Your Beatitude, Bishops, Priests and Lay Faithful of the Maronite Church and friends,

I am delighted to be able to participate in this forum about the identity and mission of the Maronite Church in new times, especially as it evokes memories of my old boss, friend and mentor, Archbishop Fouad El-Hage, the former President of Caritas Internationalis and a former President of both Caritas Lebanon and Caritas Middle East/North Africa, MONA, who died in office. I will never forget his funeral in Tripoli in Northern Lebanon where there were pictures of him on all the streets, saying ‘He was a bishop to all the poor of Lebanon, Muslim and Christian’. It is on that legacy of bringing reconciliation and understanding and peace that is a hallmark of the Maronite Church that I wish to build my contribution.

Professor Jude Butcher has outlined the history of the Maronite Church under the three rubrics of: integrity, wisdom and mission. All of these contribute to peace and reconciliation which is at the centre of the Christian faith. The Holy Father also recently acknowledged that Lebanon had a “vocation to be for the Middle East and the whole world a sign of the effective possibility of peaceful and constructive coexistence among people”\(^1\) . Peace, as we know, is not just the absence of war or conflict but the building of just and right relationships between nations and peoples, between religions and between ourselves and our God. The mission of peace requires integrity and wisdom that is abundantly manifest in the work of Caritas Lebanon and, indeed, of Caritas Cyprus which is mostly Maronite. In the 2006 war with Israel, Caritas people risked their own lives to help others, regardless of faith. Remarkably, they sought out the most marginalised – the migrant workers from countries like Sri Lanka, some of whom had been locked in the houses as the owners had fled to the safety of the mountains. Caritas started a free phone service so that those who were most abandoned could phone their loved ones in their

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own countries to say they were safe. Many were helped to go abroad. Caritas
cyprus also did sterling work in this regard. Within Lebanon, Caritas runs old
folks’ homes and centres for the disabled. It is involved in irrigation projects,
training on everything from drugs to domestic violence and has increased the
number of villages reached by mobile clinics from 44 in 2003 to 621 villages
today. The Migrants Centre runs not just programmes for refugees but works
on promoting their rights among government circles and has even been
instrumental in freeing some from detention centres. And Caritas does this
regardless of origin, ethnicity or religion of all the people assisted. Your
struggle to maintain your identity as a Church within the larger Universal
Church should lead you more in this direction of solidarity with the poorest
and most marginalised in Lebanese and, indeed, global society.

Caritas also runs training programmes for young Lebanese to try to wean
them off an aggressively consumerist mentality to one where service to
others is central. Again, this is part of the wisdom of the Maronite tradition
but has to be done in step with today’s youngsters. Tradition is wonderful but
it is not held in aspic. Tradition is not a static phenomenon but a dynamic
one. It is important to read constantly the signs of the times through the
eyes of faith and Church teaching. That assists us to recognise the things
that are not fleeting but central to the faith and to what it is to be human.
We must keep these but we must also have the courage to identify those
things that do pass, that can discarded or transformed, no matter how hard
that is, so that they can be replaced by what God is calling us to in the 21st
century.

And what God is calling the Maronite Church to in the 21st century is perhaps
the service of peace-building, inter-religious dialogue and the healing that
comes about in a reconciliation process when we all become, in St Paul’s
phrase “a new creation”. The great medieval Dominican mystic, Meister
Eckhart, said: “People should not worry so much about what they do but
rather what they are. If they and their ways are good, then their deeds are
radiant.” Pope Benedict XVI underlines this in his first encyclical, Deus
Caritas Est, when he says that “love needs to be organised if it is to be an
ordered service to the community”(#20) but that we all as Christians must
“dedicate ourselves to others with heartfelt concern” (31) and share our
humanity with others. Perhaps the sharing of that humanity through working
for peace, inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation is the greatest gift the
Maronites can give to a world thirsty for a word of hope and love.