

## CRONICHE OF THE MEETING

*By Ignacio Fernández Mendoza, C.M.  
Vicar General*

The gathering took place from July 26th until August 6, 1999 in the residence of Our Lady of the Mountain, situated in Fatqa, on top of a hill that has an altitude of 450 meters, 25 Kilometers to the north of Beirut. From this mountain top, one can appreciate the beautiful view of the sea coast and the growing urban expansion that could be seen to the north of the capital of this country.

A total of 104 persons participated. Fifty four stayed at the Our Lady of the Mountain Hospitality Center and 50 attended the sessions while living elsewhere.. Fifty Vincentian missionaries, 42 Daughters of Charity and 12 Vincentian Lay people participated in the gathering. Present at the gathering were 13 C.M. Provinces plus the general curia of the C.M. as well as Daughters of Charity from the Motherhouse and 18 Provinces and Regions. The Missionaries came from some 17 countries, while the Daughters of Charity from 18 and the Vincentian Laity were from Lebanon. A Patriarch, His Beatitude Stephanos Gathas, C.M., three Visitors, Fathers G. Bou Jaoudé, F. Kangler, and M. Ginete, and Sister Eva Saad, Visitatrix of the Province of the Middle East. The Superior General was represented by Fathers Ignacio Fernández Mendoza, Vicar General and Victor Bieler, Assistant for the Missions.

For special reasons and taking into account some suggestions from various Provinces and some individual confreres, the Superior General and his council chose to convoke a gathering dedicated to Islam. At first, the thought was that only the Vincentian confreres would participate. Later, the need was discovered to open the doors to the Daughters of Charity and also to include the Lay Vincentians. A committee composed of Fathers Victor Bieler, George Bou Jaoudé, Franz Kangler, Roberto Lovera, and Jean Landousies, were given the mandate to prepare and convoke the Gathering.

During the 24th and 25th of July, Saturday and Sunday, various Vincentian missionaries and Daughters arrived in Beirut and were received into their respective Provincial Houses of the Vincentians and Daughters. July 25th, in the morning, a considerable group of confreres concelebrated the Eucharist in the Provincial House of the Daughters of Charity. Fr. Naoum Atallah, C.M. was the president. In the evening of that same day, with the arrival of almost all of the participants in Beirut, we traveled by bus to the Welcome Center, which is the property of the Marinate Sisters of the Holy Family. The Center is a modern and spacious building, fully equipped for this type of gathering.

On the 26th, we began the sessions as planned. Father Ignacio Fernández Mendoza was the principal concelebrant. Father Ignacio, in his homily spoke of Saints

Joachim and Ann, saints of the day, and he asked that all the participants consider the Gathering on Islam as a time for personal formation. The fact is that believers of various religions have to live together on this planet. As Christians, we cannot be content to simply live shoulder to shoulder with the Moslems. Today, reflection and study are indispensable to interpret adequately religious pluralism and to act in accordance with our Christian faith and live together with believing Moslems in a spirit of freedom and mutual respect.

Once gathered in the meeting room, Father George Bou Jaoudé, Visitor of the Province of the East, gave the welcoming address to the participants of the Gathering. He mentioned that all the participants live in direct or indirect relationship with Islam. He invited all the participants to take into account this reality. In Lebanon, he noted, there are three religions that believe in one God, Christians, Moslems and Jews. Normally they have lived in harmony, but there have been times of misunderstandings and even conflict. At this present time, the current law of Lebanon recognizes 18 religious entities, all of them represented in the National Parliament. The dialogue between Christians and Moslems began many centuries ago. It has been a dialogue of daily life and contact among persons of various cultures and religions. Christians give testimony of their faith while living on this earth in the midst of the Moslem world. Bishop Antonio Maria Veglio, Papal Nuncio spoke words of greeting to the participants. He considered very important this Gathering of the Vincentian Family, organized to reflect on the relation between Christians and Moslems.

The first conference was given by Georges Massouh, an orthodox priest, who, taking into account that the great majority of the participants in the gathering knew only superficially the complex reality of the Moslem world, offered a global vision of Islam. He highlighted the historic figure of Mohammed, the origins of the Koran and its relationship to certain biblical personages, the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity, the existence of groups within Islam and finally, the beliefs and religious practices of the Moslems. The conference provoked many questions and answers.

On that afternoon and the following second day, father Hans Voking was scheduled to give a dissertation on the different ideas in contemporary Islam and on the missionary commitment of Islam. However, this session was not realized because the speaker did not travel to Lebanon. The 26th, in the afternoon, Fathers G. Bou Jaoudé, V. Bieler, y R. Lovera occupied the podium. The Missionaries and the Daughters of Charity, organized in groups according to places where they presently work, dedicated two sessions to present to the participants some personal data, the ministries they are involved in and their pastoral relation to the Moslems. The representatives of the various countries participated in the following order: Algiers, Tunis, Morocco, Indonesia, Philippines, Austria-Turkey, Lebanon, Belgium, Spain, France, England, Italy-Albania, Eslovania, Mozambique and Cameroon. In general, the Daughters of Charity are involved in social services and "hands on" promotion of the poor. The Vincentian Missionaries are involved more frequently in learning centers open to Christians and Moslems. It was brought out that the Moslem

population in Europe is more numerous now. The local churches have to take seriously this new challenge to respond pastorally to this reality that is affecting all Europe at the end of this millennium and the beginning of the new millennium. We must mention in this report the valuable presence of the Vincentian Province of Austria. Seven confreres participated, among them was Father F. Kangler, who ordinarily resides in Istanbul.

Brother D.A., C.M. gave an account of his encounter with Christianity. He related one by one the steps which led him to faith in Jesus Christ. His path was full of many difficulties. Deacon Ch. K also gave public testimony of his motives for embracing Christianity and later entering the Congregation of the Mission. In both cases, the good example of certain persons were the reasons for their entering the Christian faith.

It was a sunny day on the 27th. The gathering had begun generating much interest. Some more, some less, but all were interested in listening to today's presentations on the relation between Islam and Christianity.

Mr. Hisham Nashabe presented a brilliant conference entitled: "Testimony of a Believing Moslem Concerning his Own Faith and His Vision of Christianity". He expressed his personal relationship with the Christian faith since his early childhood. He frequented learning centers run by Catholics and also by Protestants. His own father being a Moslem, taught him to respect and appreciate the positive values of Christianity. During the conference, he pointed out the basic tenets of the Moslem faith, the relation of the Koran with Christianity, mutual similarities and differences, the agreeable attitudes of the Christians and Moslems in order to live together; namely: tolerance, respect, daily collaboration, and finally, a decisive interest in a clear ethic and the achieving of peace. The dialogue that continued after the conference was characterized for its clarity, its frankness, and even in some questions for its daring boldness. The questions direct toward the speaker focused on some hot issues such as: the relations between Christians and Moslems, how to understand tolerance and religious liberty, possible conversions, state religion, fundamentalism, the status of the woman in Islam, and the rights of all people. Some questions were asked about revelation and mission such as they are understood in Islam. Many doctrinal and practical themes of Islam were clarified. Of particular interest was the vision that a believing and practicing Moslem has of Christianity. The doctrinal contents of Islam and Christianity at times did not identify with the historical realities. At various times, economic and political interests have obscured the truth of Islam and Christianity. The religion of love, Christianity, at times has manifested itself as a religion of violence.

Fr. Jean Landousies, C.M. in the first session of the afternoon offered an excellent synthesis of Islam. He referred to: the three modalities of present Islam-Popular Islam, Radical Islam and Modern Islam; the different readings of the Koran-traditional, scientific, and political; the presence of Moslems in Europe and its missionary dimension on European soil. He made reference also to the challenges that

Islam has to confront right now- fidelity to the past and modern times; revelation and religious liberty; concept of one God and the Theocratic state. As usual, in the dialogue following the conference, many questions threw much light on the subject.

Many religious dignitaries came to the place of the gathering to give their support. His Beatitude Stephanos II Ghattas, C.M., Patriarch of Alexandria for the Coptic Catholics, was present in the gathering from the beginning until the end. Bishop Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem was also present., as well as Bishop Paul Bassim, Apostolic Vicar for the Latin Rite in Lebanon. He arrived on July 27th to greet the participants. Their presence showed the importance of the topic that was being discussed.

July 28th began with the concelebrated Eucharist presided by Fr. Manuel Ginete, Visitor of the Philippines. The liturgical songs in the liturgy was another manifestation of the international flavor of this gathering.

Fr. Yves Danjou gave a conference on St. Vincent and Islam. He alluded to the situation of the Moslems in the time of Saint Vincent with relation to Europe and the politics followed by the European countries with relation to the Moslem world. In particular, he referred to the missionary initiatives of Saint Vincent. The presenter corroborated his own point of view with various Vincentian texts. The missionary project of St. Vincent with regard to Moslems was the same as Jesus Christ: act first and teach later.

During the rest of the morning on the 28th, and the two sessions of the afternoon, Missionaries and Daughters of Charity presented their pastoral activities that they carry out in relation to the Moslems. For reasons of brevity, allow me to simply name and comment briefly on the groups that made presentations. The Province of the East of the Daughters of Charity, which consists of Lebaon, Siria, Iran, Palestine, and Egypt. In general, the Daughters of Charity concentrate their activities in social assistance, education, health, and feminine promotion. The political and social circumstances as well as freedom vary quite a bit in all the countries mentioned.

The Daughters of Charity of the Province of North Africa are present in Tunis, Algiers, and Mauritania. In Algiers there is a community of C.M. missionaries. Although geographically close to one another, each of the three countries has its own flavor and culture. Tunis has a western culture, while Algiers faces the battle between fidelity to the past and dialogue with modern times. Mauritania is affected by the extreme poverty within the life of its country. Taking into account the deep rootedness of Islam and the minority presence of the Church, the Daughters of Charity have opted, in pastoral practice, for a path that passes through simple relationship with the poor, for patient presence and witness, for the exercise of disinterested charity and for discretion, far from any ostentation. In this way the encounter with Islam remains favorable, while awaiting what the Lord has foreseen in his divine providence.

The Sisters coming from the European countries of England, France and Spain also gave witness. Islam has entered the doors of Europe and is already found in our midst. They strongly alluded to the difficulties of all kind which the Muslims encounter at the time of adapting to the European culture and society.

The Daughters of Charity offer much material help. The Daughters of Austria maintain strong pastoral relations with Islam. Our Austrian confreres, through their concern for the Moslems in Austria, and through their educational ministry in Istanbul, find themselves at the top of the list of Vincentian European Provinces in regard to this pastoral relationship with the Moslems.

July 29th, according to the program, the participants in the gathering left for certain places that had special significance in Lebanon. The day offered two complimentary possibilities: the tourist part and the academic part. The latter consisted in making contact with the Christian and Moslem realities of the country. In the morning, the group crossed Beirut and climbed the mountain range that separates the capital from the interior valley, visited ruins of Baalbek in the valley of Bekaa, situated between the mountain range of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. The highest point of Lebanon is Mord at 3,087 meters high. The highest point of Anti-Lebanon is Hermon, which reaches an altitude of 2,900 meters, forming the frontier to the south of the country between Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

We had a meeting with Bishop Boulos Mounded El Aachem, Maronite Bishop of Baalbeck and Deir-el-Ahma and president of the Episcopal Commission for Dialogue with Islam, in representation of the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon (APECL). Ulema Cheith Khalil Shoucoir of Baalbek and of Bekaa participated in the meeting. Both the Bishop and the Ulema expressed their own points of view with regard to the relation between Christians and Moslems. Afterwards, they responded to the questions asked by many. The meeting had a high ecumenical value. At this moment, the representatives of the two communities, Christians and Moslems, make a great effort at mutual understanding and peace.

The meal took place in a restaurant in Ainata, in the open air and very near the spring which bears the same name. It is the source of the fresh and abundant waters which make fruitful on a large scale the fertile lands of the Bekaa. The diners appreciated the beauty of the place and took the opportunity to share the typical food of the country in a climate of happiness and joy. In the afternoon the group went back to Fatqa, passing again the summit of the mountain chain of Lebanon, to visit the Valley of the Saints, where the Maronite community established itself in olden times and where, up to this day, many monasteries continue to radiate spiritual life.

In the afternoon, the group returned to Fatqa, and later visited the "Valley of the Saints" in which the Maronite community had been established in the past and where still the monasteries continue to radiate their spiritual life.

On July 30th, Fr. Samir Khalil, S.J., a professor at the St. Joseph University in

Beirut and at the Easter Institute of Rome, spoke in the two morning sessions about an important theme. He spoke about: Monotheism and Trinity: God and man in Christianity and Islam, and its implications in society. He divided his presentation in two parts: the vision of God and the consequences in the society, family, politics, and culture. The Jews, Moslems and Christians adore the one and only God, creator. However the presentation of God differs in each one of the three monotheistic groups. The three groups maintain some kind of relation with the Bible, even though the conclusions are divergent for the most part. The speaker presented the vision of God proper to Jews, Christians and Moslems. The Moslems manifest that their religion is simple while Christianity is very complicated. He gave special importance to the necessity of interpreting again the mysteries of our faith, starting with the presentation of God as love and interpreting the Trinity, creation, and redemption. At the conclusion of his conference, the speaker gave answers to the questions: What do the Moslems mean when they say that Islam is a perfect religion? What influence has Christianity had in the Koran? How do the Moslems understand revelation? Is dialogue between Christianity and Islam possible?

In the second part, Fr. Samir referred to the political consequences that come from the vision of God in Christianity and Islam. He alluded to the concepts of the human person, family, freedom, democracy, tolerance, and sin. From the Trinitarian vision of God flows the diverse interpretations with regard to the behavior in the practical life of Christians as well as Moslems. Finally, in the second part, the speaker focused his attention on the consequences for Christians and Moslems the presence of 20 million Moslems in Europe. Both religions will benefit if the European Christians achieve the values of modern life, without leaving behind their own Christian identity.

In the two afternoon sessions, the representatives of various countries, confreres, sisters and laity, gave presentations on the pastoral activities that they realize in their respective countries highlighting of course their relationship with the Moslems. A Vincentian layperson from Lebanon spoke first. The affiliates value their Vincentian spirituality, permanent formation, mission apostolate and personal testimony which are of major importance in the presence of the Moslems. Fr. Kangler gave information about the ministries of the Vincentian Family in Istanbul: Saint George High School and Peace Hospital. We also heard reports about Albania, and especially about the work of the Daughters of Charity of the Province of Turin. Fr. Luigi Cannato spoke about the Vincentian mission in Preshen, which pertains to the Province of Naples and in part to the provinces of Turin and Rome. The reports continued with Daughters and Confreres from Indonesia, Daughters from Eritrea, Fr. Manuel Velo from Mozambique, Daughters from the Philippines and Italy. At the end of this session, a representative from the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Lebanon described the charitable activities of the laity and their relation to Islam. Fr. Fady Basil from Province of the Mid East spoke about the "Journee Romaines Movement" which foments dialogue between Christians and Moslems. In general, all the reports referred to the historical and social situation of Christians and Moslems in the respective countries. Many questions were asked and in a charitable dialogue, much light was thrown on the inter-religious topic.

The 31st of July, Fr. Emilio Platti, O.P. gave a conference entitled: "Inspiration and revelation in the Bible and Koran". The Koran incorporated many elements of the Biblical Tradition. Mohammed was born and grew up in the middle of a multi religious environment influenced by Jewish and Christian currents. From an accumulation of intertwined doctrines, he arrived to formulate with clarity, some conclusions related to one God, eschatology, prophetism, justice, solidarity and commandments which proceed in a certain way from the biblical message. These mandates manifest without a doubt, the will of God.

Fr. Platti continued with a presentation of these mandates, especially, those of the Koran considered valid in all times and places. Islam keeps a close relation with Judaism because of the frequent mention of the Biblical Patriarchs in the Koran. Finally, the Koran will end up looking at itself and rejecting all relation with the Torah. The Koran, with all its contents, comes down directly from God without the need of human intervention. Removing all possible intervention between God and man, the Koran distances itself from Christianity given that in the Koran, the mission of Jesus is a little less than anecdotal. All the allusions to Jesus' divine sonship, his role as mediator and redeemer are lacking.

The 31st in the afternoon we visited the caves of Delta. Situated a short distance from Beirut. We were impressed by this cave, one of the wonders of the world. After the visit, we proceeded to the shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon. This shrine is today one of the focal points of Christianity. Each year, thousands of Christians and Moslems go there to venerate the Virgin Mary. His Beatitude, Stephanos II Ghattas, C.M. presided at the concelebrated liturgy. In his homily he spoke of the missionary vocation of Saint Justin de Jacobis which was being celebrated this very day, July 31st in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The calendar indicated the start of the month of August. Early on the first day, Sunday, after the Eucharist, the participants went to the south of Lebanon. From the bus windows, we could appreciate the view of the Mediterranean Coast and an uninterrupted succession of cities with their old and new buildings. Lebanon has quickly recovered from the destruction caused by the last war. We stopped in the ancient city of Sidon. Different cultures and people have left their mark here, especially the Phoenicians, Crusades and Arabs. The gospel puts Jesus here during one of his stays in a foreign land.

The second place visited was the shrine of Our Lady of Maghdouche, situated on a hill top from which one can see the city of Sidon and among other sights, a camp of Palestinian refugees. This is the second shrine that the Lebanese Christians frequently visit. Having sung the Salve Regina and having prayed to the Virgin for peace in Lebanon, we continued on our journey toward Tyre. This city is located at the southern coast of the Lebanese territory, near the Israeli frontier. We observed the roman and Byzantine ruins. Unfortunately, this area still suffers the tensions of war. We could hear the bombs going off inside of the territory of Lebanon. We had lunch

at Mounes Hotel Restaurant where we watched a presentation of the folklore of the region. A group of youth presented traditional music and typical dance.

The next stop was to have a meeting in Chark Saida with Sélin Ghazal of the Greek-Catholic church, superior general of the Salvatorians and member of the Episcopal Commission for dialogue with Moslems. Fouad Saad, local leader in charge of the Sunite Moslems, also participated in this meeting. Both put forward their interest and what they are doing to bring about peace and respect between Christians and Moslems. They emphasized the need for understanding among all. We left this meeting happily surprised at the ecumenical understanding that is being reached between the leaders of Christians and Moslems.

August 2nd, we moved on to the second part of the gathering. In the meetings, we could sense the revitalization of our Vincentian ministry within the Moslem world. It intended to help us become more creative in our ministry which puts us in contact with Islam. It pretended to give a new thrust to the mission and to the social services for the poor.

Fr. Khaled Alkasheh, Jordanian by birth, member of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue spoke in the first session of the morning about the Theology of Inter-religious Dialogue. He began by congratulating the Vincentian Family for having convoked this gathering. He affirmed that it is important to know the theological basis for inter-religious dialogue. Religious plurality, marked by globalization has given rise to a huge crisis in all the world. Hence, there is a need for the church to set the inter-religious dialogue on firm bases. How can we evaluate the theological contents of various religions? What is the starting point for a catholic who wants to establish contact with other religions? Here are some points to take into account: There is only one God and Creator. Human beings, created in the image of God, have the possibility of entering into contact with God. The ultimate horizon of all human beings is God. Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and all people. His death and resurrection is situated in the middle of all paths of humanity. The church has received the mandate to proclaim Jesus Christ to all so that all believing people will arrive to eternal life.

The speaker referred also to the salvific value of all religions. As bearers of such values, we have to affirm that the fullness of truth is found in the revelation whose presenter is Jesus Christ. Prayer is the way to enter into constructive dialogue among all religions. Through prayer, we enter into contact with God and at the same time, we find ourselves in an environment of listening and encounter with those who profess a creed different than ours. Among the questions directed to the speaker were doctrinal and practical problems which directly affect dialogue with Muslims.

Later, Fr. Khaled offered questions for group discussion and plenary session. There were three questions: Is it necessary to develop the theological reflection among religions in order to activate a true dialogue with Moslems? What is the relationship between theology and spirituality of dialogue? Is it possible to individualize some

elements of Vincentian spirituality that facilitates dialogue with the Moslems? These questions animated much reflection and group discussion. Inter-religious dialogue is a demand derived from the paternity of God. The Vincentian Spirituality have elements that facilitate inter-religious dialogue: the five virtues, the sense of Divine Providence, and spiritual poverty.

In the second and last session of the afternoon, Fr. Khaled Akasheh informed all about the purpose and activities of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. He referred especially to contact with the Moslems. There are more meetings with them. It is better to move slowly but with a firm base. Mutual knowledge and friendship is growing day by day. Dialogue has built bridges between the Moslems of the Mid East and North of Africa without forgetting the Moslems of the United States and Europe. He ended by saying that dialogue with Moslems is difficult but necessary.

On August 2nd, in the afternoon, we went to St. Joseph's College in Antoura which has 4,000 students in the primary and secondary schools. After visiting the site, we joined the confreres on the terrace for the supper they has so carefully prepared. In this chronicle we want to express our gratitude for their fraternal welcome.

On the 3rd of August, the reflection centered around the concrete pastoral commitments relating to the Moslems. What to do here and now? How to act in the midst of the Moslem world? His Beatitude Stephanos II Ghattas, C.M., manifested his joy at having participated in the gathering. He affirmed that he has never abandoned St. Vincent as his preferred saint and to feel part of the Vincentian Family. He proposed various preliminary observations. In the Mid-East, the Moslems adopt two divergent attitudes: the fundamentalist and the law. The first has as its end the establishment of a Moslem state ruled by Islamic law. The second promotes nationalism, relegating to a second place religious motivations. Both strains are involved in mutual battle. On the other side, the division among Christians inhibits for the most part the dialogue with brother Moslems. That is why union of the Churchs is urgent in order to avoid permanent scandal in front of Islam. The Catholic Church, continued the Patriarch, should continue to take responsibility for the various developmental works: education, culture, health and social development. A climate of fraternal communion with the Muslims is created through these works, open to all without distinction. At present, the Church of the Middle East needs Christian leaders in the area of culture, priests who are well trained and a renewed pastoral program. It should be the concern of all the Christians of these local churches to be the light and salt in the midst of a Muslim world. The works of service to the poor are very important in this part of the world. The civilization of love should be put into effect in concrete works. It is necessary, moreover, to renew on the part of Christians the sense of belonging to these nations of the Middle East, in which Providence had placed them and where it is their duty to give continuously a true witness of faith in Jesus Christ, while awaiting for the coming of the Lord.

Fr. Antopnius Abrimantrono, C.M., described n great detail the historical and

present situation of Indonesia, especially the relation between the Moslem majority and the Christians. In spite of the recent incidences in the last couple of years, the dialogue continues in two directions, academic and through daily life.

Fr. Landousies, C.M. formulated various questions for the groups to discuss. Given what we have heard in this encounter, What do you consider to be the most important for you as a missionary in the midst of the Moslem world? Do you think it is necessary to direct to the Superior General of the double Family some suggestions in reference to the mission in general and the formation?

Fr. Khaled Akasheh enumerate the church documents dealing with relations with other religions, especially the Moslems. Among the Conciliar documents cited, he made reference to: *Nostra Aetate*, *Dignitatis Humanae*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*. Among the Encyclicals, *Redemptoris Missio*, *Veritatis Splendor*, and *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*.

According to the calendar, it was already August 4. The meeting was almost over. We had only one morning to drawing some conclusions in regard to the academic portion and the practical business.

His Beatitude Stephanos II Ghattas presided at the concelebrated Eucharist in the rite of Saint Basil in use among the Coptic Catholics. It is a liturgical rite rich in prayers and in the use of symbols. To those of us who belong to the Roman Rite, which is stereotyped nowadays, we were pleasantly surprised by the frequent interchange of prayers among the main celebrant, the deacon and the people.

During the morning session, the secretary of each one of the six groups read to the assembly the conclusions and suggestions of the previous afternoon's meeting. The conclusions, and suggestions referred to four areas. All the groups commented about the positive results of the meeting and considered it a moment of grace. Despite the difficulties in opening dialogue with the Moslems, the group has decided to follow with discretion, patience and a high sense of Christian gratitude praying for the Moslems and appreciating their positive values. The suggestions referred to the future of the Vincentian presence in the Moslem world and in particular, the missionary activity and social service orientation. Finally, the groups asked that they continue to receive information and formation about Islam. It was suggested that the conclusions and suggestions be drawn up and published in a future edition of *Vincentiana*.

The gathering ended with a brief allocution from the Vicar General, who, in the name of the Superior General, thanked the members of the commission in charge of organizing and conducting the gathering, the team of translators and all present. In my name, in the name of all the participants, we want to express our sincere thanks to the Vincentian Missionaries of the Province of the East, in particular to Fr. Bou Jaoudé, Provincial, and to the Daughters of Charity, for their warm hospitality. We send our thanks also to the Maronite Sisters of the Holy Family and their colleagues.

August 5th was spent in contact with the reality of the country and in particular of the local church. Early in the morning, all went to the residence of the Maronite Patriarch and Cardinal, His Blessedness J. Sfeir. The Patriarch presided at the Eucharist celebrated in the Maronite rite. In his homily, he highlighted the historical reality of the church in this country, and in particular in the Valley of the Saints, populated since ancient times by monks, penitents and saints. In this place, the spirituality of the Maronite Church developed based on the following of Jesus Christ, the way of the cross and resurrection. From this place, the Christian continue to give testimony of their faith in front of those of other beliefs. The participants listened to an extensive presentation of the actual political, social and religious situation of Lebanon. Time passed and there were still many places to visit. Following the plan of the organizers, we went to the hills where the famous cedars of Lebanon grow. We feasted with a delicious meal prepared by the Daughters of Charity and finally, visited the Monastery of St. Anthony, one of the proponents of monastic life in the valley of the Saints.

I want to make clear the shared opinions of all the participants of this grand event before we leave for our respective homes. All were very satisfied with the academic content, the impeccable organization, and with the way the gathering was conducted from beginning to end. Christians and Moslems live together in many places in the world. We must recognize and value this reality as we face the new millennium. Those of us who have participated in this gathering now have a new sensitivity to the apostolate in the midst of the Moslem world. Praised be God.

(ARTHUR KOLINSKY, C.M., translator)