

## Vicar Apostolic of Arabia –Pastoral Letter 2006

### Embrace the Word with a generous and good Heart

(Luke 8:15)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This is my first Pastoral Letter to you, the faithful of the Vicariate of Arabia. I wish to greet you with the same words I always use at the beginning of my homilies: May the Lord give you peace and joy in the Holy Spirit! For what ever we are doing as faithful in the communion of the Church can bear fruit only if it is coming from the Holy Spirit. Sent by Jesus Christ from the right hand of the Father, the Holy Spirit is the guarantor that the Church remains faithful to the Word of our Saviour. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is with the Church “always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

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#### *A few words of thanks*

Before entering the topic of this pastoral letter, I would like to call to our mind a few important events of the last twelve months. First of all I would like to give homage to my predecessor, *Bishop Bernard G. Gremoli*, who guided with spiritual strength and commitment, with courage and wisdom, with imperturbable faith and tenacity the Vicariate of Arabia for 29 years. I invite you to express your gratitude practising the words in the letter to the Hebrews: “Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you ... and imitate their faith” (Hebr 13:7).

A few days after *Pope John Paul II* appointed me Vicar Apostolic of Arabia, he gave back his life to the Lord on April 2 2005 after having been a witness of faith and hope, not only during the years of good health and strength, but especially during the time of sickness and suffering. We thank God for the great gift of John Paul II, whose funeral became a manifestation of appreciation and gratitude across the whole world. It was also the first time in the history that representatives of all countries of our Vicariate expressed through their presence an acknowledgment of a Pope who had never ceased to be a promoter of justice and peace, when others were calling to war or terrorism.

On April 19 2005 the cardinals elected the new Pope who took the name *Benedict XVI*. We are grateful to God who has given us again a good and wise pastor and we promise to support him in prayer and obedience. I am sure that according to his name “Benedictus” he will be in and for the Church a “blessed” and a “blessing”.

In August 2005 the Holy Father accepted the resignation of his representative in this area, the Apostolic Nuncio *Archbishop Giuseppe De Andrea*. He has always been a close friend of our Vicariate and I would like to express my gratitude to him. On the same date the new Nuncio for Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, and Qatar, and Apostolic Delegate for the Arabian Peninsula was appointed. We welcome *Archbishop Paul-Mounged El-Hachem* as the new representative of the Pope in this part of the world and wish him God’s blessing for his delicate mission.

On November 9, 2005 the General Minister of the *Capuchins* established the *General Vice-Province of Arabia*, to underline the international character of the

Capuchin presence and to strengthen the commitment of the Order in our Vicariate, where about 30 Capuchin priests from different countries are in service. Until now the Custody of Arabia, entrusted to the Italian Capuchin Province of Florence early in the 20th century, had the responsibility for the pastoral care in our Vicariate. I express my special gratitude to the whole Capuchin Order and in a particular way to the Italian Capuchins of Florence. Many of them spent almost all their religious and priestly life in the service of the Church of Arabia and continue to do so. May the Lord bless them all!

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*Embrace the Word with a generous and good Heart*

Dear brothers and sisters!

You have come to Arabia from all over the world, “from every nation, race, people, and tongue” as the book of Revelation would say (Rev 7:9). The diversity of cultures, languages, rites, religious traditions, movements, and groups is without any doubt a hallmark of our Church here in Arabia. During my pastoral visit and on many other occasions I could witness the deep faith and the spiritual wealth of our communities. There are many faithful who, as our Lord said, “embrace the word with a generous and good heart” (Lk 8:15). Visitors from outside are always deeply impressed by the zeal and devotion of the huge crowds in the places of worship in those countries where we are allowed to gather to celebrate the holy Eucharist and to profess together our common faith.

However, the large number of people coming to our churches should not mislead us to overlooking those who are no longer practising regularly their Catholic faith. It is one of my major concerns to see how we can improve a situation in which many of our faithful, silently or openly, are shifting away from the flock, sometimes even without being conscious that step by step they are losing their Christian and Catholic identity. Jesus spoke about those “who have heard, but the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved”. (Lk 8:12)

I am very grateful to our priests coming from different parts of the world and trying their best to take pastoral care of the faithful. However, the priests are relatively few compared with the huge number of Catholics in the six countries. Very often the distance to the nearest place of worship is too great, or the freedom of worship too limited, for all our brothers and sisters to enjoy the full riches of the regular practice of their Catholic faith. For the time being we cannot change this situation, even though some improvements, with the help of the authorities, may be possible. Therefore we have to accept the challenge of how the word of God can grow in our midst despite these limitations.

*The Word of God in the Life of the Church*

Recently the Church celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vatican II Council’s Constitution about Divine Revelation in the Word of God. The Council encourages all the faithful to become familiar with the book we commonly call

“the Bible” or “Holy Scripture”. It does so with the following words: the faithful “should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose, and other aids which, in our time, with the approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere. And let them remember that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for ‘we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine sayings’.” (Dei Verbum 25)

There is no doubt about the importance of reading the word of God and listening to it. St. Jerome even said: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” When the early Christians gathered, they listened to the word of God because they knew that otherwise they could not understand Jesus Christ. In the second letter to Timothy Saint Paul makes it clear: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17) The first Christians referred constantly to “the Scripture”, that is the book called the “Old Testament”. It was read in their gatherings, which in the beginning had to be held in private houses because church-buildings did not yet exist or were not allowed. The Scripture of the Old Testament was soon enriched and enlarged by the writings, which we know as the “New Testament”.

#### *Reading the Bible in the Communion with the Church*

From the beginning the Church was convinced that the Scripture could be read and understood in the right way only by the assistance of the Holy Spirit and in the communion of the Church. That is why Peter says in his second letter: “Know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation, for no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by the Holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God.” (2 Peter 1:20-21) Reading the Bible is therefore a very particular reading, because we do it in interaction with the Holy Spirit, who speaks through the word of the Scripture and who inhabits our heart (cf. Rom 8:9.11). Furthermore, we read the Bible in interaction with the communion of the Church who in the early times of Christianity recognised that in the present book of the Bible the truth was deposited truly and faithfully. The Church was convinced that the word of God in the Bible could be fully understood only if the faithful were living in the communion with the Church, practising their faith and following the commands of God. That is why the Catholic Church always insisted that the Bible could not be or become a private book, through which the individual faithful would automatically be led the right way, but that it had to be read as the book of the Church.

The Vatican II Council in its Constitution about the Word of God declared: “Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remains always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread, and in prayers, so that holding to, practising and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort. But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been

entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission; and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.” (Dei Verbum 10)

### *Becoming Intelligent Readers of the Bible*

Certainly, the public book of the Bible should reach every member of the faithful in his or her personal and individual life as a Christian. For this reason the Council states: “Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. “ (Dei Verbum 22) It is desirable, that we all own a Bible and that we all become intelligent readers of the Bible. When you buy a Bible, ask for a Catholic edition, approved by one of the Bishops’ Conferences in the respective language area, because other editions may not contain all the books recognised by the Church. The few shops of the “International Bible Society”, which we find in some countries of our Vicariate, will help you to find the right thing when you are asking explicitly for an edition approved by the Catholic Church.

Having a Bible is one thing; reading it with Christian intelligence is another. For this purpose we need a basic knowledge about the different writings, which together form the book that we call “Bible” or “Holy Scripture”. What is important regarding each book is important also regarding the Bible: we should know the character of a particular text and to whom it is addressed. We know by experience that the private letter of a lover has a different style from the bill of a contractor. Similarly, the writings in the Bible have their particular character. Thus the chronicle of a historical period is very different from the prayer spoken in great distress; the sermons of a prophet speaking in a particular situation are distinguished from the proverbs of a wise man whose words were collected by his disciples; the Gospels of the four Evangelists have a complete different style from the letters of Saint Paul and other authors. We should know a few basic rules in order to avoid misunderstandings and simplistic or erroneous interpretations of the Bible. For this purpose it is very helpful to read the introductions that we find in every good edition of the Bible.

It is highly recommended that the private study of the Bible is completed by its reading and sharing in common, either in the family, among friends, or in a parish group. In most of our parishes we have not only Bible groups, but also Bible courses. These may help us to a better understanding and how to deal with the difficulties of some texts. I recommend strongly all the faithful to profit of these courses for the deepening of their own faith. This is particularly important for those who are called to be readers in the liturgy of our communities. They should be trained not only in good public reading, but also in understanding of what they are reading. (Those who have internet-access may get precious help on the website “Holy Spirit Interactive”: <http://www.holyspiritinteractive.net/>) It is compulsory for leaders of a Bible group or a prayer group to undergo a previous basic formation in Bible matters. Nobody is allowed to create or lead a group before he or she has passed this basic formation and got the necessary permission from the competent parish priest.

### *The Word of God and the Sacraments*

As I mentioned earlier, we read the Bible in the living tradition and context of the Church. She is the living body of Christ on earth, and is constituted not only by the Word but also by the Sacraments. In the practice of the Catholic Church both are intimately connected. For this reason you will never find the ordinary celebration of the Baptism or the holy Eucharist without readings of the Holy Scripture. Also, the administration of the other sacraments is, or always should be, combined with at least one scripture reading. Thus the word lives in the sacraments and the sacraments are explained by the word of God. Both will bear fruit if they go along with our personal prayer and the effort of a virtuous life. The reading of the holy Gospel stands out from the other texts of the Bible. That is why in the liturgy we listen to it standing as a sign of particular respect to the Risen Lord who speaks to us.

Those who are responsible for preparing the liturgy, especially the priests, the sacristans, and the readers, should always treat the word of God with due respect. In the liturgy the use of a proper lectionary is preferable to simple sheets. The readers have to prepare carefully the readings of the holy texts, and the priests must pay particular attention to the holy Gospel and the homily that follows. Do not forget that God speaks to us through human words, which we shall understand only if we are listening carefully and meditating them with a prayerful heart!

We should take the word of God in its simplicity and not lose our energies in useless speculations and erroneous interpretations. Saint Paul advises Timothy: "Remind people of these things and charge them before God to stop disputing about words. This serves no useful purpose since it harms those who listen... Avoid profane, idle talk, for such people will become more and more godless and their teaching will spread like gangrene ... Avoid foolish and ignorant debates, for you know that they breed quarrels." (2 Tim 2:14.16-17.23) Reading the word of God and listening to it requires a simple and pure heart which does not look for arguments against others, but humbly expects God's instruction for a better life. Indeed, an exemplary Christian life is the best explanation of the word of God and preserves us from going astray.

### *Discerning legitimate preachers*

Many Catholics are listening to other voices than to the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd, speaking through the Church. There are people who desire to create their own little flock outside the communion of the Church. The problem is not new. Already in the second letter to Timothy we can read: "The time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths." (2 Tim 4:3-4) Saint Paul also had to address many difficulties in the community of Corinth, which was about to lose its unity because of people who created divisions among them. And the author of the letter to the Hebrews advises his community: "Do not let yourselves be led astray by all sorts of strange doctrines." (He 13:9)

It is a matter of fact. Many of our Christians are led astray by followers of sects and by preachers who have no other authorisation than their own. Very often they are coming from abroad and troubling our faithful. They do not see the need of being recognised either by the bishop or the parish priest, but claim to be inspired

and sent directly by God. However, the sign of authenticity of a preacher has always been humility before God and obedience to the Church, as shown by some of the most famous saints, such as Francis of Assisi or Francis Xavier. Thus Saint Francis of Assisi, who was not a priest, was eagerly concerned to get the permission for his preaching from the priests. He wrote in his Testament: "If I had as much wisdom as Solomon and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not preach in their parishes against their will." (Testament 7) And in the Rule for his brothers he decreed what is equally valid for every faithful: they "may not preach in the diocese of any bishop when he has opposed their doing so. And let none of the brothers dare to preach in any way to the people unless he has been examined and approved..." (Later Rule 9:1-2). Therefore, never accept or follow preachers who are not in communion with the Catholic Church and who are not recognised by the bishop, or at least by the parish priest or the delegate of the bishop! Furthermore, refuse them when they are asking for money. Authentic preachers do not sell the word of God for money. Saint Paul was proud of this distinguishing mark, and wrote to the charismatically enthusiastic Corinthians: "For we are not like the many who trade on the word of God; but as out of sincerity, indeed as from God and in the presence of God, we speak in Christ." (2 Cor 2:17)

### *The Word of God strengthening the weak*

All over the Vicariate of Arabia we can find different types of associations and prayer groups. They are without any doubt a backbone of our Church especially in those regions where there is no ordinary parish life because of the lack of priests or lack of freedom of worship. I am very grateful to the innumerable men and women who are committed in such groups and contributing to the vitality of our communities. During my pastoral visits I met with outstanding people who are fully dedicated in leading others to Christ and in helping them to remain faithful to our Lord and to his Church. It is a matter of fact that our few priests, only around 45 in a Vicariate counting far over one million Catholics, are not able to reach out to all the faithful in the different, very often remote, areas, some of them not even accessible to priests. This situation is a challenge, not only for the bishop and the priests, but also for every member of the faithful who should care about the brothers and sisters in faith. We all may be put to the test from time to time, but we all are equally called to strengthen those around us who became weak. For this reason St. Paul addresses all members in the Church of the Thessalonians with the words: "Admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all." (1 Thess 5:14)

On the eve of his Passion, our Lord Jesus Christ said to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32) The tradition of the Church understood the words of Jesus as the special pastoral care given to Peter and to the other Apostles. The Pope as the head of the universal Church, and all the bishops, are called to strengthen their brothers and sisters. In some way each and every one of you is challenged by this word of Jesus. We all have one day to answer the question God will ask us: "Where is your brother? Where is your sister?" We should not reply as Cain did: "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9) For very often we know exactly where our brothers and sisters are who went astray. As disciples

of Jesus we know that we are the keepers of our brothers and sisters. Blessed are those among you who have the possibility of contacting brothers and sisters who cannot reach the churches or who cannot be reached by the priests, and helping them to maintain their faith or to find it again. I only ask you to do so in communion with the priests or the delegates of the bishop and to inform them periodically about what you are doing.

In such situations we may experience the word of God as “a lamp for (our) feet, a light for (our) path”, as we pray in the psalm (Ps 119:105). In meditating the word of God we shall find the right words not only for our prayer, but also for approaching our brothers and sisters, those who are sharing our faith and those who are about to go astray or have already gone astray. It is a matter of fact that the members of Evangelical groups and of the so-called “born again” are working with the Bible and attracting others with extracts of the word of God, very often combined with a sentimental approach which appeals much more than the sober use of the Scripture in the Catholic liturgy.

#### *The word of God in the prayer groups*

In this regard our prayer groups may fill a need and answer to the legitimate need of our religious nature. In the prayer groups we find a place where we can listen to the word of God and give an answer to the call of God as the Spirit inspires us. However, in the prayer groups we should always follow the example of Saint Paul, who reminds the very charismatic Corinthians in the following words: “You may learn from us not to go beyond what is written, so that none of you will be inflated with pride in favour of one person over against another.” (1 Cor 4:6)

Therefore, the Christian communities, and within them the different groups and individuals, should never remain on the pure level of experiencing and expressing religious feelings. Even the most intense “Alleluia” songs will never be a substitute for the practice of justice, mercy and love as Jesus did. The celebrations in the Church, and the prayer meetings, are very important as a time of adoration and worship and as a time of learning. However, the real test of our faith and its verification, if the word of God is bearing fruit in our lives, are not our liturgies and meetings, but the practice of love and the bearing of our daily cross. At the end of the twelfth chapter in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he speaks about the spiritual gifts, Saint Paul is opening the eyes of the community to another reality: “Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. But I shall show you a still more excellent way.” (1 Cor 12:31)

#### *The word of God leading to action*

Then he gives the Corinthians that powerful canticle of love, which remains the test of everything we are doing or not doing in our lives: “If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.” (1 Cor 13:1-3) And Paul culminates in the words: “So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor 13:13) There is no better way to verify the authenticity of our own faith and the faith of the others than this famous thirteenth chapter in the first letter to the Corinthians. Look at Our Lady, the Virgin Mary: When she

received the message of the Angel Gabriel and the Word took flesh in her womb, she went straight on to Elizabeth to share the divine gift with her and to assist the older woman. Mary, the Mother of God, is the best example for what happens, when the word is taking flesh in our life.

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Dear brothers and sisters, at the end of my pastoral letter I would like to express my gratitude to all those who are “ministers of the word” (Lk 1:2): the priests above all, the religious sisters, the catechists, the different lay leaders, and finally every member of the faithful who witnesses Jesus Christ in word and deed. “Embrace the word with a generous and good heart” and you will experience that Christ, the risen Lord, will strengthen you. May the Lord bless you all, especially those who are sick or struggling with other problems. I promise you to keep you in my prayers, especially in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. “Our Lady, help of Christians, pray for us!”

Yours faithfully in Christ

Paul Hinder OFM Cap  
Vicar Apostolic of Arabia