Servants of hope

The Catholic Church in the Maghreb today

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Listening to his Word and attentive to the signs of the times, the Church constantly receives from God its being and its mission. It is the duty of every Christian community to respond to these calls in ever new ways. At the end of the 1970s, the Catholic Church throughout the Maghreb reflected on the « meaning of our meetings »,¹ which dealt with the new situations that we lived then. The arrival of the new millennium offered us another opportunity, in the year 2000.² Following the « Arab spring » and in the light of the « originality of the Spirit », which mark our communities and the whole Church, it seemed appropriate to write this document, which tell the news, the joys and the challenges of our presence and our mission to the Maghreb today.

Our region is changing, the universal Church is experiencing major transformations, our local churches are evolving. We feel strongly a renewed call from the Lord to be more than ever « servants of hope » in North Africa. We feel called to be a missionary hope, which leads to the peace of Christ’s own heart; we feel called to be a hope united with the aspirations of the peoples with whom we journey; a hope that asks us to be faithful, joyful and confident in our tasks of praying and of being of service wherever the Spirit wishes to lead us. We feel called to offer a hope that renews daily our desire to work for the Kingdom, by adapting our capacities to what God asks of us today.

To be servants of hope in the Maghreb today is at one and the same time a call, a challenge, and a joy. As Church, we want to welcome this call, take up this challenge and live this joy, in submission to the Holy Spirit « who makes all things new » (Rv. 21.5). By trying to reread clearly, from God’s perspective, the developments in our region, in our societies, in our communities, we want to revive the breath of hope, which gives sense to the mission to which we are invited by the Spirit. We are happy to share what enlivens us; and, if God wills, we will awaken in the hearts of men and women called by the Spirit to live our vocation as Christians in the Maghreb.

A regional context in change

The northern African region is located geographically and culturally at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Middle East. The dynamics of the « Arab spring », the security issues of the region and of the Middle East, the European economic crisis, and the new situation of migration mainly from sub-Saharan Africa bring about profound changes and new challenges for our region.

1.1 At the heart of the « Arab springs »

A few months after the first events of the « Jasmin Revolution » in Tunisia and the overthrow of the Libyan regime, we found that, everywhere in the Maghreb, there was an openness to speak freely, a growing respect for diverse opinions regarding social and political life, and a willingness to share these opinions. It is from the perspective of faith and hope, without being directly involved in the events, that we welcomed what continues to germinate across the Maghreb. In fact, we fully recognize the evolution of our region which is highlighted by the values of freedom, dignity, justice, equality, personal choice, and transparency. We share the joys and the hopes of the peoples who welcome us, of the men and women called to overcome the uncertainty of the unknown and to enter into and to endure in this dynamic of hope, because « hope does not disappoint » (Rm 5,5). This perspective of hope is enforced by the observation that the events sometimes resonate directly with Gospel values. In Tunisia, « the protagonists of the uprisings were young people, the unemployed, the poor […] Their claims echoed Jesus first speech in the synagogue of Nazareth : The Lord has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, announce deliverance to the captives, freedom to the oppressed (Lk 4.19). »

[... ] The seed of the Kingdom matured mostly outside the visible boundaries of the Church, and this is what caused our surprise. There is in this a lesson in humility : we observe that God alone is missionary ».3

The dynamics of the « Arab spring » shows strong contrasts in the two countries directly concerned. If, through a long proc-

population; and we can continue to worship openly and to carry out our charitable activities in a favorable climate of cooperation, that is to say, in partnership for the greatest good of our common humanity.

1.2 «Passages» and challenges: a Paschal dynamic

At the beginning of these events, we identified three main challenges: a religious challenge, a political challenge and a socio-economic challenge. We also noted the «passages» generated by these challenges, which seemed to us to be «promises for the future». They continue to feed our hope.

A passage from the fear of religious revival, to the quiet affirmation of faith convictions respecting other values.

A passage from mute silence, to discussion, without any taboos, about the importance of promoting all freedoms.

A passage from a social life marked by a fear of losing freedom, to a life of personal sacrifices so that the whole nation might live more democratically and with greater dignity. We acknowledge the many women who spoke openly and accepted their responsibility in proclaiming their will to have their dignity and their rights better respected. We note the cry of young people who demanded a good level of education leading to a real professional future...

This unfolding process reminds us of the Exodus, that story of a people freed from dictatorship and slavery. The revolution is analogous to the passage through the Red Sea, a symbol of the desire for freedom, justice and peace. The post-revolutionary period resembles the long and difficult desert crossing, which results in the people’s reclaiming its own history. Finally the construction of democracy would be analogous to arriving in the long-hoped-for Promised Land. It is a work in process where any attempt to copy or to impose existing models would be futile and inadequate. Our role in the midst of these passages resembles that of Jesus with his two disciples at Emmaus: « Jesus himself drew near and walked with them » (Lk 24.15). Listening, helping to discern, supporting the search for justice, dignity and freedom, and also our solidarity, confidently and prayerfully expressed throughout this patience-demanding process, are our daily bread and our daily commitment.

We understand a paschal dynamic in these « passages »: « we seriously believe, from a faith perspective, that if the fiery immolation of a young man – that great cry of despair, and the chain of events that followed – is unrelated to the Paschal mystery, which is a mystery of suffering, death and resurrection of the Word made flesh in our humanity…, […] And we believe that[…] if this great sigh for justice, this great thirst for peace, this profound desire for dignity has nothing to do with the life, death and Resurrection of Christ, then our heads are in the clouds, and we are engaged in one big pipe dream. »

In these events, we feel the weight of the Council’s teachings: « Linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, [the Christian] will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope (cf. Ph 3.10; Rm 8.17). All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way ». Indeed, « since Christ died for all men (cf. Rm 8.32), and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery ».

5 : Mgr.M. Lahham, ibid.
6 : Lumen Gentium, 16.
7 : Gaudium et Spes, 22,5
1.3 Societal and religious evolution

Dignity and freedom are the main demands emerging through the events that upset our region. These desires play out in the will for all to be recognized as citizens, and responsible citizens. Journeying with people whose fate we share, we reiterate that the guarantee of full and mutual respect between people is rooted in religious freedom. This translates primarily as freedom of conscience for everyone, the freedom to seek the truth. It presupposes respect for each other’s dignity as the base for the moral legitimacy of every social or legal norm. From the very first events of 2011, we said that freedom of conscience and citizenship would no doubt be more and more at the heart of dialogues between Muslim and Christian believers who live in the Maghreb. The facts continue to bear witness to this.

In the Maghreb, the question of freedom of conscience is the subject of many legal and societal debates resulting in very positive developments about which we rejoice. The issue is cultural. Indeed, rights and freedoms would be all the more guaranteed were the culture intent on living with and appreciating the diversity and the openness of the other, in mutual respect and in peace. In this sense we believe that religious minorities offer an occasion for change – and the place permitted them is an indication of the quality of the unfolding democratic process in our countries. Insofar as the quality of a democratic structure can be measured, this is apparent in the way, among others, in which the majority appropriately respects the rights of minorities. “The care of the right to religious freedom devolves upon the whole citizenry, upon social groups, upon government, and upon the Church and other religious communities, in virtue of the duty of all toward the common welfare, and in the manner proper to each.”

8: Dignitatis Humanae, 6.
ity with the peoples of our countries, we intend to take our share of responsibility in this regard. We will continue to do so by striving to serve the entire development of the person on this earth where we live, in particular among the smallest, the poorest, and the least hopeful of those « in the peripheries »; and by trying to be attractive examples of love and truth wherever we find ourselves.

1.4 The new situation of migrations

In this context, we are particularly attentive to the developments relating to the phenomenon of migration. Having long been countries of transit between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, we ourselves are now tending to become countries of immigration. We are delighted that some of our countries are continually developing migration policies, moved by the pursuit of human rights, which are geared to the integration of migrants. There is in this a great challenge, which is amplified by Europe’s restrictive migration policy and the conflicts in neighboring sub-Saharan countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic.

Numerous migrants of sub-Saharan origin participate in animating the Maghreb Church. At the same time, the fragile situation of many of them is one of our major pastoral concerns, and is linked to struggles of our countries. With this in mind, Caritas, in each diocese, becomes an important place for collaboration with associations from different countries and with Muslim partners who, in solidarity and in charity, serve the destitute population. To go beyond simple assistance, which remains indispensable in cases of emergency, it is necessary to consider the phenomenon of migration in its entirety: its causes, its effects and its consequences. It is also necessary to discern what are just ways to support migrants; and it is necessary to learn how to sensitize public opinion to these issues which are all too often ignored, or publicized only in the case of the most terrible tragedies. It is with this in mind that our churches strive to maintain and enhance the partnership with local organizations and associations.

In this regard, we pay special attention to the situation of prisoners. The visits of male and female prison chaplains is a grace for the prisoners, who are often isolated and without family or other visitors, for the prison administration which sees the fruits of peace, and for the chaplains themselves and the parishes who are affected by their witness.

In all this, we perceive ourselves to be servants and builders of hope, and we make the words of Pope Francis our own: « Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers,
a Church which considers herself mother to all. For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome para-

lyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favour the recognition of others! »

2.1 The situation of our churches within the universal Church

Since independence, following the massive departure of the colonial-era population, the churches of the Maghreb took on a unique appearance within the universal Church. Strong ties had already been woven with the local population. The churches strengthened these links, organizing themselves to enforce or to create new partnerships with an almost exclusively Muslim population. The classical pastoral involvement (catechetical and sacramental) was no longer the dominant concern. The renewal of our communities, most notably with the arrival of many students and migrants, led to renewing a real dynamism and connection with what remained the primary concern of our churches: meeting with Muslims. Legitimate pastoral needs, more oriented towards the Christian world, cannot permit our churches to deviate from this vocation. Indeed the characteristic feature of our vocation within the universal Church is that aspect of being « Churches of encounter ». This encounter is experienced as sacramental, as a sign of the presence of Christ in his Body which is the Church, a sign of the presence of the love of the father for all his children. Our churches make their own this saying of St. Augustine: « For us, to live is to love ». Our churches, as « leaven in the dough » (cf. Mt 13,33) and « salt of the Earth » (cf. Mt 5.13), cannot turn inwards, but must live lovingly and freely this vocation to encounter and to dialogue with Muslims, which is a call to become brothers to all. We are also « Churches of encounter » because, like Christ, we become a means for them to encounter the other among themselves. Having been accepted ourselves, it is not uncommon that we present the possibility for meetings of Muslims themselves and of atheists with believers... In all its dimensions, our pastoral ministry remains mindful of furthering encounters, of promoting fraternity and friendship between all.

Our position is somewhat unique, and no doubt is occasioned by necessity and the current situation. Many of our communities find and define the meaning of their presence in their relationship, their « dialogue of life », with their Muslim brothers and sisters. We have received the grace of being placed here, in these countries of the Maghreb, to live as disciples of Jesus. It is our responsibility to discern and to renew
our meaning in the light of the Spirit. Our mission fits into the heart of the world: «I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one» (Jn 17,15); and into the heart of the universal mission of the Church which is sent to all the peoples of the world. We live a tension and a fruitful complementarity between «dialoguing» and «proclaiming», which prevents us from withdrawing into ourselves and which brings us in line with the universal Church. We also are commanded «to bear witness to the Gospel of the grace of God» (Acts 20.24). This results in our own conversion and, if it’s pleasing to God, that of any person who lets Jesus enter into his or her life. This conversion is always God’s doing and not ours. Where it occurs, we accept it with joy, as a gift of God, not as the result of our efforts alone.

2.2 The important developments of recent years

The developments which have marked our countries and our churches in recent years constitute new challenges, that is to say, new calls, to our very vocation.

2.2.1. A new generation of more diverse and universal Church members

The appearance of our communities has changed. In the decades that followed independence, the regular members of our churches were predominantly of European origin. Over the years, the origins of community members have diversified and become universal. We welcome this change with joy and hope. We see in this a sign of the times, a sign that the Spirit is inviting us to widen the space of our tent. We saw and we are still seeing more vocations arriving from the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America… They are a great breath of hope, an indication of the universal vocation of the Church. Our churches welcome this, and as such become more and more a living image of the universal Church with all its richness and diversity. This applies not only to the consecrated persons. In some of our countries, such as the Morocco and Tunisia, the number of people choosing to settle permanently during their retirement is rising sharply. Among tourists, from all around the world, it is not uncommon that some come to stay for several months and become, in fact, quasi-permanent members of our churches… With pleasure, we see in all this a «New Pentecost», a gift of the Holy Spirit: We see a new era into which we have entered and which, however inadequately, we are still determining its scope and its effects. This generation of new church members brings youthfulness, a new dynamism, and an openness freed from the constraints of history which weighed heavily on the shoulders of the older generation.
Because of this, new types of relationships are arising, and this also raises new questions. This is a grace and a hope for our Church and for the countries in which we live.

2.2.2. The arrival of large numbers of sub-Saharan Africans (students, migrants, refugees)

Another new event typical of this new time of our churches is the arrival of sub-Saharan Africans, among whom are a significant number of Christians.

First of all, many students are welcomed, by agreements established between countries, into institutions of higher education throughout the Maghreb, or, increasingly, into private schools, institutes and universities. Along with the migrants, students now represent the bulk of the laity in our Christian communities. They are truly a grace for our churches. Their arrival in the Maghreb has led many of our dioceses gradually to implement means to welcome and to accompany them, and to meet their spiritual needs, such as: chaplaincies, choirs, Christian instruction, pilgrimages, and various activities. Most of these students are not prepared to live in an almost exclusively Muslim environment. They are, nonetheless, by their very presence, the only witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ in student circles. It is a major challenge to break their isolation, such as it exists, and to help them to accept their situation and their Christian responsibility. Who, more than they, live intimately with the young people of the countries which welcome them? Helping them to witness to the Gospel life in the world where they live is considered to be a pastoral priority. They feel that our parishes and our chaplaincies help them move from the confrontation, that often characterizes the early days of their arrival, to an acceptance and appreciation, which can lead to real friendships.

The large numbers of Sub-Saharan African refugees and migrants have deeply changed the composition of a good number of our communities. Sometimes they are even the most important and active element of the community. Some are just passing through; others, unable to realize their dream of getting to Europe, are forced to settle and to find the means to live. A going back is practically impossible. Welcoming these migrant Christians into our communities is both a grace and a challenge; a call to receive Christ himself (cf. Mt 25.35). Most of the time, our places of prayer are the only spaces where they can really feel comfortable. They ask for the community’s prayer and at the same time introduce a new, more festive manner, of praising the Lord. Welcoming them inspires us to be more universal and open to the African continent of which we are a
part. Some of these people are victims of trafficking (prostitution, currency, drugs); others, because of their precarious situations, are strongly tempted to become traffickers. Faced with these realities, our communities must charitably and truthfully help to rebuild a hope that is based on the dignity of the person. The faith of many migrants who are put to the test often becomes a means to strengthen their Christian brothers and sisters. Their hope in a better future reminds us that we are all foreigners and migrants on the earth. Their situation relives the biblical experience of exile and exodus.

2.2.3. Developments in our relations with Muslims

«The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom».10 This statement of Vatican Council II remains an indispensable light for guiding and informing our relations with Muslims, even if these relations are subject to important developments. We find that the Muslims of our countries subscribe to Islam in diverse ways.

10: Nostra Aetate, 3.
New circumstances that affect our churches are also factors of change in the ways we relate with Muslims. Our churches and Muslim communities take more of a distance from the Western world, which has up to now been presented as an attractive model of development. The rejection of the Western model can even cause identity mix-ups among our Muslim partners, which may make some relationships more difficult and sensitive. We are not immune to this ferment. The arrival of new church members from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, South America, and Oceania raises new dimensions in the deliberations established between Christians and Muslims. Some topics can be addressed more courageously and calmly such as the link between the Church and the West, religion and personal conscience, faith and violence, justice and the environment, faith and science... We need to meet these new challenges with hope and creativity.

2.2.4. Les « nouveaux disciples » : un fait, une grâce, une espérance

In some of our countries, the proliferation of communication technology and of human contacts, as well as the increase of strong personal convictions, has seen the birth of new disciples of Jesus within the very heart of our ecclesial communities. Our churches in the Maghreb have always banned the practice of proselytizing, because it was neither respectful of consciences or the path taught and practiced by Jesus. « The basic form of evangelisation, is the life of the disciple of Jesus. It is not so much what we say but what we live which evangelizes, in accordance with the word of the Lord: ‘You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father’ (Mt 5, 13-16) ». We can only rejoice when new disciples, who in great freedom and aware of the risk of being excluded sometimes from their original community, join us. We welcome them as a gift from God who excludes no person from the project revealed by Jesus Christ. These new Christians, originating

from this land of North Africa, gladly align themselves with the great saints of the first centuries of the Church: Augustin, Cyprien, Felicity, Perpetua, Fulgence, Optatus...

In the wake of these great figures, and of many other less known or anonymous ones, they are witnesses to Christ in the land where these saints were born. They are often forced to live with the greatest carefulness and even, in some countries, in hiding, because of restrictive laws or an environment that neither understands nor accepts their freely made decision. Their presence is a reminder of God’s free choice and of the universal call of the Gospel. They absolutely have their place in our churches; they support the churches by their prayers and their example; and, as daily participants in the enculturation of the Gospel message through the influence of their lives, they share their hope.

2.2.5. The beauty and the issues of ecumenism in the Maghreb

Our Catholic churches in the Maghreb are not the only ones which celebrate the grace of God the Father, Son and Spirit, or which live the Gospel of the Lord Jesus. Other Christian communities of different traditions are also present, and more numerous than in the past; and they too have received this gift which is offered to all people. We have all been invited here to the Maghreb and gathered around Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is true, however, that we are experiencing the legacy of our history, and divisions remain a big obstacle in witnessing to the Gospel. But they are not insurmountable. It is up to us to defy the weight of history and to open new paths, with the help of the Spirit, to this unity for which Jesus prayed and laid down his life: «to gather into one the dispersed children of God» (Jn. 11.52). There are many means within our reach, starting with a greater knowledge and mutual respect. This occurs through simple conviviality, developing human relations that allow us better to welcome and love one another. Taking advantage of occasions for praying together is more profitable than the annual week of prayer for Christian Unity. We share the word of God in common; it brings us together, even if our approaches are sometimes different. Let us look for everything that can contribute to justice and peace. It is up to us to use our creativity and our daring to find new ways of collaborating with the power of the Spirit! We realize every day that what unites us is far more important and much larger than what divides us; we know that our Christian communities in North Africa are «laboratories» for ecumenism. What is lived here also bears fruit beyond the Maghreb. We are happy to say, for example, that some of our sub-Saharan brothers, who arrived in North Africa with a negative experience and attitude toward their
Christians brothers and sisters of other confessions or denominations, leave after a few years and become apostles and builders of unity in their countries.

2.3 Growing as disciples of Christ in the Maghreb: discernment, formation

In the light of Scripture, by sharing and in meditation, we are called to give meaning to what we live. We do not create history, but we can give it meaning. All history is sacred; and it is the same for our own. Discernment and incarnation are the two main demands of living the Gospel. To live the incarnation, forbearance is required, which comes about through a long and arduous apprenticeship. We gladly allow ourselves to be instructed by the spirituality of « Nazareth »: for thirty years, Jesus lived a hidden life in Nazareth and learned daily from the hard school of life shared simply with his family. Likewise, anything that can help us insert ourselves in the midst of where we are called to live must be sought after and cultivated: knowledge of the culture and of the language... all this is in accord with the incarnation that Jesus willed for himself. No disciples of Jesus can be free from this honorable learning from the school of life: « We need to help others to realize that the only way is to learn how to encounter others with the right attitude, which is to accept and esteem them as companions along the way, without interior resistance. Better yet, it means learning to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas. And learning to suffer in the embrace of the crucified Jesus whenever we are unjustly attacked or meet with ingratitude, never tiring of our decision to live in fraternity. There indeed we find true healing, since the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of debilitating us, is a mystical fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding...
God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does… Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community! ».12

It is our duty to take the means to educate ourselves in the faith, to grow as disciples and be capable, under all circumstances, to « to give an account of the hope that lives within us, with gentleness and respect » (cf. 1 P 3: 15-16). There have been numerous formation projects in our churches in recent years. We welcome and continue to encourage them, recalling that a real formation never finishes. However important it is to learn or deepen the content of our faith, the disciple is called to imitate Christ in all dimensions of his or her life. Formation in the faith affects the entire existence of the disciple. This formation calls forth and also underlies a necessary «on-going discernment». Through the power of the Spirit and in the Church, this discernment brings us to become more attentive to the signs that God gives and to the ways he calls us throughout the daily events of our lives.

We are surrounded daily by the joy which flows from the heart of Jesus to the people of the Beatitudes. Like him we feel and we see the Kingdom of God, which is bigger than us, unfold in our midst. The signs of the presence of the Kingdom are there, living, manifested through the poor of heart, the meek, the afflicted, the thirsty, those hungering for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted for the sake of righteousness (cf. Mt 5: 1-11). Is not our Gospel witness, the heart of which is the Beatitudes, first and foremost to show that God is at work in this world through often anonymous men and women, builders of a new world? Is it not also to join them in increasing the Kingdom of God? We are not the only players or owners in this task. The Lord invites us to be humble servants. To show hope is a daily mission that takes shape in the concrete service of the Kingdom, hand in hand with the men and women of good will whom God leads us to meet. Along this path of service, it is the « love of Christ that impels us » (2 Co 5.14). We are moved forward, along with others, by evangelical hope whose horizon is the Kingdom, to become builders of hope, especially where the night is dark, in the hearts of little ones, and at the peripheries of our humanity.

There are few opportunities to proclaim explicitly this Good News of hope. But witnessing with our life, which is our daily call, becomes the high point of the Gospel. It is a witness that begins in the midst of our communities: « This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another » (Jn 13.35). Fraternal love is the fruitful source of everything we undertake from the largest to the smallest. All our charitable works find their meaning in the love that we show forth – from the most humble charitable deeds, to major institutions such as houses for neighborhood children, to homes for physically disabled people, and to home helpers for movement impaired people: « 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 Co 13.3). Hope is inseparable from charity, which is the love of Jesus in the continual act of giving: « we boast in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rm 5: 2-5).

3.2 A Church sent to the « periphery »

In this context, we know that following Jesus means that we have been sent first of all to the world’s poor: « The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord » (Lk 4: 18-19 ; Is 61 : 1-2). On numerous occasions, our churches expressed their « preferential option for the poor », in whom they discern the face of Christ himself (cf. Mt 25,40): « For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor « his first mercy ». This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have « this mind… which was in Jesus Christ » (Phil 2:5). Inspired by this, the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a « special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness…

Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other « in a certain sense as one with ourselves ». This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith. »13 It is our unceasing duty to take the means to realize and to enliven this fundamental option for the poor. Our community discernment makes of this a priority.

We the churches in the Maghreb are often regarded as the « churches in the periphery ». This is a source of pride for us, if this expression is meant to remind us that we are in the forefront of living the Good News announced to the poor which is the primary message of the Gospel.

In so many ways, we are poor ourselves but we live in the hope drawn from the heart of Christ. Moved by the Spirit like Christ himself, we become servants of this hope, and we allow Christ «to live in us» (cf. Gal 2,20) by serving him in our brothers «in deed and in truth» (1 Jn 3,19). It is in striving to love in this way that we move «from death to life» (Jn 1: 3.14) and that we witness to the hope of the resurrection and bring forth this hope. We are also invited to realize this hope, especially where distress dominates in the existential peripheries of the world to which we are sent. Living from this hope, we are called by Christ to share and to plant it in the hearts of our brothers, starting with the weakest, the most humble, the smallest, those who have no voice, status, or means. Among the many «peripheries» to which we are sent, we single out the disabled, prisoners, illegal immigrants, young unwed mothers and abandoned children… as well as the places inhabited by Christ whom we serve in the daily reality of the little ones of this world, those whom He himself wanted to call his «brothers» (Mt 25,40).

3.3 A church of encounter with Muslims: dialogue, reciprocal hospitality

In the Maghreb, our presence finds the fullness of its meaning in our relationship with the believers of Islam. We cannot remain closed in on ourselves, for fear of remaining in a vacuum and dying of suffocation. We cannot «resign» ourselves to this particular situation; rather, we embrace it, we welcome it as a gift from God meant to bring us to growth in a spirit of respect and openness. «The real opening means to maintain firm on his own deepest convictions, with an identity clear and joyful, but open to the other to understand and knowing that dialogue can be a source of enrichment for each».14 Our first point of contact is our common humanity, starting with being good neighbors and friendly to one another. This is the base of true dialogue, which is heard more clearly than the simple exchange of words or statements about our respective religions. We know that some theological exchanges can be a ploy to ensnare us or that they will come to an impasse; nonetheless there are instances when we must promote them. Still, life remains the first opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding accessible to all. «This dialogue is in first place a conversation about human existence or simply, as the bishops of India have put it, a matter of «being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows». In this way we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking

14: Pope Francis, Evangeli Gaudium, 251.
and speaking. We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges. Family and social events, religious festivals, and all kinds of occasions are means by which we come to know one another better. They help us mutually to meet without creating any artificial conditions. This dialogue of life is also a place where we can share about the society and its developments, the world such as it is, and where it is going. We are dealing with evolving societies. Let us help one another not to lose our identities, but to keep and promote, in a joyful and confident hope, all the values of humanity that we have in common.

3.4 A pilgrim church, in companionship with people on the way

Our vocation is to be found in what we have in common, our humanity renewed by the Incarnate Word: «And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us» (Jn 1: 14). This presence of God in our flesh gives our human vocation a sacred dimension. It roots us even more in this land, in this humanity where God has plunged us, not as men and women living apart from the world but called to remain there to make it more human: «Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things» (Ph 4.8).

Nothing that is human can be alien to us. As pilgrims, we travel with the humanity present in the places where the Lord has placed us: «We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all peace of God’s face. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art. Jesus told us: «Blessed are the peacemakers» (Mt 5:9). We men and women measure the importance of our vocation in relation to and in partnership with our companions and friends who share our existence. The earth and what is most precious are entrusted to us; we are responsible for peace, the environment, respect for life, justice, the humanization of social relationships, and respect for human rights. Even while living in conditions of insecurity and weakness, to the extent that this is possible, our Christian vocation extends to all these fields in partnership with the brothers and sisters who share our humanity.

15: Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 250.  16: Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 244.
3.5 «Citizen» Church

In the Maghreb as elsewhere in the world, our Church, faithful to the spirit of Vatican Council II, likes to think of itself as a «citizen» Church. At the time of independence, the Catholic Church in each of our countries made the choice to «stay», with the desire to take an active part in the birth of new nations. To be a church almost «without people» and immersed in a Muslim society allowed us put into practice the «diaconal» vocation of the universal Church in a particular way in North Africa. We were able to be at the service of the people and to bear witness to our life in the midst of the people. A «citizen» Church, etymologically, a Church which has «the freedom of the city». Its presence has no other need of justification than to be a natural part of society, as has been the case in North Africa for more than one thousand eight hundred years, and as characterizes the Church today, despite the small number of faithful and its international character. A citizen Church is also a church that is committed to making its contribution to the life and the structure of society, without either seeking or desiring political force. This is what our churches have striven to do for fifty years in each of our countries, through our schools, clinics, libraries, women’s centers, support groups, children’s activities, aid for people in difficulties, and visits to the sick and the prisoners; not to mention the active participation in the cultural and intellectual life of society. In this respect, educational works occupy an essential place: to educate is in effect to develop in the men and women who will be tomorrow’s citizens a spirit of responsibility and openness, which is all the more necessary in a world of plurality and globalization. Recognizing the quality of their work and their commitment, we thank all those people of our communities who continue this beautiful service and ministry of education to the youth of our country with courage and perseverance. A citizen Church, finally, it is a church that is Good News for the society in which it exists and is fully alive. One cannot want to be a Catholic in the Maghreb without aspiring to be fully a citizen, either by law or by desire.

In this regard, we emphasize the grandeur and beauty of a vocation that is particular to our communities: that of the family and marriage in the context of religious diversity. In the Maghreb, marriages between a foreign Christian woman and a Muslim man are very numerous. Those between a Muslim woman and a foreign Christian man are fewer in number: such marriages in fact are not lawful, unless the future hus-
band officially professes the Muslim faith. Islamo-Christian couples are one of the most enduring realities of our churches. «Disparity of cult» marriages give the Islamo-Christian dialogue a highly incarnational dimension: they establish the dialogue in full human form in all regions, social classes and cultural realities of our country. Without concealing the real difficulties related to the cultural and religious difference, these couples and families are one of the great riches of our country, our churches, and the universal Church. They are at the forefront of this «citizen» commitment of which our communities want to be stakeholders; they are also at the forefront of some debated societal issues, such as those related to the theme of the freedom of conscience. In a world where dialogue and encounter between believers of different religions have become a predominant issue, it seems essential to us that we should acknowledge the richness of the Islamo-Christian homes at the level of the universal Church and reaffirm their support as a priority. Our pastoral care of mixed families should be based on relationship and accompaniment more than on the insistence of legal requirements. We should not marginalized mixed families by setting them apart, but rather we should see them as a human reality called to become fruitful in the Church, for the Church, and also beyond the visible borders of the Church.

We also admire the «citizen» commitment of so many of our brothers and sisters who work within the economic fabric of our country. This is a commitment which, when it is lived according to the Gospel and carefully places man at the center of development by considering him as its finality, constitutes a fundamental, sometimes even heroic, witness. And this is all more the case at a time when our region seeks new balances and suffers from an economic crisis imposed on it from the exterior. We can only give thanks for the courage of those men and women who, rooted in hope and after the first events of the revolution, have sought to protect and revive often threatened means of production. By a sustained effort and not without risk, they have saved many families from poverty because of their investments and employment. When such a commitment is lived in faith, it brings forth a powerful hope in the face of contrary trends wanting to impose themselves. This commitment of our lay brothers and sisters at all levels of the economic fabric must be supported so that this witness can be ever more a shining forth of the Gospel and the social teaching which the Church strives to promote in the world for the integral development of the human person.
3.6 « Eucharistic » Church, which celebrates the glory of God among the nations

As « ambassadors for Christ » (cf. 2 Cor 5,20) in the Maghreb, we have a vocation to pray. This vocation is both a witness and a responsibility. In societies where the call to prayer sounds five times a day, we are also called to sing the praises of God diligently, as children of God. Some men and women among us devote all their lives to this and show that our God and Father can fill up our entire existence. They are also ambassadors, like Moses on the mountain, praying for those who « fight on the plain » (cf. Ex 17.9). We give thanks to the Lord for the presence of several monasteries and houses of contemplative life in our countries, which remind us of the gratuitous priority of this service of prayer, and which are oasis and places of renewal for our communities. By means of this discrete and persevering prayer, in the midst of a humanity with whom we share our daily life, we make present and we make known in what consists « the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope for glory » (Col 1.27). Prayer is at the heart of our vocation.

This ministry of prayer, just like our whole life, finds its source and its summit in the Eucharist. At each Eucharist, we perceive how much we celebrate « for the glory of God and the salvation of the world ». Of course this is not only true for us: our Eucharists also take on a special dimension because of the fragility and precariousness of our presence. We live what is essential, even if sometimes our existence appears as banal and featureless. The Eucharist celebrated, by a single priest in a remote area, acquires a value of universality and of eternity. At each mass, the priest presents the entire Being of those who surround him with the bread and wine. At the altar, his open arms, most intimately embracing the Eucharistic sacrifice, are the symbol of the Church – present or not, visible or not. They are also the symbol of the concrete love lived by men and women who do not necessarily know the Gospel, but who seek righteousness to love and to serve God.
The assembled community then becomes all the more a symbol, regardless of its size, its composition, or its numbers. All humanity, all existence gathered together acquires a dimension of eternity insofar as it is lived in the invisible light of the Kingdom. Each of our Eucharists is a mass for the world, for our countries. We bring to it all the new starts, all the suffering, all the hopes... That is why our presence as Church is essential, regardless of its scope, regardless of its importance. In the Eucharist, thanks to the Word of God, we are given the grace to see the Kingdom, to name it, and, because of our faith, to celebrate it. No one can do this in our place. We take no glory in this, it is a responsibility that is incumbent upon us. And when we share the bread and wine of our Eucharists, we ourselves become food for our world; we join ourselves to the universal Church in her vocation to be the body of Christ; we express and we strengthen our universal solidarity in Jesus our Lord: « you are the body of Christ and individually members of it » (1 Co 12.27). When we celebrate the Eucharist, the sacrament of hope, we make present this Christ who embraces in his redemptive sacrifice the entire history of the peoples in whose midst we live. Yes, it is great, this mystery of faith; and it is this mystery that we proclaim: « On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines. On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations. He will destroy death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces; the reproach of his people he will remove from the whole earth; for the Lord has spoken. » (Is 25: 6-8).
Following Mary, under the inspiration of the Spirit: our churches as «Visitation»

In 2000, at the threshold of the great jubilee of the Incarnation, we were asked a question: Was the new face that our churches were presenting only due to the present events? Or, was there a biblical basis, which made this new expression a herald of the future? Our reflection led us to discern two situations which enlightened more particularly our life experiences: the Galilean period of Jesus, and the dispersal of the communities in the early Church. Prayer and the present events have also led us in recent years to deepen the Marian dimension of our vocation, which unites with the «beams of light» that we developed, and which clarifies the profound spiritual basis of our mission.

4.1 Our mission, a Visitation

«We love to see in the story of the Visitation (Lk 1: 39-56) the paradigm of mission. Far from any conquest, mission is a Visitation. Like Mary, carrying Him who carries us, we go to visit our brothers and sisters to help them; and each encounter is like an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a Pentecost. As in the story of the Visitation, the Spirit is the master of the encounter, opening us up to giving thanks for the gifts received, gifts which are always a surprise.»

Mary bears the Great Hope. The Spirit leads Mary and the Church in their hastening forth. Through its work within people’s hearts, the Spirit disposes them to welcome and to work for heavenly rewards. The history of our churches is the history of these meetings of humanity. The grace «to go toward» brings us to experience a joy similar to that which bursts forth from the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary. The treasures each bring to the other makes them tremble with joy: «Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice» (Lc 1.42), and Mary then said «my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior» (Lk 1: 46-47).

Our churches, following Mary, live the apostolate of encounter. Led by the Spirit, we come to experience joy when our hearts open themselves to the mystery of the other. Elisabeth released the Magnificat of Mary. And so do we experience what we bring to the other, which is a real spiritual communion, when we place ourselves at this level of truth and are attentive to meet and welcome the other as he is. The Spirit thus leads our churches on a real path of

17: Cf. CERNA, les Églises au Maghreb en l’an 2000, 2.2.
18: Desforges, P., Mgr, Une Église dans la mangeoire, Constantine 2012, 30.
truth. Our joy is and will always be that our brothers in humanity exist, that their lives become larger, that they come to be everything they are meant to be, not according to our expectations but according to the work of the Spirit in them. The hope that lives within us leads us to go forth and to be at the service of the nascent life of every person. Mary teaches us to move from being efficient to becoming life-giving. With the Spirit, she brings us into the grace of voluntary service where there is a relationship of pure respect, which is a gift that dispels second thoughts, frees from all suffering, gives the greatest of joys and dispels the sadness of all maliciousness. With Mary, our churches want to live the «fiat» which alone permits a respectful welcome of the other’s path, of his light, of his hope. The conscience of each person is a sacred mystery, which we cannot approach without removing our sandals. The Virgin Mary precedes us and leads us on this path. Our churches are moved by this deeply Marian impetus and we strive to follow her example «of pondering in our hearts all events» (cf. Lk 2,19) which mark the history of the peoples to whom we are sent. In our continuing the Incarnation, we are called every day to accompany God in his going to the peoples of the world and to experience, by means of a humble sharing of daily events, a human development which, in its ultimate stage, is an encounter with God.

4.2 The hope of universal brotherhood

Our churches dedicate themselves to living fraternally with everyone. Like Mary at Christmas who placed the child in the manger, the Spirit and Mary offer and dispose our lives so as to make of them lives given over to love. The sending of the Son, who comes unto his own, continues in his disciples. It is they, who, in the Church, become a sign and participate in the Word of God’s coming in the flesh of our people. The whole human family is represented by the shepherds and the Magi who came from afar and gather in joy and simplicity around Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. Like the image of the Holy family, our churches want to be a family uniting fraternally with everyone; an open, welcoming and praying community in the midst of prayerful people; a community seeking God with other seekers of God, bearers and witnesses of the mystery of the One who gave his life for all so that those who were scattered might be gathered into one.

As churches «in the manger», our objective is not to increase numbers but to be a sign. When Jean-Paul II welcomed us to his table in 1986, he said: «Ultimately, you live what the Council said of the Church. It is a sacrament; that is, a sign; and one does not ask a sign to produce numbers». This
way of being present constitutes a ministry, a mission, which is not intended to change the course of history, but to show forth Him who gives meaning to history by coming to the meet everyone without distinction. We do this by following the example of Mary – in silence, welcoming, and offering to the world the One who embraces everything. This humble and gratuitous presence gives sense to our lives: we are unassuming and amazed witnesses, humbly awaiting the gift of the future that always comes to us from God.

This way of being present is not passivity: instead it assumes a daily consent and sometimes an expensive perseverance, to which some have borne witness by the gift of their lives « loving them to the end » (cf. Jn 13: 1). We are often invited to renounce ourselves by consenting ever more that « it be done to me according to your word » (Lk 1,38). Marie teaches us the abandonment, which is « an active and dynamic ‘yes’, in absolute confidence that God our Savior is at work for the good and the salvation of all in everything that happens in any situation. God is always the God who is in and with his creatures, leading them to intimate union. Our ‘yes’ allows God to act in us, by means of us, and with us. We are thus called to carry, in the most ordinary events of our daily lives, the witness of an intimate life with God, a God who makes us partners in his struggle for the triumph of humanity in every person ».19

Along this path, our churches in particular are servants of hope. Cardinal Duval loved to repeat that « Friendship is revolutionary. » Our sub-Saharan African students often discover this truth after several years of more or less difficult adjustments. Islamo-Christian couples, getting beyond their difficulties and conflicts when they arise, attest to the strength of the power of the human heart which permits their religious diversity to draw them to what they have in common. The new disciples, in one or another of our countries, testify that the often close human relationships help them to overcome the struggles of a new religious affiliation… Our churches bear the hope of a universal brotherhood which is able to surpass all differences and even to make them fruitful. The image of Mary, « who listens and who welcomes » and « who believes and hopes » profoundly in God and in the other with confident abandonment which is renewed every day in prayer and humble service – her « fiat » (Lk 1: 38) – is for us the way of witnessing and carry out our mission. This is a « fiat » which can lead to the mystery of the cross, there where the upsetting events of history would bring us to think that perseverance

19: ID., 12.
is useless. The example of the Church of Algeria during its dark years showed the opposite. It is with the same hope that the church of Libya stands strong today.

The route of encounter is our missionary path: "Mission is not born from a surplus that we would like to communicate to others, it arises from a lack of the other without which, without whose encounter, I would never be able to express my Magnificat". This is a path of consenting to the project of the Incarnation, following Mary, by making the witness of our life a priority. Along the path of encounter and dialogue, Mary is our companion. Mary, our Mother, always in union with the Holy Spirit, is the real author of our journey towards the unity of the human family. And thus evangelization has nothing to do with proselytizing. It is the path of the Incarnation, to the very end, whatever it costs. It is the joy and grace of our churches to discover this day after day and to be able to bear witness to it: our mission is a path of humanization, which leads to the encounter with God: "what counts in the end [...] is a certain density of presence to mankind at a specific location, a certain weight of incarnation, in the place where one lives his commitment seriously and competently, with a constant concern for communion with others and for an interior transformation".

This applies to every person called to live the Gospel in the Maghreb, who strives by humbly giving his life to continue, as Jesus, "to come unto his own" (cf. Jn 1:11) and "to live among us" (cf. Jn 1:14). We thus experience this "Marian style" which Pope Francis calls the evangelizing activity of the Church: "Mary is able to recognize the traces of God’s Spirit in events great and small. She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives". With the Pope, « We implore her maternal intercession that the Church may become a home for many peoples, a mother for all peoples, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world ».

23: Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 288.
We are servants of hope at the service of the Kingdom, already there and still arriving, in the Maghreb where the Spirit has led our steps. In the footsteps of witnesses who have gone before us nearly two millennia ago and in solidarity with our brothers and sisters with whom we share the same joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and concerns, we walk in the firm certainty that “hope does not disappoint” (Rm 5,5). In these times of “passages”, where the future is unfolding and where the temptation to give into fear or doubts can sometimes be strong for some of our people, to be at the service of hope is an act of faith, a prophetic act, an act of trust in God who alone is master of time and history. We reiterate and we bear witness that “man’s great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God—God who has loved us and who continues to love us «to the end», until all «is accomplished» (cf. Jn 13:1 and 19:30). […] Life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively in or from ourselves: it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life. If we are in relation with him who does not die, who is Life itself and Love itself, then we are in life. Then we ‘live’.”

Every day, we look for ways to be servants of hope by our life and our acts, in a spirit of prayer, and in fidelity and service to this Kingdom which exceeds the borders of the visible church. This is a Kingdom which we see at work in and by others, and which “we cannot «build»… by our own efforts—what we build will always be the kingdom of man with all the limitations proper to our human nature”,25 but we welcome it as it is, that is to say, “a gift, and precisely because of this, it is great and beautiful, and constitutes the response to our hope.”26 As Church, we journey with our people of North Africa; we feel invited to reread what happens and to meditate constantly with a spirit of discernment, insight and creative realism, we feel that

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we are participants in this history-in-the-making, this history which is a freely given love of which God alone is the source. As we already concluded in 1979, the story is not finished. We must remain open to the new calls that God will make so that we can arrive at the other stages of this holy history, which is that of our peoples, a history through which the Holy Spirit leads us. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of hope, be with us on our journey, so that from Visitation unto Visitation, with joy and humility, we can serve and show forth a little more each day the One who wished to make us his witnesses.

✿ Vincent LANDEL; Archbishop of Rabat, president of the CERNA

with:

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✿ Ilario ANTONIAZZI, Archbishop of Tunis, and Nicolas LHERNOULD, vicar general
✿ Ghaleb BADER, Archbishop of Algiers, and Christian MAUVAIS, vicar general
✿ Paul DESFARGES, Bishop of Constantine and Hippo, and Michel GUILLAUD, vicar general
✿ Syvester MAGRO, Apostolic Vicar of Benghazi
✿ Giovanni MARTINELLI, Apostolic Vicar of Tripoli, and Magdy HELMY, vicar general
✿ Claude RAULT, Bishop of Laghouat Ghardaia and Felix TELLECHEA, vicar general
✿ Jean-Paul VESCO, Bishop of ORAN, and Hubert LE BOUQUIN, vicar general

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