

Vicar Apostolic of Arabia – Pastoral Letter 2007

“Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord”

(2 Tim 1:8)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit to you all! In my pastoral letter last year I spoke about the Word of God in our personal and common life as Catholic Christians. This year I would like to explore with you some important elements which should guide our Christian witness in our particular situation as a Church composed of members coming from all parts of the world and living in the midst of a Muslim society. I would like to put at the head of this letter the encouragement Saint Paul addressed to Timothy: **“Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord”** (2 Tim 1:8).

Christians in a Muslim society

2. After the Holy Father’s speech in Regensburg in last September we learnt once again how sensitive people react when they feel hurt in their religious beliefs. Not only Muslims, but all of us are vulnerable when we get the impression that our deepest convictions are despised or laughed at by others. This fact reveals that our religious convictions and feelings are part of our identity. We rightfully expect others to respect our beliefs, just as we should always treat with reverence the religious conviction of others.

3. We are grateful that in most of the countries of our Vicariate we are able to worship in freedom and peace. At least we are able to worship in the places which the rulers of the different countries have generously given us for this purpose. We can appreciate it even more when we compare what we have here with other places in the world and in our Vicariate where common and public worship is not possible. It is therefore our duty not to forget to pray for the authorities in the countries where we are guests. Saint Paul reminded the communities to intercede for the authorities, although at that time the Roman Empire was anything but friendly to the Christian faithful. Paul wrote to Timothy: “First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. This is good and pleasing to God our Saviour, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:1-3).

4. Saint Francis of Assisi, who met in Egypt with Sultan Malik al-Kamil in 1221, advised those brothers living among the Muslims in the following words: “They can live spiritually among the Muslims and non-believers in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians. The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord...” (The Earlier Rule Chapter XVI). Although in most of the countries of our Vicariate we enjoy a relative freedom of worship, still, we cannot ignore the fact that it is a limited freedom. We have therefore to keep our witnessing to the first way Saint Francis mentions. Out of respect for the rules of the countries where we live, that

means limiting our witness to our personal Christian lives.

A Local Church of Expatriates

5. Compared with most of the other local Churches in the world our situation is very particular: here Christians are almost exclusively expatriates. The faithful, including the bishop, the priests, and the nuns belong to at least hundred different nationalities and many languages, and are in these countries only for a limited time. We all belong to the Catholic Church, most of us following the Latin rite, though we do have among us a remarkable number of other Catholic-Rite Churches, such as the Maronites, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Melkites, and many others. We are therefore presented with a complex challenge:

- How to witness our different faith traditions in unity in the midst of a society whose majority belong to Islam?
- How to take care of our brothers and sisters in conditions where the number of priests and the space for worship is limited for reasons over which we have no control?
- How to save our faith in God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as Catholic Christians in a life situation where we are regularly “put to the test” (Luke 11:4) by influences and people who could try to lead us astray?

6. One of the most important and powerful signs is without any doubt *that we are united, and remain united*, in spite of the diversities I have just mentioned. Especially in this part of the world we cannot allow ourselves to have divisions and quarrels because of different traditions, languages, and nationalities. When faith as such is at risk, we have to stay together. For this reason Saint Paul, right at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians, made it clear that in the Church of Corinth he could not tolerate factions which were exclusively related to a name, even if those names were those of Apostles. The text is worth quoting and applying to the situation of our communities: “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:10-13).

Paul's main point here is the essential unity of the Church, that we speak with one voice - not Apollos' voice, nor Cephas' voice, nor even Paul's voice, but with the voice of Christ. As Catholics we believe that Christ's Church “subsists” in the Catholic Church. The word “subsists” means that everything that Christ intended for his followers is accessible in the Catholic Church. There is no part of his saving work and plan that we cannot reach. Our belief in this can only be credible to other people, especially those of different faiths, if we act and speak as one. As Catholics, we are not a loose federation of Churches. That idea would have been incomprehensible to the first Christians, except those whom the Scriptures rebuke. We are one people of one faith, no matter what our spiritual traditions are; no matter how we worship publicly. It is as Catholics that we stand or fall. It is as Catholics that we present an undivided Christ.

Belonging to different faith traditions

7. Applied to our situation, this does not mean that the different traditions have to disappear, but they have to be practised and witnessed to within the visible unity of the Church. This is the main reason why in 2003 the servant of God, Pope John Paul II, decided, and Pope Benedict XVI in 2006 confirmed his predecessor's decision, that in the Vicariate of Arabia as well as in Kuwait the Apostolic Vicar is the only and exclusive shepherd of all the Catholics, regardless of their Rite. At the same time, the bishop has the duty by obedience to the Holy Father and according to the laws of the Church, to provide, under the given limited conditions, the best possible pastoral care, not only of the faithful of the large majority belonging to the Latin rite, but also the others. This has to be done in due collaboration with the hierarchies of the respective Churches of different Rites. (You can find the decisions of the Holy See attached to the end of this pastoral letter.)

8. As this issue has been, and continues to be, a source of tensions and misunderstandings, I ask the priests and all the other faithful to collaborate with the bishop in obedience to the laws of the Church and to be pastorally sensitive whenever we have to find solutions to the legitimate requests of particular groups in our parishes. In situations where we cannot give a positive reply to a request because of limited space or the number of priests, we should always act in a way that does not hurt any one of our brothers and sisters!

Exposed to the influence of other denominations

9. The unity among the faithful can also be put at risk by the influence of non-Catholic Christians who try to attract our faithful and to lead them into groups and communities which are not in union with the Catholic Church. The less we can reach out to our brothers and sisters through the ordinary pastoral care of our parishes, the greater is the temptation of our scattered members to join other groups. Many of our faithful are living in conditions, which make it difficult for them to go regularly to Holy Mass or to put their lives in order through the sacrament of Reconciliation. They live too far away from the church and cannot afford expensive and time-consuming travel. Others are blocked in a labour-camp or a private household with an employer who does not give leave for regular worship. Many simply lack the knowledge that there are churches or places of worship around in most countries of our Vicariate.

Reaching out to the faithful who are in difficult situation

10. Although our possibilities are limited, a lot can be done at least to ease the problems. Many parishes, and many individual faithful who have the necessary means, have already organized a system, or could introduce it, so that transport facilities are available for those brothers and sisters who cannot otherwise afford them. In many places, including labour camps, prayer groups have been formed, or could be formed, to give the opportunity of simple private worship or study in small groups: sharing the Word of God; praying the Rosary; reading in common the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Of course this needs lay people – men and women – who are able and competent to help their brothers and sisters to do it in a good way. That is why those of you who are in charge of our parishes and communities have to make it a priority, not only to make sure you have the essential and necessary administration of the sacraments, but equally to provide

the regular and qualified education of lay people for the purpose of leading small groups. As I wrote in my first pastoral letter last year, it is not sufficient to be a pious and devout Catholic in order to guide a prayer group or Bible-study. This needs due preparation in acquiring the necessary knowledge and competence in how to read the Bible in communion with the Church and how to pray together in a more or less charismatic way which respects the basic rules given already by Saint Paul (for example in his first letter to the Corinthians) and stressed by the shepherds of the Church.

11. I can understand that many faithful become quite often innocently the prey of groups like the so-called “born-again” or “Pentecostals” who are separated from the Church. In many cases, this happens simply from the fact that basic knowledge about the nature of these groups is lacking, and because there is nobody around who could help in the necessary discernment. Not a few Christians think that the most important thing is to stay and to pray together, no matter what Christian allegiance there may be behind the group. However, for a sane and healthy development of our faith, it does matter if we remain within the teaching and the visible body of the Catholic Church. You can quite easily discover the true spirit behind those groups. For example, if people are declaring that devotion to our Lady is idolatry, and that the holy Rosary is something against the Bible, or if lay preachers are ridiculing the Pope and pointing in an exaggerated manner to the faults of bishops and priests, you can be sure that they are not in communion with the Catholic Church.

Foster a solid faith education

12. As it is still not easy in our particular situation to get the necessary manpower of priests and qualified lay people to guarantee regular formation work, it will surely be helpful if means are developed which can at least alleviate this lack of people. For example, models of Bible-sharing by means of disks and internet-home-pages could be produced and help the leaders to organize evenings on the basis of such media.

13. However, the most important task remains the responsibility of each member of the faithful, not only to educate our selves in matters of faith, but also to accept our responsibility regarding our brothers and sisters. The story of Cain and Abel reminds us right from the beginning of the Bible that we cannot escape from God’s question “Where is your brother Abel” simply with the answer “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). Yes, we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, and the way we believe, we behave, and we take care of the others can be decisive for their own way to God. Remember God’s word in the book of the Prophet Ezekiel: “When you have warned a virtuous man not to sin, and he has in fact not sinned, he shall surely live because of the warning, and you shall save your own life” (Ezekiel 3:21).

14. Sometimes there are people, who try to convert others, although they first need conversion themselves. I am thinking of people who are narrow-minded in their faith and are looking first of all for extraordinary signs. There is no doubt that marvellous things happened not only in the time of Jesus, but also later, right up until our own times. However, it would be completely erroneous to run after all kind of private revelations, very often not even recognized by the authorities of the Church, and to neglect the substance of our faith in God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as we profess Him in the Creed. All the other things,

including private and personal devotion, have always to take their measure from the Creed that our parents and godparents professed on the day of our baptism and which we renew in every Sunday Mass, especially at Easter. It helps us to maintain a sober faith and to avoid strange ideas and practices, which may look pious, but very often are rather close to superstition.

15 In his first letter to Timothy, Saint Paul says: “Now the Spirit explicitly says that in the last times some will turn away from the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and demonic instructions through the hypocrisy of liars with branded consciences. They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the invocation of God in prayer” (1 Tim 4:1-5). And in his second letter to Timothy the same Apostle says: There are those who “make a pretence of religion but deny its power. Reject them. For some of these slip into homes and make captives of women weighed down by sins, led by various desires, always trying to learn but never able to reach a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so they also oppose the truth - people of depraved mind, unqualified in the faith” (2 Tim 3:5-8). All these people made “pretence of religion”, but actually had left the way of Christ’s Gospel. Therefore we have to watch out carefully for people, for material, which enters our houses and families and does not always correspond to the “sound doctrine” of 2 Tim 4:3. Not every brochure carrying the picture of the Sacred Heart, of the Immaculate, or of the Archangel Michael is automatically filled with “sound doctrine”. And if you cannot find in it the approval of a Catholic bishop it is better to destroy the pamphlet right away!

Faith education in the families

16. The first teaching of faith occurs in the family. The family is the place where children learn their first basic prayers which will mark them for the rest of their lives. With their parents and siblings children learn how to practise their faith in their daily life and how to take moral responsibility regarding their acts. The family is really the first small Church where Christ is present and working through the Holy Spirit given to each baptized and confirmed member of the faithful. Blessed are all parents who through their example and their teaching help their children to love Jesus Christ and to follow his commandments. This foundation is necessary so that, in a second step, catechetical teaching on parish level can be fruitful.

Catechism

17. A sober and sane faith needs continued learning and growing in knowledge of the faith. The transmission of our faith to the children is especially a key issue. I express my gratitude to the parents and to the large number of religious sisters, men and women who every week invest time and skill to teach catechism to our young people. The sheer number of children attending catechism shows how important this activity is. In the U.A.E., in Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman alone, where reliable figures are available, we had around 14,000 children attending catechism in 2006. While respecting the immense efforts going into this work, we have to admit that it is absolutely necessary to continue improving the catechetical education of the catechists and to standardize the catechetical programme in accordance with the basic sources of our faith as expressed in the teaching of the

Church: the Bible, the Creed, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The particular traditions of different cultures, especially of the Churches of various Rites, can be transmitted in a time-limited special programme. These particular programmes, however, should respect the basic catechetical programme common to all. In this way we can avoid the creation of mental ghettos which will hardly be helpful for our youth and surely not fit with their real life situation in this part of the world.

“God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33)

18. In collaboration with the priests and with the assistance of religious sisters and mandated lay people, the bishop has the responsibility for the teaching of the right faith in the Vicariate, for the sound celebration of the sacraments in our liturgical assemblies, as well as for the public prayer in the church and in prayer groups. Saint Paul says in the first letter to the Corinthians “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33). For this reason it is important that all the faithful in our Vicariate respect the basic rules, which the Church has developed and which we have to adapt to the particular circumstances in this part of the world, where we are confronted with legal restrictions and high sensitivity within the Church and in society.

19. We are living in an economically and strategically important region. Almost all our faithful came to the Gulf in order to earn money in this prosperous region. However, we know that the large majority of our faithful are not rich and very often have to struggle financially. On the other hand it is an open secret that people in the respective home countries believe that we are living in a “gold mine”. In spite of the fact that this opinion is completely erroneous, there are bishops, priests, and religious from other countries who like to visit the Gulf countries with the intention of collecting money for their needs at home. This kind of tourism, however, brings up some questions and needs adequate answers.

20. First of all, I would like us to remind ourselves that according to canon law and to the particular rules of our Vicariate, no priest from outside the Vicariate has the right to do any pastoral work without the explicit approval of the bishop, or of the competent parish priest acting in his name. Furthermore, in most of our countries a Church-sponsored visa is needed for public services like celebrating Masses or preaching. Therefore priests who are passing through our countries as visitors only, without the approval of the bishop in Abu Dhabi and without the required special visa, have to celebrate Mass privately or in concelebration with others. Visiting priests are not permitted to celebrate Masses with groups in private houses. Similar rules apply to lay-preachers coming from outside. They also need the approval of the bishop and of the respective parish priest to lead any group activity. These permissions have to be asked for before a lay preacher enters the country.

21. The reasons for these restrictions are many. As regards the civil authorities, we have to address negative consequences if visiting priests, very often present in these countries without our knowledge, are infringing the rules and laws of the country we live in. Secondly, because we have so many nationalities and Catholics of different Rites, we have to be extra careful to treat everyone equally. Any outside interference creates tensions amongst us. Furthermore, we have to be aware that the faithful are anything but happy to find themselves too often exposed to people collecting money, even for a good

purpose. Many faithful have not the courage to say “no” to a religious person although they have to struggle enough for their own needs. The uncontrolled presence and activity of priests and preachers in our Vicariate very often harms the image, not only of the individual in question, but also of the Church as such. If we want to continue even with the limited facilities we have, then we need to act in such a way that the governments trust us. The more these priests and lay people are encouraged to act illegally, the more likely it is that the government will respond by restricting our freedom still further. It is our choice. Finally, with regard to protecting the life of our own communities, we should never forget the words of Saint Paul in his first letter to Timothy, where he addresses the problem of people who are interfering in the Christian communities: “From these come envy, rivalry, insults, evil suspicions, and mutual friction among people with corrupted minds, who are deprived of the truth, supposing religion to be a means of gain” (1 Tim 6:4-5). And a few verses later he adds: “The love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Tim 6:10).

“Through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26)

22. On several occasions during my pastoral visits I have said: “The Church has no expatriates, only citizens.” Wherever and whenever we would organize our Church-activities exclusively following the criterion of belonging to a particular language, social, or ethnical group, we would create “expatriates”, “strangers” among us and therefore betray the Gospel of the Lord. Regarding this issue, Saint Paul was very clear: “For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:26-28). It is true that for practical pastoral reasons certain liturgical and other common activities in our parishes are done in particular languages and/or according to the Rite of the respective Churches. However, this should never be exclusive in a way that the faithful would practise their faith only in their own group. This is for two reasons: first of all they would exclude themselves from the extraordinary riches of the multi-coloured body of our local Church; secondly, this would inevitably lead to the exclusion of those faithful who do not belong to any of the major groups, obviously something which would be strictly against the nature of the Church as intended by Jesus Christ. It would be even worse if membership of a particular group should follow any kind of social or caste border. Saint Paul had to fight against similar abuses in Corinth where there was the risk that the Eucharist was becoming a merely liturgical act without any social consequences for the Christian community. For him, it was absolutely clear that we cannot celebrate the holy Eucharist without becoming “one body in Christ”, in which any kind of exclusion among brothers and sisters is overcome. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13).

“Spirit of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:7)

23. Dear brothers and sisters, I put at the head of this pastoral letter the words of Saint Paul to Timothy: “Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord” (2 Tim 1:8). Just one verse before that he wrote: “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1,7). It is our

responsibility to work with the God-given Spirit who empowers us to be courageous witnesses of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, and to carry him to whoever is in need. The best example is our Lady, the Virgin Mother of God, who after the Annunciation went straight to her cousin Elizabeth and “remained with her about three months” (Luke 1:56) putting into practice what she had just said to the angel Gabriel: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38). May the Lord enable all of you to do the same out of the “Spirit of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:7) and you will be empowered to implement the challenge of Saint Paul: “Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord” (2 Tim 1:8).

May the Lord bless you all!

Yours faithfully in Jesus Christ,

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RESCRIPT ex-AUDIENTIA

In 6 March 2003, the Servant of God, John Paul II, of venerated memory, made certain decisions **regarding the jurisdiction of the faithful of various Rites, that live in the Apostolic Vicariates of Arabia and of Kuwait**, due to some grave and legitimate pastoral concerns presented by the respective Ordinaries of the two Ecclesiastical circumscriptions, foremost of which was preserving the unity of the faithful.

In an audience to His Eminence Card. Crescenzo Sepe, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples **on 16 March 2006, the Holy Father Benedict XVI , after having examined the decisions of his predecessor, the Servant of God, John Paul II, confirmed the following.**

1. The jurisdiction over all Catholics, of whatever Rite or nationality, present in the territories of the Apostolic Vicariates of Arabia and of Kuwait, entrusted to “Propaganda Fide”, belongs exclusively to the two local Ordinaries. A “double jurisdiction” therefore, cannot be allowed.
2. Every juridical act placed at any time and in any way in the abovementioned Apostolic Vicariates by anyone who lacked jurisdiction is therefore illegitimate and null in every effect.
3. The Local Ordinaries to whose care the faithful of other *sui juris* Churches have been entrusted, however, have the obligation of providing so that those faithful may practice and observe the norms of the Rite (cf. CCEO c an. 193).
4. Those same Ordinaries, moreover, are called to promote good and regular relations with the authorities of the abovementioned *sui juris* Churches.
5. For their part, those responsible for those Churches, while respecting the exclusive Latin jurisdiction in the abovementioned Vicariates, may maintain contacts with their own faithful, by means of letters or pastoral visits (cf. CCEO can. 82 §2). The latter must be with the agreement, in every instance, of the Apostolic Vicar.
6. To facilitate the pastoral care of the faithful of each Rite, the Ordinaries are to commit themselves to securing pastors *ad hoc*, either identifying them within the proper circumscriptions or agreeing upon their selection with those responsible for the various Rites. However, the appointment of such priests must be made only by the Apostolic Vicars, and those priests are to place themselves under their direct jurisdiction for any and all pastoral activity.
7. In particular, to resolve the concrete problems that have arisen in the Apostolic Vicariates involving certain Syro-Malabar faithful, the Major Archbishop is asked to make certain that there not be any Syro-Malabar priest present in those territories, except by the agreement of the Latin and Syro-Malabar authorities.

8. The Syro-Malabar Archbishop will work toward the full re-insertion into ecclesial communion of the faithful who have followed priests without authorization to exercise pastoral ministry.

9. Those responsible for the various Rites are bound to prevent the exercise of pastoral activities and sacramental celebration by priests or various Rites who lack the authorization of the Apostolic Vicar, applying canonical sanctions where necessary and to the extent possible.

10. The entry of priests and religious of any Rite, into the Apostolic Vicariates must be agreed upon by the Bishop *a quo* and the Apostolic Vicar *ad quem*.

11. For juridical validity, any appointment of a local Representative of a ritual Church in the Arabian Gulf must be with the agreement of the Apostolic Nuncio and the Apostolic Vicar.

12. Given the distinctive and delicate political and religious situation existing in the two Apostolic Vicariates, the erection of ritual parishes is not appropriate at this time.

Let these decisions be communicated to the Ordinary in Arabia and in Kuwait, to the Patriarchs of the Rites concerned and to all the faithful of the Apostolic Vicariates.

From the Vatican, 8 April 2006