THE CURRENT SITUATION

First of all I would like to thank you for your concern and care about the Christians of the Middle East. We still hope that brotherhood and peace may be strengthened today in the different regions of the Middle East that are stricken by internal strifes and war. Indeed, we know that Christian life is founded on hope. Jesus' words, "do not be afraid" (Mt 10:31), encourage us to be and to remain a sign of hope for all people in those places where God has planted us.

War remains one of the greatest challenges in the Middle East. We believe that, unfortunately, some powers are pushing for tensions. In Iraq, after 10 years, we don’t have security yet. In 2013 alone 6,200 persons were killed. There are daily attacks, explosions, kidnappings and murders. The same scenario is happening in Syria and in Egypt. The Coptic Catholic Patriarch, Sidrak, recently stated that during the past eighteen months more than 100 Egyptian churches have been attacked. In Syria until now 67 churches have been attacked and more than 45000 Christians left the country! Two bishops and 12 nuns in Maalula have been kidnapped. It is a shame for the whole world! Extremist political Islam is growing in the Middle East. This phenomenon remains a serious concern for Christians. Who is behind them? Who is financing them and giving them arms?

During 2013 the sectarian conflict between Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis has dramatically increased. There are two axes of support for this conflict: Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria are supporting the Shiites; Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are supporting the Sunnis. Thousands have been killed, and the unity of the country threatened. Muslims should work toward an agreement and a standing dialogue because intra-Muslim sectarian fighting is a big loss for all. People are dying and the infrastructures are being destroyed.

The security system in many countries is ineffective and unprofessional. The governments are generally incapable of controlling the situation. Following the U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, turmoil swept Iraq destroying it. A period of sectarian violence replaced his dictatorship. Suffering became an everyday struggle for all Iraqis but especially for Christians. Muslims are always strong enough thanks to their tribes. They also have the advantage of living in a country ruled by Islamic law. * (See note
In 1987, the community of Iraqi Christians included over 1.2 million adherents. Today, less than half remain. Even more troubling is that the numbers continue dropping. The United Nations Committee for Refugees recently declared that 850,000 Iraqi Christians have left the country since 2003. Naturally we are worried about our future. The continuing weakening of Christianity in Iraq is not just a tragedy for our country, but for the entire region.

CHRISTIANITY HAS DEEP ROOTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST
Middle Eastern Christianity has its origins in the earliest apostolic period of Christianity, and from its beginnings it has been expressed in the Syriac language and culture. Syriac, which is still widely spoken among Christians in Iraq today and is very close to the Aramaic of Jesus and the early Christian community. Syriac Christianity spread from this region across Asia to Tibet and China, and represents one of the most significant expansions of the faith in history. The cultural, theological and spiritual debt owed to these early Christian missionaries is immense. We should understand this as we witness today the growth of Christianity in Asia. It was in Antioch, which was part of the Roman province of Syria, that the followers of Jesus Christ were first called Christians. Indeed, the Patriarchal See of five churches originated in Antioch (Syrian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Maronites, Greco Orthodox, and Greco catholic Melkite).

THE REASONS WHY CHRISTIANS ARE ATTACKED

1- Sectarian struggle: The conflict between political groups has a negative impact on security. Often Christians are victims of tensions between political blocs. One goal is to force Christians, in effect, into territorial ghettos. I am very concerned, for example, about the political project of the creation of an “independent zone” in the Plain of Nineveh in the north of Iraq. The Nineveh plain is largely surrounded by Arabs and Kurds, and Christians would serve as a useful and undefended buffer zone between the two parts. In my opinion it would be preferable to work at constitutional level to guarantee religious freedom and equal rights for believers of all faiths throughout the land, including Christians, who until very recently lived throughout Iraq. The situation of Christians in Syria is similar.

2- Extremist Islam. Extremist Muslims have nostalgia for an umma (nation) united with the Caliphate. They are afraid that Muslims will lose their morals through modernism and globalization exported by the West. They reject a secular state, or a multicultural society, and other Western values. They pursue their strategy to establish an Islamic state and also a confessional regime: Shiite and Sunni. While there seems to be a confessional conflict between Sunnis and Shites, both agree on certain key goals. Both groups want to live under Islamic (Sharia) law. Both want the efforts of the West for democracy and the creation of a modern regime to be unsuccessful. Opposition to democracy is supported with armies and money from several countries because the prospect of a stable democracy in Iraq disturbs their interests. That prospect also disturbs the neighbors. The Syrian conflict is a model of that problem.
The situation of religious freedom is therefore worsening in both Iraq and Syria, and remains a serious cause for concern. Many individuals from various religious groups are targeted because of their religious identity or their secular leanings.

3- Criminals and Organized Crime: Criminals look for money. Christians are an easy target. They have no militias or tribes to defend them. Because the government is unable to control the whole country, Christians have therefore suffered a lot!

THE POSITION OF THE WEST

The West does not understand the difficulties and fears that Christians are currently experiencing in various countries of the Middle East. Religious radicalism is growing and becoming very aggressive. Religious violence is on the increase across the Middle East, breaking up communities and destroying relations between peoples from different religious traditions. This violence is damaging the very fabric of Middle Eastern societies. Islamist extremists want to take advantage of the current situation (that is, the anarchy in several regions) in order to empty the Christian presence in the Middle East, as if it were an obstacle for their plans. There are countries that do not want the so-called "Arab Spring" democracy. Freedom is dangerous to them.

The West has to open its eyes to see both the fears and the hopes that animate the Christians and minorities in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. Most Christians ask: what is the guarantee that we will be able to stay alive, not to be killed or expelled from our countries sooner or later? How can we achieve safety and a brighter future? These are the challenges and the crucial questions.

Unfortunately, some countries of the West are encouraging the emigration of Christians. Each month several families (about 10 persons a day) who are in a good economic situation leave for good. Many young Christians, especially those who are well educated, are leaving Iraq. This is an immense loss for those who stay. It is an immense loss for Iraqi culture and politics.

So we are hoping for more positive steps from the West that will change the situation for the better and increase the well-being of the Iraqi people and the other countries in Middle East. We earnestly hope that it is still possible to achieve a harmonious way of living together -- perhaps to establish a criterion of citizenship that enables all to be integrated, regardless of religion or ethnicity, and based on the idea that all people are created equal. We need a way to help Muslims to reconcile Islam with citizenship based on full equality. A secular positive (respecting religions) state that entails cooperation between religious and political leaders would be the ideal one. The West must help our countries to respect human rights, and in particular religious freedom, as they are respected in the West.

It is worthwhile noting that today many millions of Syriac Christians (Malabareses and Malankareses) have lived in India since the first Christian centuries. These Syriac Christians, linked to Iraqi Christians by faith and ecclesial communion, contribute greatly to India, a vast and populous country with many religions, a democratic system, and a secular constitution. There religious freedom helps to sustain the relations between majority Hindus and Muslims and Christians minorities.

In Iraq, it is vital that the government, the police, the army, the courts and all institutions uphold the law and maintain order among all citizens. The education
system should stress national unity, eliminating from school programs, books and religious institutions, the expressions that incite hatred and violence, or the marginalization of one religious group as opposed to others. We still hope that the situation will change and security will return.

THE HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MUSLIM CULTURE

The current situation is all the more tragic because Christianity has its roots in the Middle East. In Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, Christians were a majority well before of the arrival of Islam. They were well organized. At the time of the Arab conquest, in Dar al-Islam (the land of Islam) the “People of the Book” (Jews and Christians) were tolerated and treated as religious minorities under the protection of Islam (dhimmis). They were recognized as believers in God despite their refusal to accept the prophet Muhammad. Adult males were thus not required to convert, although that option was always open to them, but had to pay a poll tax (djizya) as the price for this protection. Moreover, certain conditions, like the obligation to wear distinctive dress, were eventually imposed on the Christians. In Islam’s second century, the laws became more stringent.

The early Umayyad period was marked by an open and tolerant attitude towards Christians. One of the main reasons might have been that the Muslims needed the Christians’ administrative and economic knowledge as well as the experience to rule and organize the newly conquered territories. St John of Damascus, for example, was one of the earliest and most influential Christian theologians of Islam. He and his father are believed to have served as administrators in the Umayyad caliphate. John, a saint of the Catholic Church, was educated in arithmetic, geometry, theology, music, and astronomy. In 1883 he was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII. In the attitude of Muslims towards Christians, however, very soon one can sense a certain ambivalence for social and political reasons. At times, the Muslims were more open and tolerant, at times more aggressive and even oppressive. This ambivalence is easily justified by different Koranic verses. The Abbasid period inaugurated a time of wide and fertile cultural exchange as a consequence of the spread of the Arabic language. Commissioned by the caliphs (Bayt al-Hikma - house of wisdom) Christians, primarily from the Syriac tradition, undertook huge systematic translations - especially in the fields of science, philosophy, and medicine - from Greek via Syriac into Arabic.

In this way knowledge of the Greco-Roman world was made available as one of the foundations for the development of the Arab-Islamic culture. The transmission of the great classics to Islamic civilization expanded the intellectual possibilities of the Muslim world. In addition, it contributed significantly to the flowering of Western political and religious thought. Christians in the Middle East continue to seek this role in acting as a bridge in the vital, and necessary, dialogue between the West and Islam today.

Not only clerics produced literature, but also educated laypersons and physicians. Among them were the famous Bokhtisho, a Christian physician at the school of Medicine in Gundishapur, who served the caliphs. These authors were theologians at
the same time. The Arabs used the term: "'elm al Kalam," which means the science of speaking about God (Theology). There are also texts written in Syriac which were mainly intended for Christians to use within their own communities, encouraging them in their faith and helping them to respond to certain questions and objections raised by Muslims. Those written in Arabic presented Christian dogmas and morals to Muslims. Some of them are of an apologetic nature, and others are clearly polemical. Today many Muslims do not know the history of Christians in the religious and intellectual formation of Islamic civilization. It is vital that this positive moment in Christian-Muslim relations become better known, and its significance to Islam better understood.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, after having contributed to the development of the Arab and Persian cultures, Christians and Muslims lived in a common cultural world in which they shared both values and achievements. During the Ottoman period the focus of discussion was on the application of the Millet-system (indicating non Muslim groups) as a new concept defining the status of non-Muslim religious communities. The Millet-system had a very profound impact on the identity of the various Christian communities. It left lasting marks on the minds of the people and even on institutions. Many problems which Christians face today in the Islamic world cannot be understood if one does not take into account the experience of the Millet-system, which has survived in one or other way in modern states with a Muslim majority. Its real impact remains ambiguous and needs further research.

For the important issue of the relations between Christians and Muslims in our times, it is worthwhile to take into account the experience of the past and the present Syriac communities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and India who developed a form of encounter with their Muslim neighbours in the field of dialogue, Christian witness, coexistence and cooperation. It is hoped that this long tradition may help the Syriac Christians to preserve their rich heritage and continue to offer their unique contributions to their respective cultures.

We must not forget that Syriac Christianity is the fourth cultural pillar of the early Christian tradition, along with Hebrew, Latin and Greek. As such, the continued repression of the Syriac tradition would be deeply detrimental to Christianity as a global religion.

But Syriac Christianity is also vital to the health of the Muslim-majority nations of the Middle East. It, along with all the other Christian cultures of the contemporary Middle East, lend to the region its plurality and diversity. The loss of Christianity from the Middle East would fundamentally alter the contours of culture and society in nations such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. It would deal a severe blow to any hope of pluralism and democracy.

Remember that when the Jews left much of the Middle Eastern region in the decades after the Second World War the relationship between Jews and Muslims was fundamentally altered. This is also true for Christian relations with Islam. A Christian exodus from the Middle East such as this would have an impact of historic proportions on Muslim-Christian relations.

In sum, Christians are an integral part of the national Arab tissue. They have contributed to the achievement of the Arab-Islamic civilization alongside their fellow
Muslims. It is in the interests of the region, the West, and the entire international community that they remain in the Middle East as citizens enjoying full equality under the law, and therefore in a position to continue as major contributors to their respective cultures.

HOW CAN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS LIVE PEACEFULLY TOGETHER?

The Role of Religious authorities:

Religious authorities in the Middle East have a unique, irreplaceable role in unifying people. There is a vital need for religious groups to work together in promoting a culture of dialogue and peace in tangible ways, and a culture of recognition of the other who is different, because “God created us different.” We must attain a broad acceptance and respect for human dignity, as well as the values of citizenship and coexistence. The religious discourse must defend the rights of all people and the sanctity of all life.

It is simply unacceptable that an Iraqi imam called on his fellow Muslims not to greet non-Muslims. Such a culture cannot stand!!

The government

The Iraqi government, in all its departments and sections, needs to be united and to collaborate in positive ways to provide security and protection of religious freedom and ethnic diversity, as well as to promote reconciliation and social cohesion between all the Iraqi people.

The “Culture of Peace” must be a culture of “mutual care.” All citizens should exchange ideas and proposals about concrete actions to strengthen dialogue, build trust, spread a culture of peace, and to promote the values of human dignity, human rights, citizenship, conviviality, religious freedom and democracy.

Christian role:

For their part, Christians in the Middle East should try to hold fast to their ancient homelands, maintain their historic presence and not flee to the West. They have to be brave enough to continue their witness in their particular countries. At the same time, they must permit their difficulties and suffering to be a real sign of hope and peace for their fellow citizens. All nations should encourage Middle Eastern Christians to continue to be involved and active in the cultures, social work and policies of their respective countries, and not to be afraid to claim their civil rights and equality of citizenship. This important goal was emphasized by Pope Francis when, in receiving the Oriental patriarchs at the Vatican on November 21, said that the Roman Catholic Church “would not accept” a Middle East without Christians “who often finds themselves forced to flee areas of conflict and unrest in the region”.

So, I repeat, the time has come to move from tolerance to religious freedom and full
citizenship.

In this respect, let me quote Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI from his Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in Medio Oriente: "Religious tolerance exists in a number of countries, but it does not have much effect since it remains limited in its field of action. There is a need to move beyond tolerance to religious freedom. Taking this step does not open the door to relativism, as some would maintain. It does not compromise belief, but rather calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between man, religion and God. It is not an attack on the “foundational truths” of belief, since, despite human and religious divergences, a ray of truth shines on all men and women. We know very well that truth, apart from God, does not exist as an autonomous reality. If it did, it would be an idol. The truth cannot unfold except in an otherness open to God, who wishes to reveal his own otherness in and through my human brothers and sisters".

As for us, we Christians have to find answers to the questions of Muslims as our fathers did during the Ummayad and Abbasid periods. Such an undertaking can help the Church to look for a new methodology and a new and more comprehensible theological language in Arabic to help Christians and Muslims to understand our faith and the importance of religious freedom to every person and every society. I suggest that the Church produce a new document addressed only to Muslims. It is important to clarify with them both our fears and our hopes. Among other things, this document should explain, in language compatible with Islam, the magnificent doctrine of religious freedom as it is articulated in Dignitatis Humanae, the Declaration on Religious Freedom from the Second Vatican Council. It is of course also critical that the moderate voices of Islam rise right away to say “no” to violence against Christians. The time has come for moderate Muslims, who constitute the majority of Muslims, to start promoting civil harmony and religious freedom in their societies. They must prove to the world through deeds that Islam is not a religion of "terror and killing" of innocent civilians. The majority of the Muslim population is good and not violent. They do not agree with the extremists but they are also afraid to react publicly. In short, I invite our Muslim friends in the Middle East to bring a common action toward “a Common Word.”

**CONCLUSION: WHAT MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETIES WILL LOSE IF CHRISTIANS FLEE**

The emigration of Christians is a loss with great historical significance for Muslims. If Christians flee the Middle East, they take with them their openness, their culture, their qualifications, and their commitment to religious freedom. It is important for both Christians and Muslims to work together to determine the future shape of their societies and countries in the midst of the seismic political changes rocking the region. They have to build, little by little, a new model of society in the Middle East. The changes are very dramatic and occurring very fast. Muslims and Christians must face them together, with courage and hope.

Christians are important for the Middle East because of their culture, high levels of education, skills, their spirit of cooperation and their institutions like schools, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged and poor, as well as their economic
enterprise and small businesses. Many Muslims do appreciate their presence and contribution. Many understand that Christians are a guarantee for a better future for Muslims.

Attempts to repress Christians, or to cause them to flee their respective homelands in the Middle East, where they have lived for centuries, is a great crime against them, a blow to national unity, and a big loss for Muslims. A Middle East without Christians loses its beautiful multi-identity. We Christians are trying to remain in our homelands because we are committed to love each other.

But Christians are also educated to live in freedom and peace. From where there is no freedom and peace they leave in search of a shelter to educate their children and also to live their faith freely. Those remaining of course feel much more vulnerable now. And, if we are isolated, we are incapable of doing anything. But when we are united all together, then we will be a stronger Church and we will have an impact.

Middle Eastern Christians have long lived with different kinds of oppression. Establishing freedom and democracy takes time and education. A separation between government and religion is especially important. Democracy cannot function if Islam is not updated. We must work together for a civilian state in which the only criterion is citizenship grounded in full equality under the law.

Muslim religious leaders should get involved in dialogue to build a multicultural and multi-religious society and reduce inter-religious tensions and conflicts so as to build true coexistence. Sectarian and provocative speeches do not help humanity’s development and are contrary to the universal religious Christmas message of ‘Peace on earth’.

Because we are all created by God, each of us carries a heritage that profoundly links us all. Middle Eastern countries need a cultural and social model that promotes unity through pluralism, religious freedom and harmonious coexistence among various religious and ethnic groups. Closure is a sign of death, openness is a sign of growth and integration. Religions must act in a positive manner. They must orientate people to end the climate of hatred.

In conclusion, let me make a few recommendations. The West and the international community should increase their efforts to assist the Muslim nations of the Middle East in modernizing Islam’s approach to religious freedom. As part of these efforts, the West and the international community should work to convince Muslim nations that their repression and persecution of their minority Christian communities is not only harming the Christians, but is harming the societies themselves. All should work to stop the mortal exodus that afflicts the Christian community and the entire Middle East.

Note: Christians and other minority groups have been worn down by a worsening security situation. Since 2003 to date, more than 1000 Christians have been killed in Iraq, others have been kidnapped and tortured, some have been released only after the payment of a high ransom and 62 churches and monasteries have been attacked.