effort, manifesting the ecumenical intention of the Synodal Assembly, since hope for the future of Lebanon is also linked to that of Christian unity. Also at issue was the material and spiritual reconstruction of the country, of fundamental concern to all; and this was only possible with the active participation of all inhabitants".

After a long preparatory process, the Special Synod for Lebanon was held in Rome in 1995; and the Apostolic Exhortation, the beginning of which I have quoted, was delivered by the Holy Pontiff during his visit to the Land of the Cedars in May 1997. Pope Benedict also chose the same country for signing and consigning the Document at the conclusion of the Special Synod for the Middle East, in September 2012, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, in which no less than 7 issues, from 11 to 18, are dedicated to the theme of ecumenism, structured on multiple levels.

Thirty years ago the situation was dramatic, we have heard, but it seems as if we are reading a chronicle of our times. The Christian community, in all its components, is questioning itself, reflecting and praying: it is doing so in the persons of the Heads of the respective Churches and Ecclesial Communities, who come to Rome not only by themselves, but bringing also the cry of a people, which certainly accompanies them in prayer.

The basic programme has been distributed to you, so I will limit myself to making a few notes.

On more than one occasion you will see the Holy Father and the heads of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities "walking together": they will do so on their way from the *Domus Sancta Martha* to the Vatican Basilica at the beginning of the day, after the moment of welcome and greeting in the hall of the residence where they will all be guests from the evening of 30 June to the morning of 2 July.

After reciting the *Lord's Prayer* they will descend the stairs of the Confession of the Apostle Peter, and each will place a candle as a sign of their ardent prayer for the intercession of the Apostle. During the day we will not be able to see or hear them, because the doors of the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace will remain closed to us: behind closed doors, in the Upper Room, the Apostles remained united in prayer, together with Mary, and received the gift of the Spirit that gave them the courage to proclaim. It will be our intercessory prayer, which could be launched in parishes and religious communities not only in Lebanon along that day, that will make us feel close to them and support them in the moment of mutual listening and discussion. As in the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, on 7 July 2018, the meeting table will be round, and around it the Holy Father will be accompanied by the apostolic nuncio to Lebanon, Archbishop Joseph Spiteri, who will act as moderator, and the ten Heads of the Christian communities: on the Catholic side, the Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Bechara Boutros Rai, the Syrian Catholic Patriarch Ignace Youssef III Younan, the Melkite Patriarch Youssef Absi, the Chaldean Bishop Michel Kassarij and the Latin Apostolic Vicar Msgr Cesar Essayan. As you know, on 22 June the Synod began to elect the successor to Patriarch Gregory Peter XX Ghabroyan, deceased 25 May last; on the basis of the result of the vote, there may or may not be a delegate from that Patriarchal Church. As you can see from the programme, during the morning and afternoon there will be three working sessions, each of which will be introduced by words from a rapporteur.

The concluding prayer in the Basilica will be attended by the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, according to the instructions provided to them by the Protocol Office of the Secretariat of State, and all the male and female religious communities have been invited as well as the Lebanese lay faithful present in Rome. As in the morning, the Holy Father and the heads of the Churches will walk together in procession, following the priest who will carry the Gospel. The text of the ecumenical prayer for peace will include the proclamation of some passages from the Word of God, alternating with prayers of invocation and songs from the different ritual traditions present in Lebanon, with texts in Arabic, Syriac, Armenian and Chaldean. Towards the end of the celebration, the sign of peace will not be exchanged in the traditional way - in compliance with the regulations related to the pandemic - but some young people will hand the Christian leaders a lighted lamp, which will then be placed on a candelabrum: it is the hope of peace that the younger generations hand over, asking for help so that it will not be extinguished by the tribulations of the present. At the end of the day, the Holy Father will address a concluding word and before saying goodbye he will donate a plaque in memory of the day bearing the logo.

Regarding the logo, it has been distributed to you together with its explanation: the statue of Our Lady of Harissa, which watches over Lebanon and is recognisable when arriving from the sea, a sanctuary that welcomes pilgrims of all ages, confessions and creeds, will certainly accompany the course of the day on 1 July so that a new sun may soon rise, evoked by the words of hope of the great Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran: beyond

the black curtain of night there is a new dawn waiting for us. One year after the terrible explosion in the port of Beirut with the dense clouds that darkened our eyes and filled them with tears, we want to see the sun again together with our brothers and sisters in Lebanon. Thank you.

Intervention by Bishop Brian Farrell, L.C.

In this speech I will limit myself to briefly presenting the non-Catholic Churches that will participate in the "Together for Lebanon" Day, and to briefly describing the relationship between Catholics and other Christians in that country.

Lebanon is both a complex and interesting country. Almost all the Eastern Churches, Orthodox and Catholic, are present with the great diversity of their rites and traditions, as are several ecclesial communities born of the Reformation. Daily life, as well as social and political life, is an interweaving of coexistence and cooperation between the different ecclesial communities, whose history is not always free of conflict and even persecution.

The non-Catholic Churches that will be present on the Day of Reflection and Prayer for Lebanon are:

1. The Greek Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Antioch, of Byzantine tradition, led by Patriarch Youhanna X Yazigi. Its main see is in Damascus, Syria, but it has many dioceses in Lebanon, where it also has an important theological faculty in Balamand. This Church is of great historical, social and cultural importance in the Middle East. The faithful of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch are generally of Arab origin and language. We can say that Arab Christianity has existed since the beginning, having been present, according to the book of the Acts of the Apostles, at Saint Peter's discourse on the day of Pentecost.

With regard to ecumenism, this Church shows great openness and solidarity, and participates in the international theological dialogue of the Catholic Church with the Orthodox Church as a whole. The PCPCU recalls its close cooperation in the past with the brother of Patriarch Youhanna, Metropolitan Paul Yazigi, who was kidnapped in 2013 by the so-called Islamic State, together with the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, the Syrian Archbishop of Aleppo.

2. The Catholicosate of the Armenian Apostolic Church of Cilicia, led by Catholicos Aram I. Basically, the presence of the Armenian community in Lebanon dates back to the time of the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century. Under these circumstances, the centuries-old Catholicosate of Sis (in Turkey) retreated southwards, first to Syria, then to Lebanon, finally establishing its seat in Antelias, Beirut, in 1930.

The current Catholicos of Cilicia, His Holiness Aram, is a leading figure in the ecumenical movement, having served as moderator of the Central Committee of the Ecumenical Council of Churches from 1991 to 2006. He played a major role in the development of the Council of Churches of the Middle East, which I will mention below. On several occasions Catholicos Aram met with the various Pontiffs, from John Paul II onwards. He met Pope Francis in 2014, in 2016, and in 2018 he attended the unveiling of the statue of Saint Gregory of Narek in the Vatican gardens. In July of the same year he was present in Bari at the prayer for peace in the Middle East.

3. The Syrian Orthodox Church, headed, since 2014, by Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II. This Church, heir to the great Syriac tradition, is little known in the West but very important in the history of Christianity, in theology and liturgy, and in expansion in the East. The main seat of this Church is in Damascus, but it is very present in Lebanon, especially in Beirut, Mount Lebanon and the Beqa'à Valley. The Syrian Orthodox Church, and His Holiness Aphrem personally, often participate in international ecumenical events. In 2015, the Patriarch visited Pope Francis. In 2018, he took part in the prayer for peace in the Middle East held in Bari. In February last year, the Patriarch welcomed the International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches to his seat in Beirut.

Between the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church there are important common agreements on Christological doctrine and pastoral matters. I will not go into details, but on Christology, for example, Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas and Pope John Paul II in 1984 were able to say: "we find no real basis

today for the sad divisions and schisms that occurred among us regarding the doctrine of the Incarnation".

4. The Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon, represented by its President, Reverend Joseph Kassabhas. The evangelical community in Lebanon has its origins in the intellectual awakening that took place in the Arabic-speaking part of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, and today it continues its intense educational effort in Lebanon.

Ecclesial life in Lebanon is fraternal and solidary, given the common history of the various Christian rites, the high number of mixed marriages, and the active participation of young people who increasingly join parish and ecclesial movements, which often operate ecumenically.

As far as the organisation of ecumenical activity in the region is concerned, I think it is worth mentioning the important role of the Middle East Council of Churches, made up of four families of Churches: the Orthodox Churches, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Catholic Churches, and the Evangelical Churches and Communities. The Middle East Council of Churches organises regular meetings of the Heads of Churches, supports initiatives in favour of peace and justice, encourages interreligious dialogue with the Islamic community, and contributes to the implementation of social, humanitarian and educational programmes in the areas most affected by the ongoing conflicts. The headquarters of the Middle East Council of Churches is in Beirut.

This meeting between the highest leaders of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches present in Lebanon will certainly be a moment of intense communion in facing the great common challenge, the overcoming of any partisan vision in order to build the good of all and safeguard the specific vocation of Lebanon in the variegated religious and social framework of the Middle East.
