



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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Audience with members of the Synod of the Greek-Melkite Church

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of the Synod of the Greek-Melkite Church, to whom he addressed the following words:

Address of the Holy Father

I am pleased to welcome you and happy to see Msgr Georges Kahhale again. He is good! I would like to say that he has helped me a lot. First of all, he immediately learned the language: I hope that your successor speaks Spanish because one cannot be the bishop of a people without speaking their language. Too bad he is not here. Then we had another problem over there, with a priest in Buenos Aires, and [Msgr Kahhale] was dynamic in finding a solution, but also a great shepherd, very kind in his manner of helping him. When I saw him, I was pleased and this is why I want to share this witness before all of you. One of your brothers to be commended. Thank you, Msgr Kahhale. And later he will tell you about the adventures we had with that priest in Buenos Aires.

I am pleased to welcome you this morning, launching the work of the Synod of Bishops of the Patriarchal Church of Antioch for Greek Melkites. I thank the Patriarch, a great friend, His Beatitude Youssef Absi, for the words he addressed to me.

You asked to be able to celebrate your yearly meeting in Rome, at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and the many martyrs who gave their lives for their fidelity to the Lord Jesus. We need their intercession so that in our days too, in societies that some analysts define as “liquid” — with weak bonds that increase loneliness and the abandonment of the most fragile ones — the Christian community may have the courage to bear witness to the name of Christ, maker and perfecter of our faith. Among the successors of Peter there are also some who were born in Syria, and this makes us, on the one hand, feel the Catholic breath of the Church of Rome, called to preside in charity and have the *sollicitudo Ecclesiarum omnium*, and on the other, it makes us pilgrims in the land where some of you, starting with Patriarch Youssef, are bishops: the beloved and martyred Syria.

The tragedy of the last few months, which sadly compels us to turn our gaze towards Eastern Europe, should not make us forget what has been taking place in Syria for the last 12 years. I remember, in the first year of my pontificate, when a bombardment had been planned over Syria, that we held a night of prayer, here in Saint Peter's, and the Most Blessed Sacrament was there too, and the Square was full [of people] praying. There were also some Muslims who had brought their prayer rugs and prayed with us. And it was there that the expression "beloved and martyred Syria" was born. Thousands of dead and wounded, millions of refugees displaced both internally and abroad, the impossibility of starting the needed reconstruction. On more than one occasion, I met and heard the stories of young Syrian youths who had arrived here, and I was struck by the tragedy they carried within, over what they had experienced and seen, but also their gaze, almost drained of hope, incapable of dreaming a future for their land. We cannot allow the last spark of hope to be taken away from the eyes and hearts of young people and their families! I thus renew my appeal to all those who have responsibilities, within the country and in the international community, so that a fair and just solution to the drama in Syria may be found.

You, Bishops of the Greek-Melkite Church, are called to ponder the way you bear your witness as a church: heroic, yes, generous, but always in need of being placed in God's light, in order to be purified and renewed. *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. You are a Synod because of the characteristics that were acknowledged to you as a Patriarchal Church, and it is necessary that you reflect on the synodal style of your way of being and acting [as a church], according to what I asked of the Universal Church: your ability to live the communion of prayer and intentions among yourselves and with the Patriarch, among the Bishops and the presbyters and the deacons, with the religious men and women, and with the lay faithful, all together forming the Holy People of God.

You are understandably concerned about the survival of Christians in the Middle East — So am I! It is a concern! — which I share fully. And on the other hand, for decades now the presence of the Melkite Church has had a global dimension. The Patriarch asked me to ordain bishops from many places. There are even eparchies for Australia and Oceania, the United States and Canada, Venezuela and Argentina, to mention but a few. And there are many faithful in Europe too, although they still have not had the opportunity to meet in their own ecclesiastical provinces. This aspect is undoubtedly an ecclesial but also cultural and social challenge, with difficulties and obstacles. At the same time, it is also a great opportunity: to stay rooted in one's own traditions and origins, at the same time, opening yourselves up to listening to the times and places in which you are scattered, in order to be able to respond to what the Lord asks of your Church today.

Within the synod, I encourage you to exercise your skills with great wisdom: I know that reflections have already begun in some Eastern Churches, on the role and presence of Bishops emeritus, especially those who are over 80 years old, which in some Synods are a considerable number. Another item is the elections of Bishops, for which I ask you to please always reflect well and to pray to the Holy Spirit for enlightenment, adequately preparing the material and information on the various candidates well in advance, overcoming all partisan mindsets and those related to balances between the Religious Orders to which you belong. I invite you — and I thank you for your commitment in achieving this — to make shine the face of the Church, which Christ attained for himself with his Blood, keeping division and murmurs distant, which do nothing but scandalize the little ones and scatter the flock entrusted to you. I would like to pause here: watch out for gossip. Please, none. If someone has something to say about someone else, let him do it to his face, with charity, but to his face. As men. You can say it to their face on your own, or you can say it to their face in front of others: fraternal correction. But never speak ill of someone to someone else. This should not be done. This is a worm that destroys the Church. Let us be brave. Let us look at the way Paul said many things to James' face. To Peter, too. And this is how unity is achieved, true unity among men. Remove all kinds of gossip, please. And then the people become scandalized: 'Look at priests, look at bishops, they are at each other's throats!'. Please, always say what you have to say to each other's face.

I offer my heartfelt blessing to each of you and to your synodal work. May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Church, accompany you. And I ask you to kindly pray for me. I need it. Thank you!

