

**THE TWELFTH LENTEN LETTER
OF PATRIARCH CARDINAL MAR BSHARA AL-RAI
FASTING IN THE AGE OF THE SYNODAL CHURCH
ROME 2022**

To their Excellencies, our Brother Bishops,

The Reverend Superior Generals,

The Reverend Priests, Monks, and Nuns,

And all the beloved children of our Maronite Church in Lebanon, the Patriarchal domain,
and the countries of expansion,

Peace in the Lord Jesus and Apostolic blessings,

I would like to consider in this year's Lenten letter three complimentary and interconnected ministries—the ministries of the word, of prayer, and of love—their personal and communal character in the journey of the synodal Church, as well as some pastoral directives concerning fasting and abstinence.

First: The three ministries

1. In the nascent Church's early journey, the Twelve Apostles joined together three ministries: the ministry of the word, prayer, and the ministry to the poor for which were instituted seven deacons, among whom was Stephen, the Archmartyr. Thus, with one accord, they forever identified these three ministries with the Church and her mission.

This is what we read in the Acts of the Apostles: **"It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. [...] Let us therefore select seven men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word"** (Acts 6:2-4).

2. The season of Great Lent reminds us of these three ministries and galvanizes them, in addition to living out the law of fasting and abstinence as a sign of repentance and penance for sins—our own and those of other people—and for evil in the world—be it of our own making or not. Thus, we pray in Psalm 50: **"Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love; [...] For I know my transgressions; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your eyes."**

In fact, during the Season of Lent, spiritual retreats are held in parishes in order to delve deeply into the word of God, thanks to homilies, exhortations, and educational programs hosted on social media. Opportunities to pray and to go to confession, penitential rites, and sacramental graces are offered. Charitable social services are activated in the Patriarchate, eparchies, parishes, religious orders, and convents. Donations to Caritas-Lebanon are collected at church entrances, in ecclesiastical and civil institutions, and on public roads. Such efforts are coordinated by various charitable NGOs, chief among which is Caritas Lebanon, the Church's pastoral and social arm.

3. Faith is born of the **word of God** and is expressed in **prayer**, while **love** springs out of the Divine heart and, through us, reaches other people (*agápē*). This love is an expression of repentance and a conversion from selfishness and self-love to encounter and generous material and affective giving. True repentance helps us realize that we have not loved, while through forgiveness, we reach the pinnacle of fasting, prayer, and charity. For forgiveness is the expression of the greatest love.

4. Charity loses its essence if separated from the ministry of love, for then it remains a passing, seasonal act performed during the Great Lent. Rather, charity must be a way of life characterized by the virtue of solidarity, that is, feeling and acting as individuals who are all responsible for one another. Viewed this way, charity begins, before any material assistance, with a compassionate regard for others. For the heart offers itself, and material assistance is but the human expression of a joyful gift of oneself.

Second: The journey of the synodal Church during the season of Great Lent

5. The preparation for the General Assembly of the Roman Synod of Bishops on the theme: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” is infused with a deeper motivation and meaning during the season of Great Lent. For the ministry of the word, prayer, and love requires a Church whose members journey together, be it in eparchies, parishes, religious orders, monastic communities, or civic organizations.

This “journeying together” concerns the following triad:

- **Communion**, which is a vertical union with God and a horizontal unity with all people;
- **Participation**, which means sharing the possessions entrusted to us with those who are in need financially, spiritually, morally, educationally, or socially;
- **and the Mission** which Christ entrusted to the Church of all the baptized men and women—a mission of truth, love, freedom, justice, and peace.

By “**synodality**” or “**journeying together**” we emphasize the duty of each man and woman to participate in a communal journey free from individual whims. For we are the one Body of Christ which remains unified as it moves and walks.

Conclusion

With the Universal Church, during this Great Lent, our Synodal Church under the leadership of His Holiness Pope Francis, is committed to communion, vertically with God, and horizontally with all the people; to sharing the fruits of the earth with our needy brothers and sisters; to evangelization and prayer to God for peace to our countries, especially in the Middle East and Lebanon.