By their fruits – The Problematic of Collective Identity

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Your eminence Cardinal Sfeir, your grace Bishop Abikaram, and other Bishops, clergy, religious and people of faith here today. A special welcome to the youth of the Maronite Church from across the world who in this historical gathering have been asked by Bishop Abikaram to reflect upon Jesus, a young person with enthusiasm, honesty, transparency, firmness and when necessary outrage.

We focus this morning on the question of collective identity through reflecting upon the fruit of our lives.

God, in both the old and new testament, tells us that we will be known and identified by the fruit of our lives. Psalm 92 declares that just people will be identified through the high quality and plentfulness of their fruit.

The just grow tall like palm trees,
Majestic like cedars of Lebanon.
They are planted in the temple courts
And flourish in God’s house,
Green and heavy with fruit
Even in old age. Psalm 92

The Gospels present Christ telling his followers that people will be known or identified by their fruits.

You will be able to tell them by their fruits (Mt 7: 15, 20).
For every tree can be told by its own fruit (Lk 6:44).

In considering the collective identity of the Maronite people let us recall the fruit of your lives to-date and the fruit you are called to produce as you discern your changing roles in the Maronite Church of new horizons and new times.

I offer these reflections to you, brothers and sisters in Christ, as a Christian Brother and a Professor of Australian Catholic University. As Christian Brother I acknowledge the most generous friendship, hospitality and faith shared with me by many people present today. I also recall the 25 Maronite students who stayed within the residence of our Brothers at the Maglianella in Rome for some 5 years while they were planning and building their own centre. These students showed, amongst many things, their ability to cross cultures in language and ways of living, including making and consuming much popcorn while watching the football.

As a Professor of Australian Catholic University I acknowledge how we are both committed to excellence in Catholic education. This excellence is distinguished in the expression of our Catholicity, scholarship and engagement with communities from very diverse backgrounds. In Sydney you are known for the quality of Catholic education in the schools at Harris Park, Dulwich...
Internationally you are known for your commitment to Catholic education as in the universities in Lebanon and in your schools throughout the world.

As we consider your collective identity as Maronites, let me take the role of a Catholic scholar. I present, from the perspectives of faith and reason, evidence of the fruits of your presence in history.

Throughout your history, which is one of continual challenge and change, you have always been “a Church of new horizons for new times”. Throughout each period of change in your history as Maronites, you have been people of integrity, wisdom and mission. These three virtues are seen in St Maroun who, wholehearted in his commitment to his faith, and not to be distracted from his mission, took himself to the mountains. Here Maroun’s mission is said to have included converting a pagan temple into a Church dedicated to the “true God”, preaching the word of God and offering physical and spiritual healing to the people.

I will focus upon each of the three fruits of the Maronites in turn: integrity, wisdom and mission.

**Integrity**

Maronites have been willing to pay the price for their faith. The price has included losing their lives, leaving family and friends, and moving to new places. Maronites were true to their faith in Christ being both divine and human and this in the face of persecutions from the Monophysites and the opponents of the Council of Chalcedon. Counted amongst your martyrs are the 350 monks massacred in 517 for defending the decree of the Council of Chalcedon and who are remembered on July 31 each year. The Patriarch of Antioch was martyred in 602 followed by more reprisals from the Byzantine army and the emperor of Constantinople. Between 1840-1860 there were the massacres of thousands of Maronites by the Druze assisted by the Ottomans. War against the Maronites in Lebanon has continued in this 21st century. The integrity of the Maronites through all of this is testimony to your belief in Christ’s words “he who loses his life will save it”.

**Wisdom**

The Maronite Church and people have been wise in their strategic decisions which positioned them well for addressing threats and beginning life anew. The wisdom in these decisions seems to lie in how people addressed both the spiritual and temporal dimensions of the situations. The movement of the people towards and into Lebanon, including to the rugged mountains of Lebanon, provided safe places for the people to live their faith with integrity and ensure their livelihood with sufficient shelter and food. Later people moved from Lebanon to Egypt, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Central America and Africa, often in response to further acts of aggression such as from the Druze in 1860.

The wisdom of the Maronites was behind significant developments in the Middle East. The introduction of western literacy on a large scale within Lebanon after the 17th century contributed to Lebanon being more than Arabic in its cultural expressions. The Maronites’ commitment to scholarship and learning was key to their importing the first printing press to the Arabic-speaking world. The Maronite monasteries were leaders in the Arabic Renaissance in the late 19th century through the development of Arabic and Syriac printable scripts. As Maronites, your wisdom extends to valuing both scholarly achievements and the enviable know how of the village farmer who can cultivate the rocky hillsides with vineyards and orchards.

The Maronites have been wise in providing structural foundations for the integrity and sustainability of their faith. Some of these foundations include: a breadth of vision which crosses the boundaries of eastern and western Catholic traditions; the appointment of the Patriarch being approved by Rome; and scholarly institutions in Rome with the Maronite College as well as in Lebanon and other parts of the world. You also have strong roots in the monastic traditions and a diocesan structure that brings an inclusiveness to the life of the Church.
You have been open to God’s gift of wisdom which “deploys her strength from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things for the good” (Wis 8:1).

**Mission**

Maronites have provided a continuing example of integrity and wisdom in living the mission of Christ. You have responded sagaciously to challenges and threats, with some people standing their ground and others moving or migrating to new places, initially within Lebanon and then to new countries internationally. In these places you could live and proclaim your faith with freedom. In many ways you have continued the missionary role of the early Christians who, in the midst of persecution, were disciples to other countries. You have shown, through both standing your ground and being missionary, that the kingdom of God is for all people.

Your mission has deep spiritual and cultural roots, which stem from Lebanon to many parts of the world (see Table 1). A map of the Maronite Church today shows that as a Church with new horizons for new times your mission is international in footprint and cultural expression. This forum is an expression of the Church’s commitment to bring its international engagement, discernment and scholarship to the articulation of people’s understanding of Maronite identity and mission within and across the different countries where you are living today.

As at 2004, The Maronite Church had approximately 3.5 million members throughout the World. 94 % of the Maronites of these are of Lebanese descent with about 1.4 million living in Lebanon.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Australia: 150,000</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon: 1,432,000</td>
<td>France: 50,000</td>
<td>USA: 200,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria: 46,100</td>
<td>Cyprus: 10,000</td>
<td>Canada: 80,000</td>
<td>Africa: 40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine: 7,500</td>
<td>UK: 5,000</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: 6,000</td>
<td>Germany: 5,000</td>
<td>Argentina: 700,000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Belgium: 3,000</td>
<td>Brazil: 500,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other: 8,500</td>
<td>Mexico: 150,000</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Venezuela: 25,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total: 1,491,600</td>
<td>81,500</td>
<td>1,655,000</td>
<td>190,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identity and mission today**

Integrity, wisdom and mission are fruits by which you have been known across the centuries. What light do these three core values offer us for the task of these three days? These values have been central to the expression of your identity and mission since the time of St Maroun.

Integrity requires us to see with the eyes of faith and with an objectivity that is attentive to the challenges and opportunities for Maronite people locally and internationally. These challenges and opportunities concern yourself as a people and your role in the world today.

Wisdom requires us to make decisions and judge in ways which address both the spiritual and temporal dimensions of life calling upon the faith, practical know how, scholarship and cultural resilience of the Maronite people. Maronites’ openness to the know-how, scholarship and cultural insights of other people will be a source of new insights drawn from the international fabric of Maronite life today.

Mission requires us to act in ways which ensure that God’s promise of life and life to the full (John 10:10) is for all people. Maronites’ history, with its Lebanese roots and culturally diverse expressions, tells of your experiences:

- as people of faith astute in the world;
- as both leaders and the oppressed;
• of being the persecuted and the refugee;
• in valuing the scholar, artisan, practitioner;
• of offering and receiving hospitality;

Throughout your history you have been, and you remain, people of hope who, firm in faith, have seen, judged and acted in ways which have opened new pathways for yourselves in your life and mission. Today let your vision move beyond your mission to the Maronites to that of all God’s people. How do you see, judge and act in ways which best serve all the people of God and thus give new expression to Maronite identity and mission today?

These three days you are considering your identity and mission within and across Maronite communities throughout the world. Through listening to and reflecting upon local and global cultures, contexts and issues you form a global set of cells offering life and hope to Maronite people and the world as a whole.

Pope Benedict has declared that:

> Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well. (2007, #48).

So how are we to be sources of hope in our own countries and in the world? Let us think about Australia, host community for World Youth Day and Maronite 08. The Australian community challenges all Catholics or Christians through its individualistic, materialistic, secular and diverse cultures. There is freedom of speech and religion but no formal state religion. As Church we are called to engage with the diverse communities in urban, rural and remote areas. We are to influence community life and public policy through our proclamation and living of the Gospel. Our words and our actions are both paramount. As Church we have opportunities to hear and learn with youth through words, images and actions which, at times, challenge people of older generations. With its youth the church is able to find new expressions of:

• the Gospel virtues of faith, hope and love;
• the role of family and extended families; and
• mission - living the call of the Gospel (cf Matthew) to care and be sources of hope for the sick including those mentally ill, the aged, those injured through aggression and hostilities, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, homeless people, people in prisons and refugees.

As your history shows you have been the refugee, the imprisoned, the homeless seeking hope from others. You have also been the source of hope to others. Central to this hope has been the Maronite gift of hospitality – welcoming the other, the stranger. John Paul II acknowledged Lebanon’s gift of being more than a country. Lebanon “is a message of freedom and an example of pluralism for East and West.”

How does the Maronite Church express this message of freedom and pluralism today and through so doing be a source of hope to the world? Let us reflect upon the place of the ark as a symbol of hope. For Noah the Ark was an inclusive place of refuge (Gen 9); for the people of Israel the Ark of the covenant was a sign of God’s presence and guidance for the people(Gen, Ex); in the Middle East the Phoenician boat brought the alphabet and learning to the wider and more inclusive world; and more recently through the Ark, the Maronite Church in Lebanon shared the relics of Saints Charbel, Rafqa and Nemetallah with Maronite and other communities around the world. These journeys were about moving beyond differences to new and more inclusive communities.

Peter Kearney, an Irish song and hymn writer who lived in Australia for a long time, expressed used the image of the Ark to show the joy of inclusive communities:
All aboard the Ark! No first or second class
Everyone is welcome and the tickets are for free
On board the Ark the slow can join the fast
We’d all be laughing if we had such company.

This Forum is the time and space to experience and express a new and more inclusive Maronite identity today. Rooted historically and structurally in Lebanon while having every day roots and expressions in all continents of the world.

Here lies the problematic. How does the Maronite Church become a Church of hospitality today as it welcomes its people internationally, acknowledges historical and structural roots, encompasses local cultures and contexts, and lives out its mission as Christ in and to the world? Here the fruits of integrity, wisdom and mission are key as you see, judge and act within and across local and international communities today.

The Forum is a unique experience of Maronite hospitality. Pohl claims that “most Christians have lost track of the heritage of hospitality.” This heritage of welcoming the stranger offers the world a timely message of “equality, transformed relations, and a common life”. Go beyond the problematic of collective identity and articulate, for yourselves, the wider church and the world today, the integrity, wisdom and mission in the Maronite heritage of hospitality.