

# **Bishop Munib Younan\***

## ***The Mission of the Church in a Multi-Religious, Multi-Cultural and Multi-National Society***

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What is the mission of the Church in a multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-national society? Is the mission of the Church purely ecclesiastical or is it also social? Does the mission of the church include only Sunday services, Sunday schools, acts of mercy and youth activities, or does it extend beyond that? Can the Church survive distant and isolated from society? Who is the Church? I would like to begin my speech with these words: The Church comprises the group of believers who have a clear distinctive identity. The Church cannot identify and accomplish its mission without full knowledge of the identity of its members.

What is the Identity of the Local Church?

When Arab Christians are asked about their identity they reply that they are Christians. But is there such a thing as Christian nationality—an Arab nationality and Christian faith? Thus, the identity of Christians in the Holy Land is an Arab Christian identity, and it is not a new or updated identity. It is an identity that had formed since the inception of the Church on the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit descended on Arabs living in the Holy Land at that time, as the writer of the Acts of the Apostles relates in the second chapter of his book. People of other nationalities also received the Holy Spirit, and they formed their Arab Christian identity in the Church of Jerusalem that had been multi-cultural and multi-national. Since its inception the Church has not been detached and segregated but has existed with the community and has had a clear and distinctive identity. In this context I would like to highlight two points:

**A.** Incarnation theology helps Arab Christians understand their identity. When the divinity of Jesus Christ incarnated, it became flesh and incarnated in a certain culture and identity. This is the condition of Arab Christians who derive power of identity from the Holy Bible, the Old and New Testaments. The identity of Arab Christians is an extension of Biblical civilization and an expansion of the culture of Holy Scriptures. Thus the Arab nationality of Christians goes back to their early Christian roots and their Christianity is closely connected to their Arab nationality. Arab nationality strengthens the sense of belonging of Arab Christians to their land and their Christianity helps them become light and salt in the Holy Land. In this continuous and permanent extension between Arab nationality and Christian faith ripens an original Arab Christian identity that belongs to Arab history, culture, civilization and race. And, Arab Christians belong also Christian faith that transforms their life to become peacemakers, advocates of justice, servants of reconciliation, defenders of human rights, initiators of dialogue with the other, and proponents of the rights of children and women. The Holy Land in which we have been living for two thousand years had taught us that suffering, pain and hardships do not discourage or thwart us; rather they burnish our Christianity that our identity becomes comprehensive, open, full of love and forgiveness. Such is the identity of Arab Christianity that I live daily.

**B.** Belonging to Arab Christianity is an unceasing responsibility that falls on the shoulders of every Arab Christian living in the Holy Land. It is the responsibility of belonging to the Holy Land and not to any other place: and this is the special privilege that Arab Christians have. They become salt and light; they understand themselves and discover the meaning of their life and existence in a society where there is a conglomeration of different cultures and religions. Indeed, they become witness just like Paul the Apostle. They do not labour in isolation or for winning their daily bread or for their entertainment, but they strive for their spiritual rejuvenation, and for the spiritual rejuvenation of the community; they struggle for the sake of Arab Christianity, for the sake of the land and the nation to which they belong. They feel contented that they take part in the building and development of their nation.

The challenge that Arab Christians face is how they could become true witnesses of the message of God in the Holy Land where they live, and how their message could become an indivisible part of the ecumenical, apostolic and holy Arab Christian Church.

### **What Is the Mission of the Arab Christian Church?**

The mission of the Church lies in preaching the word of God, the dissemination of the holy sacraments and the declaration to all of the good news of salvation. The first mission of the Church is to proclaim the love of God that He gives to all for free. As John the Evangelist writes. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). Jesus did not say that God so loved Christians but He said God so loved the whole world and all people. The mission of love that the Arab

Christian Church carries is not exclusive to Christians, but it also includes all people and is concerned about two issues. The first issue is that the mission of love is concerned about humanity in general. Jesus had served mankind, and likewise the mission of the Arab Christian Church is to preserve the humanity of mankind and serve all people despite differences in race, religion or culture. As Jesus has brought on the cross the image of God to people, thus the Church has to preserve this image through the Church's love to all. The other issue is that the mission of the Arab Christian Church does not differ from the mission of the ecumenical all-inclusive Church that cares for justice, forgiveness and peace, and advocates that every human being has the right to live in dignity on his own land.

### **How Can the Arab Christian Church Accomplish Its Mission?**

With this mission that respects justice and human dignity the Arab Christian Church today can become a true witness of Jesus Christ. She does not isolate herself but engages actively in the life of her community because Christ called upon her to be His true witness. How can the Arab Christian Church do this?

**First**, the mission of the Arab Christian Church is a mission of peace and justice. So often we ask: Why does the Church talk about justice? Why does the Church defend the oppressed? Doesn't the Church have to pray in her hermitage and refrain from interfering in politics? Didn't Jesus teach us to give what is Caesar's to Caesar and what is God's to God? So many times people ask me: Isn't the role of the Church to prepare people for afterlife? I reply in the affirmative. But here we need to understand the essence of the Christian faith. When Jesus Christ redeemed us on the cross. He did not mean us to care only for eternal life but to care for redemption in this mundane life as well and contribute to the making of earthly peace. When in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught us to love our neighbor and pray for our enemy and live with the other, He meant us to start eternal life here on earth. Besides, how can Arab Christians pray in church and perform their religious duties while oppression and injustice and violence are increasingly on the rise around them? Can Arab Christians behave like an ostrich and bury their heads in the sand and claim everything is alright with the world and there is no reason to fear. This is an escape from reality that contradicts the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. Didn't God send His Son Jesus of Nazareth to accomplish the mission of love to all? Jesus tells His disciples in Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour".

When the Church rehabilitates believers to work for peace and justice and freedom for all, she contributes to earthly peace. When believers bring up their identity at the holy baptism and meet in peace round the table of the Lord and take the holy communion and listen to the stories from the Bible and teach about faith and hope, then the Church is educating them in the fundamentals of peace making and justice in this life and in a multi-religious and multi-cultural society. The Church is the school of the Holy Spirit that prepares and trains Christian believers to be peace makers. Saint Paul writes, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 22:5). Therefore, the live Church remains a disconcerting entity that upsets injustice and the unjust; she refuses to suppress the conscience and she speaks up for the truth at a time when people shout, "'Peace, peace, but there is no peace' (Jer 6:14). The Church names and resists the idols that man makes and that lead to a fake freedom and temporary security, and to injustice, oppression, war, violence and terrorism. In fact, the Church calls upon leaders and nations to repent and reject the teachings that call for elevating a people or a nation to the level of God. The Church also stands against those who resort to security through peace or war and those who agree that one people or race or civilization has the right to control another people, occupy and colonize them.

The mission of the Church is a mission of love and recuperation. It is a prophetic mission that derives its strength from the prophets of the Holy Land. It rejects injustice and offers a clear vision of just peace and reconciliation. It supports the oppressed and defends human rights and religious and cultural freedom and the freedom of expression and speech.

**Secondly**, the mission of the Arab Christian Church is an educational mission. Jesus Christ was a teacher who traveled from one place to another. He taught all people without exception. At every occasion He attended, He was a teacher. He was a good teacher, and in his teaching he raised the status of mothers and children and treated enemies as friends. The fathers of the early Church imitated Christ and they educated people because they realized that the ineffaceable mission of the Church is educational. If we read the history of the Arab Christian Church in Palestine, we see that it was very successful in its mission because it gave attention to education. History has proved that the Church that focuses on education succeeds in transmitting the Christian message to a society that is religiously and culturally pluralistic. I hear much caustic criticism from some Christians that a large number of students in our educational institutions does not belong to Christian faith but to other faiths. But before leveling any criticism we need to think of the goals and objectives that Lutheran, Latin, Catholic, Episcopal and Orthodox schools focus on:

- a. Strengthening the Arab Christian identity in a religiously and culturally plural society that is becoming increasingly secular;
- b. Co-existence with people from other religions and understanding their traditions and social norms;
- c. Teaching peace education;
- d. Assisting in building an infrastructure for a civil and modern society where democracy prevails;
- e. Bringing up the new generation and training them in the defense of human rights including those of women and children;
- f. Providing high standard education and emphasizing extracurricular activities that develop and strengthen character as a whole.

**Thirdly**, the mission of the Church is a mission of human service. The mission of the Church is a mission of the needy irrespective of their religion, race, or political affiliation. We often hear complaints about why the Church serves those who are not Christian. Did not Paul the Apostle teach us. "Let us do good to all especially to the people of the faith." Isn't the mission of the Church restricted to its children? The Christian Church is represented by her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus did not come to serve the Jews, but also He went to the Gentiles who are considered by the Jewish law unclean, and He took care of them and taught them. We remember the Canaanite woman that shouted: 'Have mercy on me son of David' and asked for the recovery of her daughter. He did not say a word. After she shouted He told her: 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the people of Israel'. She came and knelt before Him and said, 'Master help me'. He said to her: 'It is not good to take the bread of children and give it to the dogs'. She said: 'Yes, master but even the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall on the floor'. Jesus praised her and said: 'Your faith is great. Let it be as you want'. And her daughter recovered at that hour" (Mt 15:21-28).

The mission of the Arab Christian Church is a mission of service that does not discriminate between those whom she serves. Her service is one of love in hospitals, clinics, and old people's homes, in education and everywhere. As Christians we have to give up our selfishness and narrow mindedness and learn from Jesus how to love and serve others. The duty of the Church is to serve those in need. Didn't Jesus teach us in Matthew 25:31-46 when He shall set the sheep on His right, but the goats on the left and say, "'Come you blessed of my Father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me meat; I was thirsty and you gave me drink, and you took me in. Naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came unto me.' Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, 'Lord when did we see you hungry and fed you, or thirsty gave you drink? When did we see you a stranger and took you in, or naked and clothed you. Or when did we see you sick, or in prison and came to you?' And God shall answer and say to them, 'Verily I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these brothers you have done it unto me.

This is the mission of the Church: to serve for the sake of service and not for personal interest or for converting people to another religion. The mission of the Church is to serve people as Jesus served humanity because our faith that works by love is not exclusive to us, but that the love of Jesus Christ includes all and calls upon the Church to serve people indiscriminately. Some might say: But other religions serve themselves only I answer them: My vocation and my mission as an Arab Christian Church is to carry the message of love and serve with mercy all people. This is the power of the live Church.

**Finally**, the mission of the Church is a mission of coexistence with other religions. Living or coexisting with the other is a Christian art. No doubt that our Arab Christian experience is long, exciting and thorny, but we have managed throughout the ages to accept the other and live with them. We lived and are still living with Muslims and Jews because this land is a Holy Land.

***The mission of coexistence and mutual dialogue can be summed up in the following:***

1. Dialogue between the three monotheistic religions has to take into consideration the theology of creation seriously. Why did God create us with differences in religion and doctrine? Why did God allow us to live together in the Holy Land? Religious dialogue does not change the doctrine of the other, or their thought or customs. It rather helps us see God in the other and not in us only. When we see God in the other we acknowledge the equality of human rights for all people, religions, doctrines and cultures. Thus the Church calls upon her children to see God in the other and accept the difference of the other and their humanity. In this way we can through dialogue acknowledge each other's rights: human, civil, religious, national, and political. God created people equal and He sent His only begotten Son to redeem us on the cross. This clear message defies bigotry, racism and fundamentalism that prevail in the world these days and remedies the world from any presumptions about the religion of the other be they anti-Semitism or Islamic terrorism or the terrorism of the alien in our modern world.
2. The Church urges her members in their dialogue with the other to find common values in the three

monotheistic religions. The world of consumption, materialism and secularism has lost all values and become a world of material interest. Religious dialogue needs to look for the common values that reinforce the concept of the family, equality, justice, peace, tolerance and reconciliation in the three religions. A world without values is a world full of chaos and a world that has not spirit.

On the other hand, a world with sublime values defies religious bigotry and sectarianism, and calls for pluralism, democracy and respect to the religion of the other, their cultures and traditions, as God meant them to be.

3. The mission of the Church also calls on the three monotheistic religions to cooperate for the achievement of peace and justice in an unjust world where the criteria of justice have been distorted. Believers of the three faiths have to be prophetic in finding peaceful means and approaches to solve complex problems. They can defy the authority of the world and tell politicians: Enough war and destruction. Instead of using the money of the people in developing arms use it to put an end to poverty and to develop education and to achieve peace and justice. Use the money to bring justice to the oppressed and overcome diseases.

4. The Church also calls for the reinforcement of the culture of peace. We need to know the other as they wish to define and identify themselves. The enhancement of peace education helps us understand the other and accept them as they are with their traditions and shun stereotypes and presumptions about them. Presumptuous thinking about the other destroys the progress of human life. We ask our schools and institutions, our families and the media to spread peace education among the public.

I will tell an incident that happened to my wife and me. We found a Jewish girl at Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. She spoke in Hebrew with us and asked us to help her go into the Old City because her teacher taught her that Palestinian Arabs might kill her. We walked with her and my wife Suad spoke with her all the way in Hebrew. When we reached the Christian Quarter intersection my wife asked her, "Are you scared?" She answered, "Of course I am." My wife said, "Do you realize that we are Palestinian Arabs." The girl was surprised and could say nothing because the experience she had contradicted what her teacher had taught her.

Peace education challenges us. What do we teach at home and in schools? Do we teach what we should be teaching or what politicians impose on us to teach? The message of the Church is clear: the three monotheistic religions must teach the truth about the other; they must teach tolerance and forgiveness not hatred, pluralism not bigotry, openness not close-mindedness, acceptance of the other not discrimination, love not hatred. If we bring up our children with these values our Holy Land will be a land of multiple cultures, tolerance and love and will follow the message of Jesus Christ who taught us to love each other.

## **Conclusion**

In his struggle for justice in the United States, Martin Luther King said, "Love is the strongest permanent force in the world. This creative power, represented in the life of Jesus Christ, is the most powerful tool and weapon people can use in their search for peace, security and serenity." Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us about the mission of the Church in a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-national society, saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22:37-40).

## **Notes**

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