

Maronite Patriarch Stresses Unity in Diversity

Faithful Affirm Holy Spirit's Action in Leader's Election

ROME, APRIL 15, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The new patriarch of the Maronite Church was in Rome this week, affirming a vision of unity and diversity.

Patriarch Béchara Boutros Raï, who last month was chosen to succeed Cardinal Nasrallah Pierre Sfeir, had a private audience with Benedict XVI on Thursday to officially receive the "Ecclesia Communio," already extended by a letter from the Pope on March 24. After a Maronite patriarch is elected, the Bishop of Rome extends his official expression of communion.

The patriarchate is based in Lebanon, though the faithful of that Church are present in Syria, Egypt, the Holy Land, and in countries of the diaspora, such as Argentina and Australia.

Patriarch Raï said he arrived in Rome "bringing with him the image of a Lebanon that lives unity in diversity."

He explained that the reason for his visit was to express the love of the Maronite Church and of Lebanon for the Church of Rome.

The Maronite Church has always been in communion with Rome, even while maintaining its own liturgy and calendar. The liturgy is celebrated in Arabic, except in ancient songs and ancestral prayers of the Eucharist, for which Aramaic is used.

Patriarch Raï arrived in Rome on Monday, expressing gratitude for the Pontiff's expression of communion.

He was received by the superior general of the Maronite Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who stated, "Our hope is that your mission as patriarch will be spiritually fruitful as 'communion and witness' in Lebanon, in the Middle East and in the diaspora."

Communion and witness

The first stage of the patriarch's visit was at the College of St. Anthony Abbot in Rome, which belongs to the Mariamite Maronite Order, the order to which he belonged before his episcopal election in 1986.

Abbot Semaan Abou Abdo welcomed the Maronite leader in "his home," recalling the years in which the patriarch lived as a Maronite monk in that college, completing his studies at the Pontifical Lateran University. The abbot also recalled Patriarch Raï's activity as director of the Arab section of Vatican Radio.

Expressing the hope that the new patriarch will be able to make the "Communion and Witness" mission fruitful, the abbot underlined the support of the Maronite monks through prayer and

fulfillment of what has been called the "mariamite monastic pact," which consists in "giving priority to God, to obedience, to chastity, to poverty and to fraternal and community life for the greater glory of God."

"Fidelity to the pact is fidelity to love, to the love of God and love of the Church," said Abbot Abdo.

He expressed the will of the order to continue with the work of sanctification with filial love under the direction of the Maronite Church, to prepare the Bride of Christ "to appear before her Spouse without stain or wrinkle or something similar."

For his part, Patriarch Raï expressed his gratitude to the Mariamite Order that prepared him and helped him to mature to become father and head of that Church.

In his address, he sent a particular greeting to Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, thanking him for having sent Minister Boutros Harb as his official representative during the visit to Rome.

The patriarch expressed his hope that the president will be able "to direct the vessel of the nation to a safe shore, helped by his collaborators, specifically his council of ministers and the parliament."

He stressed the importance of Lebanon's mission, "the Lebanon of ordinary life, the Lebanon of unity in diversity, the democratic Lebanon, the Lebanon of Islamic-Christian coexistence protected by the constitution, the Lebanon land of liberties and of openness to the Arab and Western world."

Patriarch Raï said he drew strength from the Synod of Bishops, from the religious orders, from priests, from the laity and from the structures of the Church. He expressed gratitude for all the love and support he received after his election.

A new stage

During a dinner in honor of the new patriarch, held in the St. Isaiah College of the Antonin Maronite Order, Father Daoud Reaidi, superior of the college, pointed out among the important aspects of this election, the need to "follow the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to understand his will."

He underlined the importance of following "the one whom the Spirit has chosen through the Maronite Synod."

The monk identified in the election of the new patriarch an "evangelical program" that is not "inspired in worldly events and that is not ruled according to the times, but is the one that inspires events and the key to their reading."

"His election is the beginning of a harvest that shines on the horizon," Father Reaidi said. "It is a stage in the journey of the history of the Maronite Church" in which the new patriarch will add his contribution to that of his predecessors.

The Antonin superior spoke of the popular riots that have agitated the whole of the Middle East and North Africa as "awakenings of liberty, of the meaning of citizenship and of democracy, which are values that deny all the totalitarian currents that in some way have fueled Islamic extremism."

He noted, "These movements of rebirth show that the search for identity in the Arab world, the recognition of diversity and openness to coexistence between Christians and Muslims, are factors that highlight the importance of the Lebanese experience, which is revealed as a message and model at this concrete time."

The Maronite Church, which today has more than 3 million faithful, was established by St. Maron, who lived between the 4th and 5th centuries as a hermit on Mount Tauro, an ancient city of northern Syria.

[With the contribution of Robert Cheaib]

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