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Opening Speech of Patriarch John X In the International Scientific Conference



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“The Orthodox Church of Antioch from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century: Towards a Proper Understanding of History”

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On this blessed evening, I am pleased to be among you and to inaugurate with you, from this blessed Hill of Balamand, the International Scientific Conference entitled, “The Orthodox Church of Antioch from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century: Towards a Proper Understanding of History.”

As I welcome each and every one of you, beloved brothers and sisters, I pray for God's blessings to shower you, and I entreat Our Lady, the Ever-Virgin Mary, patron saint of this place, to embrace you with her tenderness and intercede to her Son for all of us, so that we may live faithfully according to her commandment: "Whatever He says to you, do it."

A proper understanding of history, as mentioned in the conference title, requires adherence to scientific principles. The account of history is not a personal point of view, but a set of facts and events that we ought to study in order to understand what actually happened, and to draw conclusions. Since our topic deals specifically with ecclesiastical history, it is our quest to redeem it, to correct the course anew, to heal wounds, and to reconcile every rift.

However, what is evil is the changing of the reading of history according to immediate self-interests, so that things are turned upside down, and facts are taken as personal views! Yes, we deeply regret that some are comfortable with the "post-truth era" and consider this as a basis. For some, truth has become synonymous with what the masses believe, i.e., the product of sophistry and populism, while historical facts are left to oblivion. In this post-truth era and the blurriness associated with it, we need, now more than ever, for scientific research to reveal facts. Therefore, we want this scientific conference today to deal with a difficult period in the history of the Church of Antioch, the first church founded by the Apostle Peter, in which "the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11: 26). From this Church came Ignatius, the God-bearer (+107 AD), who, on his way to be grinded by the teeth of the lions in Rome, addressed the whole Church with his letters, which are still a universal ecclesiastical reference. Saint John Chrysostom, the teacher of the universe, who was led as a lamb and taken to exile. He yielded up his spirit on the way, as a result of the decisions of the Synod according to the emperor's policies at that time, that is, outside the nave of the church, in which Chrysostom refused to yield up his spirit to his Lord. Saint John of Damascus was the defender of the faith, and whose hand was restored by the Virgin after being cut off for speaking the truth of faith. Let us not forget Patriarch Peter III who sought with all wisdom and strength to prevent the schism between Constantinople and Rome and to keep the dispute between them within the confines of the Church. He wanted differences, especially small ones, not to turn into a reason for distance, division, fragmentation, hostility, and for an absence of love.

In the context of preserving the spirit of Peter III, who saw himself as "a bone of Antioch's bones and blood of its blood", and in the footsteps of the Apostle Peter, who bore his name and who also succeeded him in the care of the sheep of Christ in the Mother City, the Church of Antioch, the Apostolic Patriarchate and the first See of Peter continues to be the Church of communion, consultation, openness,

and peace. She remains a Church with her place and authority among the Churches. It pains and saddens her with every division between other churches. Equally, She is pained by the dismemberment of a segment of her children who violated her authority as a church being the fullness of ecclesiastical entity, and as a church equal in dignity to the second church established by the head of the Apostles. She is a church that is aware that her role as an authority is no different from that of other ancient apostolic patriarchates. She is a church whose Patriarch, Peter III, realized that it was his responsibility to work on avoiding a schism between the two sister churches.

From our predecessor, Patriarch Peter III, we understand the faith of our Church is that true communion can only be achieved through consultation and mutual respect between Churches, through the community's complete obedience to its Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, along with being in harmony and peace that descends from the Holy Spirit, and away from any worldly logic of domination, control, and subjugation of others. Is there anything more beautiful and truer than Patriarch Peter III's analogy of the five patriarchates to the five equal senses, working together in harmony within the body of the Church, whose only head is Jesus Christ, Who promised to be with us forever until the end of the age?

Just as the Antiochian Patriarch Peter III was bold in this ecclesiastical theology, which was contained in his correspondence with Rome and the Latin world, he was equally bold and faithful to the authentic Orthodox ecclesiastical theology in his interaction with the Ecumenical Patriarch Michael Cerularius, when he reminded him that "the Apostolic See of Antioch is not under the See of Constantinople."

It would have been desirable for the contemporaries of the Patriarch of Antioch to hear his voice and realize that there is no place for lust, power, and domination in the Body of Christ! It would be desirable for our brothers today, who refuse to resort to conciliarity and claim primacy of Sees and their infallibility, hear the words of this Patriarch. Suppressing the conciliar sense is a sin. Conciliarity is the starting point for anyone who wants to maintain unity, and who does not want to isolate and marginalize others.

However, history, even church history, is not always written by the wise and saints, and therefore the wisdom of the Patriarch of Antioch did not resonate with the disputants, and the schism between East and West was perpetuated and deepened with the passage of time, and tragedies succeeded. Antioch was not spared the repercussions of the great schism and the struggle for power, and this part of the Church turned into a land of conquest and capture.

The schism deepened and took on existence and reality with the so-called Crusades that uprooted the Orthodox Antiochian patriarchs from their See and replaced them with Latin patriarchs.

Despite the severe hardships and persecutions that befell us in the Mamluk era and other eras, the leaders of the Church of Antioch never lost sight of the fact that the only response to attempts at unity, through coercion and material/worldly temptations, was total and complete devotion to the spirit of Orthodox conciliarity. Hence Antioch's rejection of the Council of Ferrara Florence in 1439, which was held on the verge of the fall of the Roman Empire.

The years continued with their cruelty to Christians living in this tormented region of Antioch. With the advent of the Ottomans and the first attempts at Western colonization in the East, Rome sent missionaries to us, not to help persecuted Christians, but to entice them to join it, accompanied by promises of commercial and economic opportunities and political protections by the European powers, so those who became weak under such pressure joined it.

This situation was not because of the accusations that some attach against the Antiochian clergy about the alleged neglect of the parish and the so-called lack of spiritual care for the faithful. The patriarchs of Antioch since the seventeenth century, such as Meletius Karma (1634-1635), Makarios III Ibn Zaim (1648-1672), and Athanasius III Dabbas (1686-1724), spared no effort to educate the parish, secure its needs and preserve the Orthodox faith. Their efforts yielded a pastoral renaissance and cultural and spiritual renewal in the Patriarchate of Antioch.

The themes of this conference will allow you to appreciate the renaissance vision that the Church of Antioch worked to achieve despite the harsh social situation and the challenges of the living conditions in the Middle East at that time. No matter how much some try to obscure or distort the facts, they are not able to hide what has been achieved in many areas, including: reviewing books, scientific and critical editing of texts, printing them in Arabic in printing presses, criteria for priest selection and for the election of bishops, educating priests in seminaries and theological schools, restoring many church buildings and icons, providing relief funds to needy families, opening schools for children's education, organizing spiritual courts and supervising their work, regulating marriage and personal status laws, and revitalizing monastic life in monasteries. Their labors were mixed with the sweat of perseverance, the tears of prayers, and the blood of martyrdom. They had a clear and correct vision of the ecclesiastical renaissance, and of how to establish the flock in the authentic Orthodox faith, despite the enormous pressure from inside and outside to destabilize Church life and the confidence of the faithful in the Church.

You will have the opportunity to see this renaissance movement carried out by the Antiochian patriarchs and bishops despite all the challenges and attempts to break in and sow dissension, and to carefully research all these subjects and events during the next two days, in order to draw lessons and prevent the recurrence of

the same tragedies, especially in these difficult days in our countries, in which many at home seek alleged protections, and many abroad seek to buy consciences and loyalties and win over the needy people or weak souls.

Fraternally, I leave it to those who departed from us and joined the West, in accordance with an agreement that allowed them to preserve their rituals and maintain their patriarchal system, to evaluate the results of their choice, especially since this Balamand hill witnessed, not long ago, an Orthodox-Catholic dialogue and church meeting (1993), which examined the feasibility of this Uniatism as a way to achieve the desired unity between churches and dropped it from consideration as a feasible way in the efforts for unity. Pope John Paul II, with his usual boldness, apologized in 2000 to the Eastern Orthodox Church for the mistakes made by the Church of Rome, in the Middle Ages, towards the Christians of the East that led to Christian fragmentation.

From a paternal outlook, I say that our Antiochian See suffered because of the absence of fraternity and fell under a tutelage that had its own implications, but it was able at the beginning of the twentieth century to enter a new phase inaugurated by the election of Patriarch Meletius Al-Doumani.

In addition, I must thank God, because He has given us, Christians, the ability to be present in this Antiochian scope, to overcome difficulties, despite the twists and ruggedness of history, to bring us closer together, to remove the effects of division from our souls, to make us feel that we are one family of the Father. Our common life in this regard has increased our sense of the importance of our unity. It has made our relationships based on the encounter in Christ Jesus and not on formal courtesies. That is why we will continue to work together, to strengthen the bonds of fraternity and love among our Churches, and for achieving the united witness of Christ Jesus.

In this atmosphere of love, we must, at the Antiochian level, break through the barriers of history, tear down the remaining walls of enmity, abandon emotional courtesies and superficial closeness, translate our love for one another into a sincere revelation, activate local theological dialogue and deepen common historical research, so that we can strengthen our true Antiochian identity through joint scientific works that contribute to the healing of our historical memory. This healing process, as noted above, began on this Balamand hill thirty years ago, when Uniatism as a method to unite with Rome was rejected. Therefore, we hope that this conference, in which we desire to have a proper understanding of our history, be the first pillar, which establishes joint action with our brothers that will allow the history of that era to be read accurately and to dispel all ambiguities that marred it on the way to be fully healed from wounds and be in the service of the desired unity.

We have made great strides in our joint pastoral work, through the agreement between us and the Syriac Orthodox, and we were close to achieving a project of unity between us and the Rum Catholics, but the difference in the understanding of partnership, conciliarity and the relationship with the churches outside the Antiochian scope prevented the realization of this project. Should we give up and abandon the dream of Antiochian unity? Would it not be better for us to have the courage to insist on continuing to work in order to get as close as possible to this unity? Is not the vivid feeling of our children regarding unity of destiny and unity in witness and holiness an incentive to strive for the unity to which we all aspire and whom the glorious Lord Jesus has commanded us to follow?

As I speak to you about Antioch, I remember the last Feast of Pascha that I held above the rubbles of the Antiochian historic cathedral recently destroyed by the earthquake, inflicting indescribable suffering on the people. Here, I take it as an opportunity to send my peace, love and blessing to our children in this city, and in Alexandretta and Mersin, and with them and through them I assure the world that we are children of hope, that we will rebuild what was destroyed, and we will remain witnesses in this land on which the Apostles walked. This land was sanctified by the blood of the martyrs, including the two hieromartyrs, Nicolas Khashe and his son Habib. Those two were martyred in the last century and their glorification will be studied by the Holy Synod in its upcoming meeting, and whose intercession we already ask for all of us and for this See which is preserved by the holiness of its believers throughout generations.

From this blessed Balamand hill, which is one of the places that has a vibrant presence for our Orthodox Church in our beloved Lebanon, I address all our fellow citizens to work together to formulate a vision that respects the pluralism that abounds in this country and its distinct communities, and to preserve the unity of Lebanon, a unity that highlights our values, and does not turn sectarianism into a tool for corruption and vitiation, to disrupt governance, to hinder the work of the state, and to oppress citizens. Hence, I address the consciences of all officials in this country, and in particular to the members of parliament, calling for the election of a President of the Lebanese Republic who will ensure the regularity of the work of institutions. I ask for divine mercy for the souls of those who died in the Beirut Port explosion, stressing that justice that ought not to be hindered by self-interests finds its way and prevail.

To the civilized world, to people of conscience wherever they are, I ask: Why making the Syrian people starve? What is the guilt of these people which makes you punish them by blocking food and medicine? Is it humane to deprive a human being of electricity, water, heating, and medicine? Is it humane for fathers to be unable to feed their children and mothers to live anxiously in order to secure a

morsel of bread? Has politics become so criminal that it watches people die of hunger and oppression and remain indifferent? Isn't it time to lift the blockade on the Syrian people and lift the sanctions on them?

How can I not express the pain in our hearts over the case of the Archbishops of Aleppo, Youhanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi, who have been kidnapped since April 2013? This bleeding wound in the body of the Antiochian Church will not heal until their fate is known, and their kidnapping will remain in our history as a painful picture of the oppression suffered by human beings living in this East.

As we stand here in the vicinity of the eternal Cedars, we must say a word of truth about what is happening in occupied Palestine. Palestine is crucified because of the self-interests of nations. Palestine is bleeding with the Nazarene on the calvary of tyranny. We support the Palestinian right to its land and to the effective establishment of its state. We stand by the side of these displaced people who are suffering from bitterness and siege, imprisonment, murder, and displacement. Peace cannot be formed on the bodies of children and slaughtered men, nor is it imported by shedding innocent blood. What is happening in Palestine is the result of the violation of human dignity, the contempt towards international law and all resolutions, racial discrimination policy, and the persistent imposition of the logic of oppression. Hence, our call is for the immediate cessation of the war on Gaza. The people of Gaza are paying the price of the suffocating siege with much blood. Our call also for us, Muslims and Christians, to see in Jerusalem a way up to the mercies of the Father of Lights. We ask the Holy Lord to send down His divine justice and mercy, and His peace which surpasses all human peace, a peace that cannot be established by blood and fire.

Beloved,

History has been harsh on us in this region, and it continues to be harsh, but we are loyal to this land, because it has been mixed with the soil of our fathers and with the blood of our saints. We are committed to bear love for all the inhabitants of this area with whom we were, and still are, partners in life and death and mistreated like them by external forces. We are the children of this land, and we do not seek foreign protections in it, but we seek to translate the teachings of the Gospel in this land. Let us convey the kindness and peace of Christ wherever we go. We are here to build this country on the values of love and decent morals with all good and sincere people. We are a loving bloc, not a sectarian bloc. We only aspire for the earth to be heaven and for history to be a history of God's lovingkindness, compassion, and love for mankind, not the history of sin.

In conclusion, three hundred years have passed, my dearly beloved, since the unfortunate schism of 1724 AD, which led to a rift in our Antiochian Orthodox Church, resulting in unfortunate and sad social, economic, and political

repercussions, which reflected negatively on our parishes. It is our hope that this conference will add to the foundations we have put in place in order to restore unity and harmony between our church and the Rum Catholic church, and that it will also promote the strengthening of fraternal ties between the five patriarchates (which bear the name of Antioch), and stir the spirit of kinship among them so that our witness to the Lord of glory may be one.

May the Lord God bless you and bless this conference for the God's glory, and for the good estate of the Church and Her unity, and for the prosperity of the country and the people.

[Antioch Patriarchate سڤذوثرألا مورلل قرشملا رئاسو ةيكاطنأ ةيكريرطب](#)