

Vicar Apostolic of Arabia – Pastoral Letter 2008

“May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith”

(Ephesians 3:17)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ!” (Eph 1:2). These are the words the priest very often uses to greet the people at the beginning of the Holy Mass. The words are taken from the letter of Saint Paul addressed to the Church in Ephesus. With the Apostle I wish to call you “God’s holy people” and “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph 1:1). In this pastoral letter I would like to deepen the reflections I presented to you a year ago under the theme: “Do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord” (2 Tim 1:8). This year I am putting my letter under the word of Saint Paul to the Ephesians: “*May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith*” (3:17). On June 29, 2008, the Catholic Church will start the year of Saint Paul. I take this opportunity to look with the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians at our situation as Church in Arabia.

2. Let me first of all start with the wonderful prayer of the apostle in the third chapter of his letter. I make it my own for you all, dear faithful in the six countries of our Vicariate: “I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that ***Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith***. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 3:14-21) Indeed, the goal of our Christian life is that “Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith”!

The Situation in Ephesus

3. Paul addresses this prayer to God the Father for the Church in Ephesus, one of the biggest multicultural cities at that time, located in present Turkey. He lived in this town more than two years, longer than in any other place, except his hometown Tarsus (also in present Turkey) and Jerusalem where he studied at the feet of the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. Ephesus was at its peak and counted at that time most probably between 400,000 and 500,000 inhabitants, being thus the second biggest city after Rome in the whole empire. According to tradition we find the tomb of Saint John, the Apostle and Evangelist, among the ruins of this once most important trade centre. At the periphery of Ephesus, in Meryemana, a few kilometres up in the hills, till today Christian and Muslim faithful visit the house of Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, where she might have lived under the same roof with the disciple who stood with her under the Cross, and where she died and was taken up into the glory of God. Centuries later, in 431, the fourth Ecumenical Council gathered in the city of Ephesus, and witnessed that it was part of our faith to call the Virgin Mary “Mother of God”. At the time when Paul wrote his letter - probably only a few years before his death - the Church of Ephesus was still very young, needed consolation and

encouragement, but also correction because of many dangerous influences coming from preachers who announced their own version of the Gospel, and not the one in the sane tradition of the Apostle.

“I know your activities, your hard work and your perseverance.”

4. In the New Testament we can find another letter sent to the Church in Ephesus, written not by Saint Paul, but by the author of the last book of the Bible, the Revelation to John. The short section “to the angel of the Church in Ephesus” still echoes the challenges present in this vibrant community approximately 40 years after Saint Paul’s letter to the same Church. John tells the head of the Christian community: “I know your activities, your hard work and your perseverance. I know you cannot stand wicked people, and how you put to the test those who were self-styled apostles, and found them false. I know too that you have perseverance, and have suffered for my name without growing tired. Nevertheless, I have this complaint to make: you have less love now than formerly. Think where you were before you fell; repent, and behave as you did at first, or else, if you will not repent, I shall come to you and take your lamp-stand from its place.” (Revelation 2:25) The initial compliment to the community cannot hide the fact that the former highlight among the Churches in the region was about to lose its initial fervour, and to become mediocre, with the risk that its “lamp-stand” could be “taken from its place”. It could be a good spiritual exercise to read our own situation in the light of this short address to the Church in Ephesus. However, here I shall just look at St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

The Dangers of Group Interests

5. Already at the time when Saint Paul wrote this letter, probably around the year 60, one of the important questions in this vibrant metropolis was the one about the identity of the fast-growing Christian community. On the one hand the young Church was living in a city whose official religion was the cult of the famous goddess Diana of the Ephesians. Her famous shrine was a very important economic backbone for the booming city, and led to the demonstration of “the silversmith called Demetrius, who provided work for a large number of craftsmen making silver shrines of Diana” (Acts 19:24). Questioning this cult, as the Christians did, was therefore a rather dangerous thing. On the other hand, the Church in Ephesus had to resolve the problems due to the fact that her members came from different parts of the empire, especially from eastern regions, and were therefore initially foreigners to each other. There were faithful of Jewish origin and others of pagan origin. Both had landed in the city mainly for economic reasons. Many of them had lived before in very different parts of the Roman Empire. Similar to the situation in Corinth, it was not easy to make one body out of this very mixed community. Tensions had to be overcome which were due to different interests, cultures, social standards, religious traditions and languages, although the common Greek language (called “koiné”) played the role that English has nowadays in our region. Christianity was not yet officially recognized and suffered a lot of discrimination, even persecution. The danger was that the faithful put their own particular interests before the needs of the whole Body of Christ. Briefly, the situation in Ephesus was quite similar to the one we know from our own in the Arabian Peninsula.

“Together make a unity in the work of service.”

6. In this situation of structural and social weakness, and bad influences on the

faithful from different parts, Paul returns to the essential elements of our Christian life and to the gift which had been given to the faithful when they had become Christian in the sacraments of initiation. The Apostle tries to win the faithful over to unity by all the theological means he has at disposal when he says: “With all humility and gentleness, and with patience, support each other in love. Take every care to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all”. (Eph 4:2-6). These basic elements of the Church are more important than all particular interests of individuals or groups. Paul knew very well what we can still experience today: that the strength of the Church in a society where she is a minority and challenged by various hostile forces and influences lies in the unity based on “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all”.

“He chose us in Christ.”

7. In the situation of Ephesus it was essential - as it is for us in Arabia - that the faithful knew to whom they belonged, and whom they were to profess as their only Lord. That is why the Apostle starts his letter with a wonderful hymn about the mystery of salvation, blessing “God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ” (Eph 1:3). At the end of the hymn he calls the Ephesians to the source of their new citizenship: “Now you, too, in him have heard the message of the truth and the gospel of your salvation, and having put your trust in it you have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance, for the freedom of the people, whom God has taken for his own, for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:13-14). Since baptism and confirmation we are no more primarily citizens of a particular country or members of a particular family, tribe or clan, but first of all citizens of “God’s holy people”, forever “stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit”. Wherever we live, and whatever our activity or our social position may be, the first and basic dignity consists in belonging to Jesus Christ as our Lord. In him we are all equal. Our Church in Arabia has to answer challenges similar to those of the local Church of Ephesus in the time of Saint Paul.

“We are claimed as God’s own.”

8. The Apostle makes it clear that this dignity of the Christian must have its consequences both in the life of the community and in the life of the individual. The prayer I quoted at the beginning shows it well. Listen to the words of Saint Paul: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he (the Father in heaven) may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” This prayer reminds us also of the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel before his death: “Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him, and make a home in him” (John 14:23). The one who is truly faithful loves Christ and keeps his word, and thus becomes a dwelling place of God the Father, Son and Spirit, or – in the words of Saint Paul – a “temple of God” (1 Cor 3:16), “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:16). That Christ dwells in our hearts through faith is a spiritual reality, which must have consequences for our daily life as Christians. For it means that we are no longer obedient to the godless voices of the demons but to the voice of Jesus who says: “I am the Way; I am Truth and Life” (John 14:6). Christ who dwells in our hearts through faith is actually the only one who is able to preserve us from going

astray, living with lies and becoming the prey of eternal death. When Paul draws a conclusion for the practical life of the Christian faithful he does it always as a consequence of the truth, which is Christ himself, and not simply as a moral admonition.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us therefore listen to how the teaching of the Apostle can be applied to our Christian life here in Arabia, or, in the words of Paul, how “to lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you were called” (Eph 4:1).

Harmony & peace amongst us

9. The credibility of the Christian witness stands or falls with the love and unity among the faithful: “Take every care to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together” (Eph 4:3). This is particularly important, as I said earlier, in our situation of the Arabian Gulf, where the structures of the Church are rather weak, but the variety of the different charisms very broad. Sometimes there is a kind of competition between different groups, provoking tensions and suspicions. Saint Paul is calling to mind the “gifts” which have to guarantee the order in the community. In the letter to the Ephesians they are called “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11). We do not know anymore exactly the role of each of these gifts at the time when the letter was written. However, it seems that there was a kind of hierarchy. That means that the apostles were the ones who had to coordinate the prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, in order that the community could live and work properly. It is still the same in our situation: the bishop has the responsibility, together with the parish priests, to coordinate the different gifts among the faithful. He is the one who has to watch over the activities of those who are exercising the different spiritual gifts in the many groups we have in our parishes.

The purpose of our different gifts

10. Saint Paul makes it clear for which purpose the gifts are granted: “To knit God’s holy people together for the work of service to build up the Body of Christ, until we all reach unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God and form the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself” (Eph 4:13). Wherever and whenever the activities of “prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers” lead to quarrels rather than to “build up the Body of Christ” and to “reach unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God”, we already know that something must be wrong. Very often we find behind such a situation the spirit of ambition of an individual member of the faithful and not the humble spirit of a servant of God. In other cases the jealousy of some of the faithful leads them to spread all kind of rumours against someone they see as a rival, sometimes not stopping short of character assassination. Is it not for such a case that precisely in the context of the different gifts in the community and after recalling the task of “building up the Body of Christ”, the Apostle concludes: “Then we shall no longer be children, or tossed one way and another, and carried hither and thither by every new gust of teaching, at the mercy of all the tricks people play and their unscrupulousness in deliberate deception” (Eph 4:14)?

Let Christ renew our spirit

11. Rendering a proper service in the church requires a new life in Christ. That is why the Church puts certain conditions not only for priests and bishops, but also for lay people exercising a particular service in the community, as, for example, during the liturgy as a

lay-minister, usher, or singer, and outside the liturgy as the leader of a group or member of the parish council. Saint Paul recalls what happened to the faithful when they were touched by Christ, something that must continue for the rest of their lives: “You were to put aside your old self, which belongs to your old way of life and is corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind was to be renewed in spirit so that you could put on the New Man that has been created on God’s principles, in the uprightness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:22-24). The main criterion for any service in the church community is therefore not the belonging to any particular ethnic group, a person’s intelligence or social rank, but first of all the credibility and authenticity of his or her faith, hope, and love as a Christian, or in the words of the Apostle a “mind renewed in spirit”.

“There must be no more lies!”

12. It seems that already in the first community the principles of “uprightness and holiness of the truth” were not sufficiently respected. Otherwise the Apostle would not have seen the need to speak about it so clearly. Actually, it is one of the basic problems in our relationships as Christians. There are apparently pious and devout Christians, who are specialists in twisting the truth. Saint Paul says it in a very direct way: “So from now on, there must be no more lies. Speak the truth to one another, since we are all parts of one another” (Eph 4:25-26). The Apostle knew how harmful lies are for the health of a Christian community. We should never forget that the commandment “You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour” is part of the Decalogue and therefore also part of Christ’s teaching. Liars in the body of Christ are worse than the cancer in the human body. They kill not only the truth; they kill the others with their bad tongues.

“Do not pursue indecency.”

13. Like the Ephesians at the time of Saint Paul, we are living in a time, which is in many regards marked by permissiveness. This is particularly true regarding human sexuality. The rigidity in the past has given way to a laxity, which allows almost everything. The easy access to all kind of improper material through internet and other media is leading many people to a mentality without a sense of shame. Saint Paul is very clear about this: “Among you there must be not even a mention of sexual vice or impurity in any of its forms” (Eph 5:3). Christians should therefore behave differently from the mainstream lack of restraint in this regard which we see today. As brothers and sisters, we should help each other to maintain a pure heart and a pure body. As the Apostle says, it starts with our language. Dirty jokes and suggestive remarks can put in danger the other who is fighting in controlling his sexual desires. The way we dress can be help or excitement for others. Looking pornographic material and/or trading with it, is a sin, and poisons one’s heart and mind, as well as the heart of the other. In this regard I ask the parents to give first of all a good example, but also to take seriously into account their responsibility regarding their children. You cannot get rid of your duty to help the children find the right way, even if at a certain age you have to let them go their way in confidence.

“Be children of light.”

14. There is no doubt about the Apostle’s teaching regarding this matter when he says: “For you can be quite certain that nobody who indulges in sexual immorality or impurity or greed – which is worshipping a false god – can inherit the kingdom of God. Do not let

anyone deceive you with empty arguments: it is such behaviour that draws down God's retribution on those who rebel against him" (Eph 5:5-6). We have therefore diligently to take care about what is going on in our heart which is the source of how we are acting. Jesus says: "It is what comes out of someone that makes that person unclean. For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a person unclean" (Mark 7:20-23). We should therefore not only purify our hearts, but also feed and fill it with good things. If we are mostly feeding our inner life with bad films, books, or conversations we should not be surprised that the contaminated heart will produce bad things. Saint Paul gives the Ephesians some advice: "Do not get drunk with wine; this is simply dissipation; be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18). This is exactly the decisive point in forming our Christian character: let our heart be filled by the good Spirit of God instead of the bad spirits of the devil.

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another."

15. Many of you have your family back in your country of origin, and are condemned to a life which is exceptional, if not abnormal. I know about the sufferings and the risks for the moral life which this loneliness can create. The relatively high figure of married couples who are going through crisis or even divorce speaks for itself. It is very important that our Christian communities help families. However, they should also take special care of those who are artificial bachelors or spinsters, their wives or husbands living elsewhere. It is not sufficient to condemn the improper behaviour of certain of the faithful who are going sexually astray. We have first of all to understand their particularly difficult situation in life. This understanding includes the need to break their isolation in the labour camps or elsewhere, giving them the real feeling of belonging to the Christian community. My gratitude goes to all those faithful who are reaching out to brothers and sisters and bringing them human and spiritual comfort.

New Life in Christ

16. How can we feed our heart with the good Spirit of God? In living a regular spiritual life in prayer, and in receiving the bread of life in the Holy Eucharist. That is why the Apostle tells the faithful in Ephesus: "Sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs among yourselves, singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts, always and everywhere giving thanks to God who is our Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19-20). Saint Paul surely does not mean that we should make a lot of words and noise as it happens sometimes in certain groups. We should always be able to follow interiorly what we are reciting and singing. In many communities the high-speed prayers raise some doubts about whether the words come from heart or simply have to be said. The Lenten Season could be a good time for a community as well as for the individual faithful to have a closer look at the way they pray. We should always keep in mind that it is not the quantity of words which counts but the devotion of the heart. Jesus knew about this risk even among his followers. That is why he makes the following remark before teaching them the "Our Father": "In your prayers do not babble as the gentiles do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard" (Mt 6:7). Many Christians have to rediscover the value of silent reverence in their relationship to God. Sometimes I am shocked seeing faithful in the church who are not only "babbling" their prayers, but even chatting and laughing during the liturgy, or when they are visiting the

church. Are they aware of the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle? Do they realize that one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of reverence and awe?” I wish our churches to be - and remain - houses of God, and therefore places of devout prayer and reverence.

Spiritual Warfare

17. Our life as Christians is a permanent struggle. We should fully trust in God’s help, but never feel too secure. At the end of his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul is giving a picture of the spiritual war we have to go through, and of the armour we need in this fight. “For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens” (Eph 6:12) “To resist the devil’s tactics”, we must take up “God’s armour” (Eph 6:11.13). The Apostle refers to the whole equipment of a soldier at that time, and relates it to the basic Christian values he speaks about: the belt of truth, the breastplate of uprightness, wearing for shoes the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the salvation as helmet and finally “the sword of the Spirit, that is, the word of God” (Eph 6:17). Being a Christian does not mean having an easy life without any conflict, but it means that God will give us in Christ the necessary means we need for our struggle as his faithful.

“Pray without ceasing.”

18. In this regard, the Apostle turns again to the most important weapon of every member of the faithful: “In all your prayer and entreaty keep praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion. Never get tired of staying awake to pray for all God’s holy people” (Eph 6:18). It is the duty and the dignity of every faithful to be part in the struggle of this life through prayer. In this regard I would like to quote a significant passage from *Spes Salvi*, the new Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI about Christian hope: *Prayer must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly. Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan (a prisoner for thirteen years, nine of them spent in solitary confinement), in his book of spiritual exercises, tells us that during his life there were long periods when he was unable to pray and that he would hold fast to the texts of the Church's prayer: the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the prayers of the liturgy. Praying must always involve this intermingling of public and personal prayer. This is how we can speak to God and how God speaks to us. In this way we undergo those purifications by which we become open to God and are prepared for the service of our fellow human beings. We become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others. Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well. It is an active hope, in which we struggle to prevent things moving towards the “perverse end”. It is an active hope also in the sense that we keep the world open to God (Spes Salvi N. 34).* In prayer we experience and express that “the Christ is dwelling in our hearts through faith”. We do it in company with our Sister in faith, and our Mother in Christ, the Virgin Mary, who probably passed her last years in the house of John, the Apostle, in Ephesus, and must therefore have been a pillar for the other faithful in the city.

19. Dear brothers and sisters, finally I would like to beg you to ask for me, your bishop, and for all the priests in the Vicariate what Saint Paul is asking the faithful in Ephesus for himself: “Pray for me to be given an opportunity to open my mouth and

fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel of which I am an ambassador; pray that in proclaiming it I may speak as fearlessly as I ought to” (Eph 6:19-20). As human beings we are limited, but we are given from God through the mandate of the Church a responsibility and a mission, which exceeds our own capacities. We need therefore your solidarity and help in prayer. I promise you that me too I am praying to God every day for you, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. May God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, bless you all, the priests, the religious Sisters, and all the other faithful. My only wish for you is the one Saint Paul expressed for the faithful in Ephesus: “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:17).

Yours faithfully in Jesus Christ,

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