

*Virginie Habib, Rosary Sisters*

## **Mission of Hope**

### **Mission Gifts from each Continent Today**

#### **Middle East**



#### **Introduction**

To begin my presentation, I'd like to thank Father John Paul Herman, Director of the SEDOS Centre, for inviting me to share my mission's experience in Middle Eastern countries, an area plagued by constant wars, confrontations, and upheavals that rise and fall depending on who controls the strings of the game, with others from many continents so that we can gain insight from each other's various experiences, we encourage one another to remain committed to our mission as "pilgrims of hope."

The hope we speak of is not optimism or positivism; rather, it is the fruit of a firm belief that is nourished by the Word of God in the Bible, shown in our attitude towards daily life events, deeds of charity, tolerance for others who practice different religions, races, or cultures, and grounded in reality to transform it in accordance with God's plan for humanity. This hope is the motivation that keeps us dedicated to and committed to our mission, to be creative in our responses to difficulties and challenges, and to continually discover a way when it seems difficult to do so. It is the light that illuminates our dark moments and keeps us moving toward our ultimate goal so that we

become the light to those who are entrusted to our mission to follow the path that leads them to their salvation.

According to this concept of hope, I shall proceed with my presentation, attempting to structure my experience in a systematic pattern for clarity, and I make no claim to be exhaustive in any of the parts that I will unfold, given the time constraints and nature of this presentation.

In the first part of my speech, I'll provide brief overview of the context. In the second, I'll outline the areas we're striving to invest in so that we can sow seeds of hope for the day when our region can at last enjoy peace, prosperity, fraternity and harmony among all of its inhabitants.

#### **I. General Overview of the context**

I'm interested in starting this section with a quote from Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation, "**The church in the Middle East: communion and witness**". This document was released in Beirut, Lebanon on September 14, 2012, and it was the outcome of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, which met from October 10 to 24, 2010, around the Successor of Peter. It states the following in (nr. 8):

"It is moving for me to recall my journeys to the Middle East. As a land especially chosen by God, it was the home of Patriarchs and Prophets. It was the glorious setting for the Incarnation of the Messiah; it saw the raising of the Saviour's cross and witnessed the resurrection of the Redeemer and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Traversed by the Apostles, saints and a number of the Fathers of the Church, it was the crucible of the earliest dogmatic formulations. Yet this blessed land and its peoples have tragically experienced human upheavals. How many deaths have there been, how many lives ravaged by human blindness, how many occasions of fear and humiliation! It would seem that there is no end

to the crime of Cain (cf. Gen 4:6-10 and 1 Jn 3:8-15) among the sons of Adam and Eve created in God's image (cf. Gen 1:27). Adam's transgression, reinforced by the sin of Cain, continues to produce thorns and thistles (cf. Gen 3:18) even today".

The countries of the Middle East, in general, and the Holy Land in particular, are going through tough and brutal political, social, economic, and human situations that frequently affect the most precious human being, whom God loved and created in his image and likeness. For many years, the people of this region have suffered in every aspect of their existence, namely history, heritage, civilization, culture, land, lives, and dignity.

If we conduct an inquiry among the generations born after World War II and those born today would have survived at least one war. Those who were fortunate enough not to have suffered war were subjected to displacement at least once, if not more.

Many of them suffered the transition from citizens to refugees, standing in front of the other countries' embassies to get a visa to an alternative country, spending the rest of their lives longing for their homeland country, and dying in the Diaspora without having the chance to return, or if happened to come back they will be visitors and not citizens.

While it is true, on the one hand, that Christians have been neither the primary nor the sole target of these tragedies, there is no denying, on the other hand, the very heavy cost paid in terms of human lives and the general impoverishment of the life of the Churches.

I cannot conclude this section without addressing the ongoing war in Gaza that began on October 7 and continues to this day. The number of women and children who have been killed is incredibly high. Rescue crews are still unable to reach many of the people under the rubble because they lack the tools needed. Hunger and thirst plague those who are still alive, many have already passed away.

Hospitals, universities, and schools including the School of the Rosary Sisters, were destroyed, this prominent educational project became a wreck and ash like others, as well as structures next to the Orthodox Church and the Holy Family Church of the Latin Patriarchate, were seriously destroyed.

During the war Gaza's small Christian community of around 1,000 people sought refuge in churches, twenty-eight of them were killed, while others were injured and are currently being treated in primitive methods in school buildings and classrooms, some of them died as a result of inadequate care.

This war has screened thousands of orphaned children, including those with lasting disabilities or who have lost a limb or more; one can say that what is happening is a devastating human catastrophe in all measures. Today, as Christians in the Middle East, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Either we choose to deal with these circumstances out of our faith, retaining the flame of hope alive, or we surrender to frustration and despair.

After hearing all of this news, you might wonder how these people, whose nations and peoples are encircled by suffering and tragedies on all sides, can talk of hope.

One thing I can guarantee you is that the number of Christians in our Middle East has decreased due to enduring events. As I previously stated, the subsequent wave of migration that follows every major conflict and crisis has never affected our will to live on, to emerge from each crisis and spread our message, to fulfil our dream of a respectable living in our country of origin, and to bring about the peace that has eluded the efforts of all world leaders to date.

We may not be able to change the decisions of the powerful; or have direct influence on them. We can, however, intervene where our communities are, building alternative forms of peace, development, and progress in our local contexts of life.

If current development models subordinate humanity to consumption and violence, we will continue to build communities and relationships that place human beings at the heart of all the contexts of what we do: in parishes, in schools, in hospitals, and in the countless peace and solidarity initiatives that, if they do not change the world, nonetheless contribute to creating contexts of peace and respect and are a witness to our Christian way of being within these difficult realities. No matter how tiny and fatigued, our communities will not give up shaping the destiny of the many last and poor ones in their territory.

## II- Mission of Hope

“**Witness and Mission**” is how the Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East summed up the existence of Christians in the region in their second pastoral letter, “**The Presence of Christians in the Middle East: Witness and Mission**”, issued in 1992. They then elaborated the meaning of these terms in the letter Nr. 19 as follows:

“Our Lord Jesus' teaching invites us to this kind of presence when he urges us to be light (Mt 5:14-16), salt (Mt 5:13), and leaven (Mt 13:33). If the light is turned off in the home, it loses its meaning and existence. If the salt loses its flavour, it is useless. If the leaven is taken from the dough, it hardens and gets ruined. When we are not light, salt, and leaven, we become a petrified frozen being, a burden to ourselves and our societies”.

In this second section I will share with you some of the main privileged mediums where we are thriving to sow the seeds of hope in order to fulfil our witness and mission as Light, salt and leaven in our countries and communities.

### 1- Educational Institutions

Educational institutions are one of the privileged medium for sowing the seeds of hope in the soil of the new generations, Confucius the Chinese philosopher once said: “If your plan is for one year plant rice. If your plan is for ten years plant trees. If your plan is for one hundred years educate children”.

It's obvious that many religious founders and foundresses are inspired to start their congregations through the charisma of education.

In the Middle East, like in other countries, Catholic and Christian educational institutions, such as schools and colleges, play an essential and effective role in education, and they were previously the only educational institutions in several of our countries, like Palestine and Jordan. They tracked the evolution of society, constantly adapting to meet new needs. They continue to carry out their mission today in the face of continually changing situations in our societies and churches, which are often complex and demanding. They aim to improve their

performance in all aspects while keeping their uniqueness and distinction within many different challenges that are threaten their existence like in Lebanon.

After the general introduction in the previous paragraph about the role of educational institutions in the Middle East, in this second paragraph I would like to shed light on their role in educating generations in science, ethics, religion and the arts. Christian and Muslims students without discrimination are prepared to face the future and the actual society with readiness.

Also, our Christian educational institutions in general and Catholic in particular are a favourable environment and space for training in coexistence and religious dialogue in its life dimension, educating on human, evangelical, ethical values, and strengthening human ties through the educational policy pursued by our educational institutions, which is represented by several educational initiatives and activities to achieve these goals.

As an example, but not limited to, several Christian and Catholic schools arrange a joint weekly or monthly school session for Muslim and Christian students to learn about and discuss a common topic between the two religions, as well as to learn about each religion's point of view on this topic and the points of similarity between the two religions.

Another example that comes from Bethlehem University, Palestine's only Catholic university in which a course is required of all university students regardless of major. It introduces the students to the fundamentals of the Christian and Islamic religions, as well as some topics about Judaism, and it is followed by Muslim, Christian, and other students.

In addition, I wish to emphasize the vital part that our Catholic schools play in ensuring that students grow their Catholic faith while also emphasizing its ecumenical dimension since the Christian students who join our Catholic schools belong to the Orthodox, Greek Melkite, and Evangelical churches.

We succeeded in our diocese in the Holy Land in creating catechism textbooks with an ecumenical approach that addresses all Christian students regardless of their church affiliation, and they are currently taught in all Catholic, Christian, and even public schools.

Catholic educational institutions cannot overlook the social context in which they operate, which welcomes all students, not just Christian students. Our society is made up of a variety of churches and religions. The school must consider this reality; however, it must do so in such a way that it does not lose its Christian identity and originality, while also understanding this reality to organically incorporate it into its identity, mission, and educational vision.

To conclude this section, for the many years that I spent in the educational domain, I consider that our Christian educational institutions are “factories” of hope and each student is a glimpse of hope for the future of our churches and societies.

If you are interested to know more about this topic, there is a whole chapter on it, in **the International Handbook of Catholic Education: challenges for school systems in the 21st Century**, entitled: **Schooling and catechesis in the Holy Land, Challenges and responses (p. 695)**.

## **2. Consecrated people: presence, prayers, witness and mission**

“Monasticism in its different forms was born in the Middle East and gave rise to several of the Churches in the region” Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation (EMO/ nr.51).

Middle Eastern countries are blessed with the numerous and effective presence of various religious congregations for women and men, some of which have roots in our countries and some of which have a long history of mission.

Religious men and women have a significant and efficient role in keeping the flame of hope alive among our Christians and the entire inhabitants through their life witness and mission.

The presence of religious women and men in Middle Eastern societies has a positive impact on the entire Christian and Muslim people, who value their presence and mission. Through their total consecration to God, they bear witness; first of all, to the heavenly kingdom, and by living a communal life in communion, love, and brotherhood, they bear witness to the possibility of living in peace, love, and harmony among varied peoples, cultures, and religions.

They bear witness to the love of the one God for all of His children through their humanitarian mission with all people, regardless of race, religion, or colour, and through their care for the person in all of his/her human, spiritual, and social dimensions through the services they perform according to their special charisma.

Christians in the Middle East need to be assisted to stay rooted in their homeland, encourage them to persevere, and support them in holding onto hope for a better future so they don't surrender to hopelessness, frustration, loneliness, or despair. Those who are consecrated can be this witness to a brighter tomorrow through their life witness, prayers and mission.

## **3. Parishes: Pastoral Movements**

Parishes are recognized as the beating heart of dioceses since they host a wide range of apostolic movements for all ages, including children, adolescents, young mothers, the pastoral council, scouting, and choirs. Each of these groups has a unique annual program, meeting schedule, and events. Each of these Parishes is considered an oasis of peace and hope amidst a troubled zone where the faithful can receive spiritual nourishment for their faith as well as social and entertainment activities, whenever there are restrictions on movements between the towns or from one place to another, people can find in their parish a breath of hope.

## **4- Holy sites and pilgrims**

“As the land of biblical revelation, the Middle East soon became a major goal of pilgrimage for many Christians throughout world, who came to be strengthened in faith and to have a profoundly spiritual experience.” Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation (EMO/ nr.83).

The countries of the Middle East represent the geography of salvation, where the events of salvation history occurred. What has already been said about Middle Eastern countries in general can be applied more deeply and extensively to the Holy Land.

Only in this Holy Land can it be declared that the Son of God was incarnated, born, lived, preached, and performed miracles before being crucified for the sake of those he loved, and then rising again. The Holy Land witnessed the first meeting between man and God in the

mystery of the Incarnation, and everything in it: its water, air, sky, nature, stones, soil, flowers, trees, birds... echoes his words and reveals his love for humans, who were created in God's image and likeness.

According to the liturgical calendar, we are now in the fifth week of the Lenten season, and next Sunday is Palm Sunday, which prepares us for the Holy Week, in which the events revolve around Jesus' suffering, culminating in his death on the cross on Good Friday, and the world enters darkness until Sunday dawn, announcing the Lord's Resurrection. Jesus's resurrection from the dead was a tremendous occurrence that changed the course of history, events, and has impact on simple and great people.

We Middle Eastern Christians are currently going through a period of hardship that is analogous to what Jesus' followers went through on Good Friday afternoon after his crucifixion; we are experiencing it in both its spiritual and material forms, in the hope that the region of the Middle East will rise with the risen Christ on Resurrection Sunday.

Despite the injustice, oppression, and displacement that our countries and people are experiencing, we are convinced that this night will be cleared, no matter how long it lasts. Our trust and hope stem from our belief in Christ's resurrection, which defeated evil and death. Our faith defeated the world, and with our trust and hope, we will defeat evil through the grace of our Saviour's resurrection, Jesus Christ.

When hopelessness and frustration creep into our hearts, the empty tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem reminds us that neither death nor evil have custody over our lives. These holy places, which abound in our countries with saints' shrines, are a source of faith, hope, and consolation, and it is a tremendous privilege that we can visit them to get blessings and strength to continue in our lives and mission.

At the same time, the holy places attract thousands of Christian pilgrims from all over the world who seek grace and blessings. Those pilgrims provide hope for Christians in the Middle East and strengthens their faith through their support and solidarity.

## **5. Synodal Journey: Continental Phase**

The Catholic Churches in the Middle East (Coptic, Maronite, Greek-Melkite, Syrian, Chaldean, Armenian and Latin) held their Continental Synodal Assembly in Bethania (Harissa, Lebanon) from 13 to 17 February 2023. These Churches participated through delegations from various countries: Egypt, the Holy Land, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf countries. There were also Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, Rapporteur of the synodal Assembly 2021-2024, and Sister Nathalie Becquart, Under-Secretary of the Synod. In addition to the Patriarchs, the delegations gathered bishops and priests, religious women and men, secular men and women of all ages. The total number of participants was one hundred and twenty-five persons, including forty secular and consecrated women, married and single, and forty lay men, adults and young people of all ages, husband and wife, and persons with disabilities. Friends from the Orthodox and Protestant Churches, the Council of Middle Eastern Churches (CEMO/MECC) and agnostic men and women also participated in this synodal assembly. Representatives of Muslim denominations participated in the opening session.

In the joy experienced at the idea of a meeting that allowed us to celebrate the One Church, and despite the sadness associated with the loss of the victims of the deadly earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, we have been given the grace of celebrating the Continental Synodal Assembly of the Catholic Churches of the Middle East and the Arab Gulf. Together, we listened to each other and to the message that the Spirit conveys to us today. All participants in this Assembly expressed their joys and hopes, as well as their fears and challenges. This encouraged them to undertake concrete initiatives for which they invested in their respective Churches. Moreover, their participation has made synodality a real experience and a space of free expression, especially for women and young people, as well as for many people whose voices were no longer heard; or for people with disabilities; and finally, for all those who have found themselves on the margins of pastoral life. The experience of this Synodal Assembly has been a kind of

remedy for many difficult situations within each Church, and for the tense relations between the different Churches. This Assembly clearly recognized two dimensions without which the Church would lose the reason for being and the soul of its existence in the East: the ecumenical dimension concerning relations with varied Churches; and the dialogue dimension which ensures openness and encounter with other religions.

It is clear that the People of God in the Middle East are led to bear witness to their faith through their life and hope, despite the complexity of the present context. The call for renewal to the journey together, to dialogue and to discernment is an urgent matter that cannot be postponed. To reap the fruits of synodality without delay is done in view of the constant commitment to walk together after Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the People of God, animated by the will to promote human brotherhood. This is how the Eastern Catholic Churches will be able to respond to the call of His Holiness Pope Francis, to realize what God wants for his Church in the third millennium: that it be more synodal.

Avoid minority complexes and banish the associated fear, due to multiple trials endured through persecution, immigration and other difficult situations, so as not to succumb to temptations and preserve the Faith and Hope. Work should also be made to enable Christians to take root in the territories of their respective countries and to help halt the current process that empty the East of the Christian presence and threatens to change its demographic identity. This requires close cooperation with civil authorities. Moreover, in order for our Churches to be the Church of Hope in the Middle East, it is necessary to revive the prophetic spirit that listens to the Will of God and works towards its realization, for God is the true Master of history. Thus, the testimony of Hope remains until the end of time.

### **Conclusion**

I once read an expression suggesting: “If you can't change your circumstances, change your perspective to find other opportunities.” That applies to our present scenario in the Middle East.

We have to change our perspective regarding the fact that Christians are minorities in our societies, from a simple sociological reality into a reality of vocation, witness and mission which we live in the joy of faith.

“The church is evaluated not by figures and statistics, but by Faithful's proactive sense of their vocation and mission. The time has come to transform this quantitative reality into a qualitative reality, in which the spiritual and faith dimension take over numbers and figures, and thus we are liberated from all the social and psychological residues left behind by history's minority status, such as isolation, or dissolution.”

The first Christian community that was developed in Jerusalem was a small and humble minority yet was characterised by the vitality and of the new human person in their enthusiasm and joy. This led all people to look at them with surprise and admiration, and they “were looked up to by the whole people” (Act 2:47).

Our mission in the Middle East is about being light, salt, and leaven which implies that it does not matter how great the darkness is outside, how tasteless the world around us is, how little ferment there is in the absurdity that surrounds us. The really important thing is not this, but that the light, however small, is truly light and enlightens, that the salt does not lose its taste since it only takes a few pinches of real salt to impart flavour and that the leaven, however small, contains the ferment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Such is our mission and we alone can fulfil it. Jesus Christ says: “you are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14-16), and “you are the salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13), as if to say that unless we are the ones to enlighten and salt the Middle East with Christ, it will remain dark and tasteless.

Despite everything, we shall live here with a renewed commitment to enlightening and flavouring the entire Middle East, where our roots are, and where we will continue to provide our beautiful witness of faith.