

## Vicar Apostolic of Arabia – Pastoral Letter 2009

### **“I live by faith in the Son of God, who has loved me and gave himself for me”**

(Galatians 2:20)

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

May the Lord give you peace and joy in the Holy Spirit! As we are still celebrating the Year of Saint Paul, I am writing you this pastoral letter based mainly on the teaching of the great Apostle of the Gentiles.

#### ***Chosen by God***

1. When the Apostle Paul addressed the community in Corinth in his first letter, he stated: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:26-30). Looking at our Church in the Vicariate of Arabia, I am very often reminded of the situation Saint Paul met in Corinth. Most of the people coming to our churches have no say in this world. The many thousands of bachelors in the labour camps throughout the Peninsula and the numerous housemaids and other employees very often experience their powerlessness. How many of them are deprived of the possibility to reach our communities because they lack the free time or the money to join the Holy Mass! Not only in Corinth but also in Arabia most of our people do not belong to the world of the powerful and rich. Apart from a relatively small number of well-situated and sometimes even influential people, we belong to those, whom Saint Paul calls “low and despised in the world”.

2. Actually, many people among us also feel that they are nothing because they have passed through humiliation and unjust treatment. They may consider themselves as nobodies who have no power and are exposed to the good or bad humours of others. If we take as measurement the common “human standard” this might even be true. However, there is something more important that gives the human person dignity: the fact that we have been called and found by Jesus Christ and that therefore we belong to those whom “God chose”. Saint Paul speaks about his own experience in the letter to the Galatians when he says: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh ***I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me***” (Galatians 2:20). Since the experience of the Risen Lord on the way to Damascus, Paul more and more discovered what it meant to be loved by Jesus Christ, who gave him a new dignity, which made irrelevant all the other “dignities” he had considered important earlier.

### ***Beloved Children of God***

3. Those among us who consider themselves as nobodies do not take sufficiently into consideration their dignity as images of God by creation and as children of God by adoption. What makes us really alive and precious is the mystery that we are not simply the result of an accident in the long history of evolution, but that each of us has had a place in God's heart since eternity. You certainly remember the wonderful story of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan by John the Baptist: on "coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from the heavens, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11). Jesus is the "beloved Son" with whom God the Father is well pleased! He is the chosen one who will bring back to the Father all those willing to accept his love.

4. The mystery of our own life as baptized Christians is that we too are chosen ones because of our adoption as children of God. The same voice which spoke to Jesus spoke also to us when we were baptized: "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, with whom I am well pleased!" Saint Paul develops this essential topic of our Christian life in his letter to the Romans: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:14-17).

### ***God gives us dignity***

5. Our dignity and preciousness is not the result of recognition by any power and authority in this world, but by God who tells you and me: "I love you!" The only important question afterwards is the question God is asking you and me: "Do you love me?" This relationship of God with us and of us with God in Jesus Christ constitutes our dignity, which no earthly power can take away wherever we are no matter how miserably we are treated and how much tested. A contemporary spiritual writer says the same with the following words: "Our preciousness, uniqueness, and individuality are not given to us by those who meet us in clock-time – our brief chronological existence – but by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity" (Henri Nouwen).

6. The letters of Saint Paul are full of words which reflect this mystery of being chosen by God without any human merits, but out of love. And he reminds us that we always should live in gratitude for this extraordinary gift. Addressing the Christians in Thessalonica he says: "But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Is it not wonderful that Paul invites us to thank God not only for being chosen ourselves but also for our brothers and sisters who are equally beloved by God? Each time we pray together in the church, in small groups or in our families, we should remember this gratitude for the wonderful gift that we are the beloved children with whom the Father is pleased because we bear in us already the Spirit who is crying: "Abba, Father!"

### ***The irredeemable love***

7. As Saint Paul was struck by the love of Christ, we too should be able to profess with him: “I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). This experience may enable us to discover the love of God in Christ in every situation of our life, as Paul says in a wonderful way in his letter to the Romans: “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:33-39). This is the ground on which we stand and from which we get our strength despite our human weaknesses. We are his beloved ones even during those periods of our lives when we may not feel God’s love or even turn our back on him. His love towards us remains as Saint Paul says in his famous canticle of love addressed to the Corinthians: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

### ***Sharing in the body of Christ***

8. It is precisely this unconditional love that we are celebrating in every holy Eucharist. In it we take our distance from the table of the demons that are always tempting us, and share the table of the Lord to whom we belong. Saint Paul writes in this regard to the Corinthians: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). It is therefore essential that we approach the table of the Lord with due faith, reverence and love, because we are not simply getting a piece of blessed bread, but the body and blood of Christ, present on the altar with the same love he showed in giving his life for us on the Cross. As Paul says: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Corinthians 11:26-29). That is why the Church always requires from the faithful that they should receive the Holy Communion only if they are in the state of reconciliation with God and with the Church. In the case of mortal sin this is done through the sacrament of reconciliation. Furthermore I wish to remind you again that the way we conduct ourselves in the presence of the Lord in the holy Eucharist should always express our faith and love for Christ. We express our reverence in bending our knees or bowing our body, in dressing decently, in stopping conversation, and in keeping devout silence and a spirit of adoration.

9. When we are celebrating the holy Eucharist we have to renew our own baptismal promise answering to the question “Do you reject Satan, and all his works, and all his empty promises?” with a courageous “Yes, I do!” Looking closer into the reality of the world in which we live we may better understand the meaning of Saint Paul’s words to the Corinthians: “I do not want you to be partners with demons. You

cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy?” (1 Corinthians 10:20-21). We may no more be tempted by pagan gods as the people in Corinth were, but we may well be tempted by modern kinds of demons leading us astray from Christ’s way of life. Keep your distance from them!

### ***Keeping the Lord’s commandment***

10. Saint Paul is very clear in his teaching that the only valuable answer to Christ’s unconditional love will be our love in return. We express this love in following Christ’s word and commandments as Jesus teaches us in the Gospel of John: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments ... Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me” (John 14:15, 23-24). Saint Paul speaks in this regard about the Spirit of God who dwells in us and keeps us away from sin. The fact that we are adopted children of God has consequences for our moral life. Listen what Paul writes to the Romans: “You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you ... So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption” (Romans 8:9, 12-15). That is why Paul in his letters, after the doctrinal part, is always giving some exhortation for the practical life of the communities and of the individual faithful.

### ***The new life in Christ***

11. In chapter twelve of the letter to the Romans he speaks about the new life in Christ: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2). ‘To be a beloved child of God’ has to take flesh in a life that is taking its measure from God, and not from the questionable values we may find in the mainstream behaviour of modern societies. Not to “be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of (our) minds” is not an easy task, and requires in the words of the Apostle a careful discernment regarding the will of God. I am just selecting from the rich teaching of Saint Paul in his letters a few points which have not lost their importance for our life as Christians in the Gulf (and elsewhere).

### ***Fulfilling the Law***

12. Saint Paul was surely the most fervent defender of the Christian freedom. However, this did not mean for him a lawless life. Thus he writes to the Galatians: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Galatians 5:13). And summarising the teaching of Jesus in this regard, the Apostle gives the following admonition to the Romans: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; ‘You shall not murder’; ‘You shall not steal’; ‘You

shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10). "Summed up" of course does not mean "abolished" but to be fulfilled in a new spirit. It would be a grave error if we thought that the commandments (Decalogue) were outdated after Jesus Christ. The opposite is true: adultery, murder, stealing, telling lies, hatred against the other are still transgressions which are incompatible with the Spirit of Christ "who has loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). As true Christians we should always strain ourselves to be models in fulfilling the law of Christ or in the words of Saint Paul to "be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

### ***Overcome evil with good***

13. As I said at the beginning of my letter, many of us may experience humiliation and injustice of different kinds. The first spontaneous reaction of our human nature is anger and resentment. However, the Apostle teaches us another way: "Bless those who persecute [you], bless and do not curse them" (Romans 12:14). In blessing those who are harming us, we are stopping the spiral of hatred and violence and becoming ourselves a blessing for the world. This is true regarding the inner life of our communities, as Saint Paul says: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour" (Romans 12:9-10). But it is also true in the relationship with those who may not share our faith but may well have the economic and political power: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-18, 21). Authentic Christian witness in daily life is the most efficient preaching. Although very often we cannot announce the Gospel with words, we can always let it speak through the practice of our faith and love. A true Christian life is a challenge for others and becomes thus the leaven in society. We leave it to the Lord when the time will come that the seed we are spreading today will bear fruit. We should never forget that to God a thousand years are like a day and a day like a thousand years (Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8). He is, and remains, the master of history.

### ***Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit***

14. The experience of Saint Paul when he said "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20) determines all dimensions of the Christian life, including our body. Being loved by Christ and belonging to him is incompatible with a permissive sexual behaviour which is not considering the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. In Corinth, as well as in other big cities of the Roman Empire, the Apostle had to deal with the sexual liberality and promiscuity which were quite common at that time. It seems that those who converted to Christianity sometimes misunderstood the freedom in Christ as a free pass to permissiveness. What Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians has not lost any actuality for our times: "The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? ... Shun

fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body, but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:13-16, 18-20).

15. As I mentioned already in last year’s pastoral letter, I am well aware of the difficult situation of so many men and women who live in the Gulf as artificial bachelors or spinsters. They left their families back home. The temptation is great to satisfy the sexual needs outside the legitimate marriage either in a new illegitimate partnership or in casual contacts with persons of the other or even the same sex. How many couples and families have broken because of this situation which partly is due to unjust rules as, for example, the impossibility to live together with the family. However, everyone who comes to the Gulf to work has to be aware of this situation which it is not in our power to change. Instead of judging brothers and sisters who are passing through a moral crisis, we should do everything to help and comfort them.

### ***Bear one another’s burdens***

16. In this regard it is very important that our communities and different groups give everyone the possibility to feel at home and to find strength in mutual encouragement. In his letter to the Galatians Saint Paul speaks about this aspect of our mutual relations in a wonderful way: “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2). I think that in this regard the prayer groups and different associations are playing a very important role. There is on one hand the mutual spiritual support through prayer. On the other hand there is also the human warmth, which may help to overcome the feeling of loneliness and solitude.

### ***No other Gospel***

17. It happens that some faithful are becoming the prey of non-catholic groups or communities just for the reason that they feel more welcome there than in our own Church. The temptation to look for other ways was present even in the churches founded by Saint Paul. It is not by chance that he had to fight with the Galatians because of their inclination to follow other preachers who were telling them another Gospel: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!” (Galatians 1:6-9). In this regard Paul did not know any compromise. It is still important that in our prayer groups and associations we remain in the sound teaching of the Bible as it is read and interpreted by the Church. The recent Bishops’ Synod in Rome about the Word of God reminds us that the formation not only of our priests but also of the lay leaders is essential for the transmission of our faith. Do not search first of all the extraordinary things like visions, miracles and spectacular healings, but “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

### ***God sent his Son, born of a woman***

18. Jesus is not only the beloved Son of the Father but also the beloved son of the Virgin Mary. Hanging on the cross he gave her as mother to all of us: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home” (John 19:26-27). Mary, who opened herself to the Word of God in a way that enabled him to take flesh in her womb, is also the one who can teach us in a unique way how to live as children of God. Each time we implore her intercession, we are turning to someone who is the Mother of God, as well as to our mother. She has given birth to the Son of God who came to redeem us “so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (Galatians 4:5-7). And with this I am coming back to my starting point: We are the beloved children of God with a unique dignity because in every one of us Christ is living. And therefore we may speak together with Paul: “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

### ***Conclusion***

19. Dear brothers and sisters, I wish to conclude this letter with two words of Saint Paul making them my own wishes and blessings to you, the community of faithful living in Arabia: “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:8-11). And I wish to add another word Saint Paul addressed to the Thessalonians: “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13).

With this blessing I greet you and recommend you to our Lord Jesus Christ.

+ *Paul Hinder*

Paul Hinder OFM Cap  
Vicar Apostolic of Arabia