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Letter of the Holy Father to the Lebanese on the occasion of the celebration of Christmas

The following is the Holy Father Francis' letter to His Beatitude Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï, Patriarch of Antioch of the Maronites, and to the Lebanese people on the occasion of the celebration of Christmas:

Letter of the Holy Father

To His Beatitude Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï
Patriarch of Antioch of the Maronites
President of the Assembly of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon

I would like to address to Your Beatitude and, through you, to the Lebanese people, without distinction of community or religion, a few words of comfort and encouragement as we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

Beloved sons and daughters of Lebanon,

I am deeply troubled to see the suffering and anguish that has sapped the native resilience and resourcefulness of the Land of the Cedars. It is even more painful to see you deprived of your precious aspirations to live in peace and to continue being, for our time and our world, a message of freedom and a witness to harmonious coexistence. Sharing as I do your joys as well as your sorrows, I feel deeply the gravity of your loss, especially when I think of the many young people robbed of any hope for a better future.

On this Christmas Day, however, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Is9:1): the light that lessens our fears and instils in each of us the sure hope that God’s Providence will never abandon Lebanon and will turn this time of sadness to good.

Lebanon is mentioned frequently in sacred Scripture, yet surely one image of the Psalmist stands out: “The

righteous shall flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar of Lebanon" (*Ps 92:13*).

In the Bible, the majestic cedar symbolizes steadfastness, stability and protection. The cedar symbolizes the righteous who are deeply rooted in the Lord, a sign of beauty and prosperity, standing tall and bearing abundant fruit even in old age. In these days, Emmanuel, God-with-us, becomes our neighbour, walking at our side. Trust in his presence and his faithfulness. Like the cedar, draw deeply from the roots of your life in common, so that you may once more be a people of fraternal solidarity. Like the cedar that withstands every storm, may you make the most of present events in order to rediscover your identity, which is to bring to the whole world the sweet fragrance of mutual respect, coexistence and pluralism. Yours is the identity of a people which does not abandon its homes and its heritage, the identity of a people which refuses to renounce the dream of those who believed in the future of a beautiful and prosperous country.

In this regard, I appeal to political and religious leaders in words drawn from a Pastoral Letter of Patriarch Elias Hoyek: "You who are heads of the country, judges of the earth, deputies of the people, who act on their behalf... are obliged, in your official capacity and according to your responsibilities, to seek the best interest of the public. Your time should not be dedicated to pursuing your own gain, your action is not for yourselves, but for the state and the nation you represent".

Lastly, my affection for the beloved people of Lebanon, whom I hope to visit as soon as possible, and the constant concern that has inspired the actions of my predecessors and of the Apostolic See, impels me to appeal once more to the international community. Let us help Lebanon to stand apart from conflicts and regional tensions. Let us help Lebanon to surmount this grave crisis and resume a normal existence.

Beloved sons and daughters, in the darkness of the night, lift up your gaze. May the star of Bethlehem be your guide and a source of encouragement, so that you may come to understand more fully God's plan, and so lose neither your way nor your hope.

From the Vatican, 24 December 2020

FRANCIS
