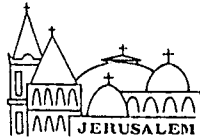


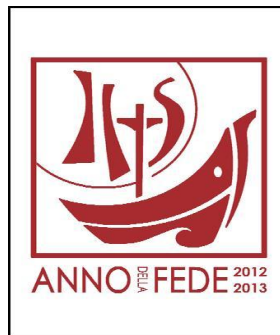
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של ארץ הקודש

THE ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC ORDINARIES OF THE HOLY LAND
Latins, Melkites, Maronites, Syrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Custody of the Holy Land

A Pastoral Letter for the Year of Faith



*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*
(Hebrews 11:1)

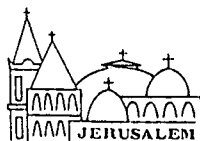
To our dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,
Priests, deacons, men and women religious, and all the faithful.

The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

1. The Church proclaims the “Year of Faith”

On October 11, 2012, the Universal Church embarks on the “Year of Faith,” called by the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. On this same day, the Church commemorates 50 years since the initiation of the Second Vatican Council by Blessed Pope John XXIII, and 20 years since the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church by Blessed Pope John Paul II. These auspicious anniversaries already plot out an itinerary for the coming year. In addition, October 2012 will see the next General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops focused on the theme: “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith”.

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On September 14, 2012, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI signed the Apostolic Exhortation “The Church in the Middle East” in the Greek Catholic Melkite Basilica of St Paul, Harisa, on the first day of his visit to Lebanon. Then he consigned it to the Catholic Patriarchs of the East during the Pontifical Mass which he celebrated in Beirut on the following Sunday, September 16. In the Introduction to the Exhortation he writes: “*The example of the first community in Jerusalem can serve as a model for renewing the present Christian community and making it a place of communion for witness*” (Ecclesia in Medio Oriente, n. 4).

The Holy Father, in explaining his intention for this “year of faith”, wrote: “*Intent on gathering the signs of the times in the present of history, faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world. What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end*” (Porta fidei, n. 15). Pope Benedict holds up the Council and the Catechism as two contemporary treasures that help us live as disciples of Christ in this new age with its many challenges.

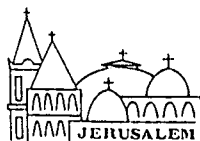
2. “A living sign of the Risen Lord” in the Land of Faith and Resurrection

Together with the Universal Church, we too give thanks for the two treasures that are constituted by the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. We add, to these two documents, the Acts of the Synod for the Middle East, the Apostolic Exhortation, already mentioned, the Pastoral Letters of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East, and the sixteen documents of the General Pastoral Plan issued after the Synod of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land (published in 2000). These are important resources for ever needed renewal in our lives as Christians. Here we find a first commitment this year: to study these documents and to define a plan of action plan that transforms them into a way of life for us.

Furthermore, we can draw on the discourses delivered during the three visits made to this Holy Land by the successor of Peter: Pope Paul VI in 1964, Blessed Pope John Paul II in 2000 and Pope Benedict XVI in 2009.

What does it mean to be “a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord” in our own land, the land called holy, which is linked intimately to the story of this faith? “Our

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land is blessed because it is the cradle of divine revelation and the history of salvation. Furthermore, and above all else it is the land of the Divine Incarnation" (The Jerusalem Church, The General Pastoral Plan, 6). It was to this land that Abraham was called from his own land, embarking on a journey of faith that guides us even today as we meditate upon its narrative in Sacred Scripture. From that time onwards, our land has been the geography of this story of faith, from Abraham to Moses to David; from the priests, kings, sages and prophets of the Old Testament to the one who fulfills their prayers and sacrifices, their proverbs and oracles, Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Lord, "*the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*" (Heb 12:1). The great cloud of witnesses to faith (cf. Hebrews 12) who populate the Sacred Scriptures sprang up from this very land.

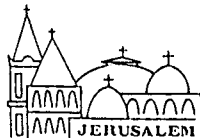
Here too the Church was born at Pentecost and from here went out to the extremities of the earth, carrying the faith in the Risen Lord with her. This Mother Church of Jerusalem, custodian of the faith of the Apostles, is our Church and continues to provide models of faith even until today: Blessed Maryam Bawardi, Blessed Marie-Alphonsine, Venerable Samaan Sruji. A Year of Faith is a time to renew our sense of being the members of this venerable Church and to get to know her history and her diversity better. It is a time to take seriously the challenge of being a community of saints so that the Mother Church of Jerusalem can continue to be a beacon of light.

Our Land, perhaps more than any other, is called to radiate faith. Millions come here to renew their faith by frequenting the Holy Places. Yet we, the "living stones" of this Holy Land, called to be custodians of the Holy Places and to animate them with our own prayers and supplications, with the diversity of our rites and with the fidelity of our continual bi-millennial witness, are called to be a "people of faith" in an exemplary way. The Year of Faith is a blessed opportunity to reflect on how we, both as individual believers and as Church, can be "*a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord*" in this land and in the world.

3. Renewal of the Church in the Holy Land

We are in need of a profound daily conversion, a constant renewal in the Spirit in order to fulfill our mission as disciples and apostles of Christ in this Land, bearing witness to Christ's victory over death and living as signs of the Risen Lord. Saint Paul reminds us that in baptism we are reborn to new life: "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the*

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dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). The Instrumentum laboris for the Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization states: *"The Christian faith is a true encounter and relationship with Jesus Christ. Transmitting the faith means to create in every place and time the conditions which lead to this encounter between the person and Jesus Christ. The goal of all evangelization is to create the possibility for this encounter, which is, at one and the same time, intimate, personal, public and communal"* (n. 18).

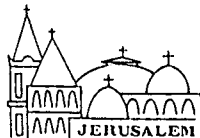
As living signs of the presence of the Risen Lord, we seek to renew ourselves in this Year of Faith and we give thanks for the gifts we are surrounded with. In this land, we host the constant flow of pilgrims coming to renew their faith. They are a constant reminder to us of the privileged geography in which we live. We are members of a Church enriched by the tens of religious orders and congregations that seek to make their home in the land of Jesus of Nazareth. Their devoted service, through their schools, universities, hospitals, clinics, orphanages, homes for the elderly and the handicapped and retreat centers, is a constant reminder that *"just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead"* (James 2:26). In a special way, we are enriched by the contemplative monasteries that are vital centers of prayer dotted throughout our land. The new communities, vibrant with new life, are also flocking to our land, offering their experience of the Risen Lord and their resources for renewal.

Furthermore, our Church continues to be challenged to open itself to the arrival of many Christians who come to our land to find a home, to seek work or to find safety from persecution, oppression and violence. Indigenous Christians are called to open themselves and their churches to these newcomers in order to create *"the conditions which lead to this encounter between the person and Jesus Christ"*. These migrants also bring riches from their traditions and cultures that can help in the renewal of faith.

4. New evangelization amidst enormous challenges

"Christian communities, affected by the strong social and cultural changes taking place, need once again to find the energy and means to ground themselves solidly in the presence of the Risen Christ, who animates them from within. They must allow themselves to be guided by his Spirit so that they can newly experience the gift of communion with the Father which is theirs in Jesus Christ, and, in turn, offer to others this same experience as the most precious gift that can be possessed" (Instrumentum

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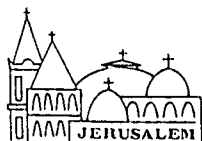
laboris, n. 46). Our land is the context in which we are called to be a sign of the presence of the Risen Lord. The challenges are myriad and daunting.

Our land continues to be torn apart by violence, injustice, occupation and insecurity. Many are enclosed behind walls and checkpoints, others languish in prisons, suffer discrimination, mourn loved ones, yearn for family members with whom they cannot be united, live in fear and anxiety. Christians are a tiny flock in our societies that are dominated by other religious traditions, Islam and Judaism, and they are more and more marginalized. Around us, as a known world is crumbling and powerful dictators fall, the future looks uncertain as formerly restrained undercurrents are unleashed. Many of our brothers and sisters in faith have chosen to emigrate, leaving our communities even more impoverished and fragile. The world around us sometimes appears very threatening. With regard to the faith we seek to cultivate, our biggest challenge is despair.

It is in this specific context with all its formidable challenges that we must creatively and prophetically conceive of a “new” evangelization. “*The adjective ‘new’ refers to a cultural situation which has changed and the need for the Church, with renewed energy, determination, resourcefulness and newness, to look at the way she lives and transmits the faith*” (Instrumentum laboris, n. 49). The discourse and witness of the Church must be formulated within the specific context of the lives of the faithful so that they can be expressions of an authentic faith. Our churches must not become closed ghettos where we separate ourselves from the threatening world around us but rather pulsating centers of life, activity and celebration. The General Pastoral Plan, describing the mentality of faith, underlined: “*The purpose (of religious formation) is to penetrate the human person and to influence his or her mentality and to transform it into an evangelical mentality. When this is achieved, faith and life conform to one another. When the principles of the Gospel become the source of orientation, judgment and movement, the Christian person and his or her actions are in conformity with the application of the message of Christ. Only thus can faith contribute to the changing of society and the building up of the Church*” (Christian formation for adults, 33).

In being “*a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord*”, we are challenged to speak a language of faith that also promotes justice, peace, pardon, reconciliation and, above all, hope where the world and its language reflect only despair. This language must be borne out by courageous acts of faith that promote healing and bridge building at every level of our lives. This is precisely the language we speak and the acts we perform when we celebrate the Eucharist – Christ’s giving of Himself for our salvation and the

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salvation of the world. In fact, the Year of Faith “will also be a good opportunity to intensify the celebration of the faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, which is “the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; ... and also the source from which all its power flows” (Porta fidei, n. 9). Furthermore, this year will renew the faithful as they are sent forth from the Eucharistic celebration, seeking to act in:

- edifying Christian communities that radiate love at the level of our families and parishes;
- promoting collaboration and joint witness within the Catholic Church, enriched and not divided by a diversity of structures and rites;
- strengthening ecumenical relations and fraternal sharing with all other Christians as we strive to give common witness to the One Risen Lord;
- daring to build and strengthen relations with all believers in this Land, Muslims, Jews and Druze, all of us created in the image of one God, loving Father of all;
- seeking out all our brothers and sisters in humanity so that we can work together for a society that offers each one his or her place, in dignity, in security, in justice and in peace.

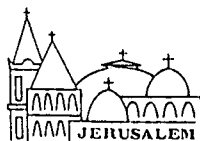
However, let us be mindful that a lack of joy and hope are indeed the major obstacles to our vocation in our Land. As the Instrumentum laboris underlines: “*this lack of joy and hope is so strong as to wear thin the very fabric of our Christian communities. The new evangelization is proposed in these places as a remedy to bring joy and courage to life and become an imperative invigorating our faith*” (n. 168). Our faith must indeed be a prophetic faith – “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrew 11:1) – based upon a profound experience of a personal and intimate relationship with the Risen Lord and His Father, eternally faithful to His promises.

5. Some practical suggestions to live this Year of Faith

We encourage the parish priests, catechists, teachers, men and women religious, parents and all the faithful to make this year a concrete occasion to deepen, renew and refresh our faith. Make our churches, our schools, our medical and social institutions, our religious houses and monasteries and especially our homes places of encounter with Jesus Christ. He calls us to convert and follow him. What can we do practically to mark this “year of faith”:

- **celebrations** – let us celebrate in various ways our faith. This can be marked by celebrations in the individual parishes as well as in our dioceses. Particularly meaningful in this Year of Faith can be inter-ritual celebrations that expose the faithful and

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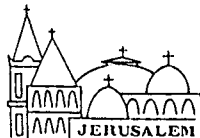
particularly the youth to the rich diversity of rites in our Catholic Churches. These common celebrations have a special importance in this year in order to strengthen our unity. The Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land will announce a series of celebrations to mark this year.

- **sacraments** – let us celebrate the sacraments with a profound awareness of how they are living expressions of our faith. When we celebrate the sacraments of baptism and/or confirmation let them be an occasion to renew our faith, besides being occasions of gathering our friends and relatives around the new grace that God gives to one of our families. Let us organize penitential celebrations in every parish in order to put the faithful before God and start a new journey of grace, of strength and love, in our families and our societies. Let us celebrate the Eucharist, the Mass on Sunday and in all feast days with even more dignity. Let them be occasions to better understand the gift of God, the sense of his accompaniment to us in this Blessed Sacrament and His permanent presence among us as a source of strength and love in us, so that our presence becomes more active in our societies. Let us celebrate the ordination of priests or deacons or religious professions in this year: so they may be a source of particular joy to the family that offered his or her son to the service of God and all people. Let us pay particular attention to the sacrament of marriage in order to make it an occasion of joyful welcome of the grace of God and His blessing of the new family, besides the social joys that surround it. And lastly, let the Unction of the Sick, be an occasion to pray with them, to accompany them, to direct their sufferings to be part of the sufferings of Jesus Christ for the Redemption of our societies, threatened by so many material and spiritual dangers. In all these celebrations, we pray and proclaim and strengthen our faith in the Risen Lord and His victory over death and sin.

- **pilgrimage** – we, faithful in this land, we live our daily life around the Holy Places. Here, in our land, right at home, the history of salvation unfolded and the grace of God came upon humankind. Here, among us, at home, are the places that remind us of the history of salvation: here, the Word of God was incarnated and became flesh. Here he was born and lived, taught, accomplished his miracles, died and was resurrected, triumphant over death, then ascended into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Here the Lord dwelt in our land and these places are still the places of our daily life. In this year, prayerful trips to the various Holy Places should be organized for students, parents, workers and all our parishioners.

- **study** – We mentioned at the beginning of this Pastoral Letter the many documents that can deepen our faith and guide our life in the Church and in society. We must know

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them, meditate upon them, find in them the principles of action in order to know how to behave in our societies and what positions to take in the different areas and circumstances. Priority is given to Bible study, hence the necessity to organize Bible study groups, in order to deepen our understanding of the Bible, so it can become our guide in every situation in life. We have to organize also groups that study the documents of Vatican II, the Catechism of the Catholic Church as well as the Pastoral Plan and the Pastoral Letters of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East. In particular, let us make time to study the Holy Father's 2012 Exhortation to the Catholic Church in the Middle East. It is the responsibility of the parish priests with the help of the religious communities to lead these study groups. The academic institutes in the diocese are invited to make a contribution to this joint study by inviting the lay people to sessions on themes that are relevant to this year.

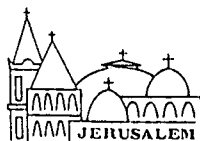
- **formation** – let us work to form all those involved in the life of the Church. Let us organize sessions for all who actively participate in the liturgy so as to deepen our understanding of the liturgy as a primary expression of faith.

- **collaboration among priests** – Our faith necessitates witnessing. And the first witness is the unity of the clergy and their collaboration on different projects and initiatives. They are called to pray together in the diversity of our rites, and to love each other. The common meeting of our priests is the best way to express this. Another field of collaboration among priests can be homilies. The priests are invited to create a treasury of homilies that underline themes from the Catechism and that can be used in this Year of Faith to strengthen the faith of the faithful.

- **young people** – let us take the Year of Faith into the Catholic schools by organizing youth activities (religious music festivals, quizzes, plays, etc) that promote awareness among students and teachers so that they come to know their faith and to live it in all circumstances. On this occasion, we renew our recommendation to the schools to pay particular attention during this year to catechism and religious education. We ask all the directors of our schools to give more and better attention to catechism. The “year of faith” must be for the schools “the year of catechism”. The Church has entrusted to them the responsibility of religious education. They must educate generations who know their faith, and can, with its light and strength, face the challenges of life in this Holy Land.

- **media coverage** – The year of faith is also the year of Catholic media, as the media are one of the most important tools in the education of the faithful and for communicating the

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true image of faith. One of the goals of this year should be a better Christian formation for those who are involved in the media, and to prepare others to work in this field, in order to make a link between faith and society and all its developments. Let our Catholic media focus on the theme of faith by inviting individuals to give a personal testimony about their faith story – this can draw on the experiences of lay people, religious, contemplatives, priests and bishops.

- **ecumenical initiatives** –The year of faith in the Holy Land, where we have diversity and division among the Churches and where we have different religions, must be also a year of economical action among Christians and dialogue with the different religions, in order to strengthen love, mutual understanding, and collaboration between all believers. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January should take on a special meaning in this Year of Faith. Let us seek out our brothers and sisters in the other Churches and ecclesial communities in order to underline our common faith in Jesus Christ. Parish priests, religious, men and women, and all faithful should prepare to consecrate a week of prayer in all the parishes, recalling every day the prayer of Jesus (cf. John 17: 17-24) for the unity of Christians. Similar, the Week for Christian Unity could be further developed into a week of “dialogue and mutual understanding” among believers of different religions as a contribution to the growth of love among people in our societies, torn by so many quarrels political and social.

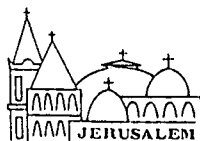
- **a first shared occasion for reflection** - With particular joy, the Interritual Presbyteral Council, the Committee created for this very occasion, biblical and theological institutions are planning common initiatives with regard to “the year of faith”. The Catholic Ordinaries would like this occasion to be a moment shared by seminarians, students of theology and Biblical studies, professors, clergy, men and women religious, consecrated and all the faithful in order to reflect on this year together.

These are just a few practical ideas that can inspire our clergy and our faithful to make the most of this blessed occasion. We encourage them to take initiatives in collaboration with the priests and the bishops in order to promote this year as an opportunity to deepen our faith.

6. Conclusion: A “Year of Faith” for coming generations

In his post-synodal exhortation, Ecclesia in Medio Oriente, Pope Benedict XVI addresses us, saying: “*The Year of Faith, which is linked to the new evangelization, if*

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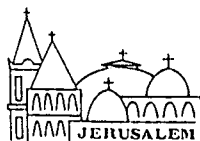
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lived with intense conviction, will provide an excellent incentive for Churches of the region to evangelize themselves and to consolidate their witness to Christ. To make known the Son of God who died and rose again, the sole Savior of mankind, is an essential duty of the Church and a grave responsibility for all the baptized. "God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). As she takes up this urgent and demanding task in a culturally and religiously pluralistic context, the Church is aided by the Holy Spirit, the gift of the risen Lord who continues to sustain his disciples, and the treasury of great spiritual traditions which are a sure guide to all who seek God" (Ecclesia in Medio Oriente n. 88).

This Apostolic Exhortation is addressed to us and to our Churches, so that we can grow in our unity and in our mutual love in the same home, in the same diocese, and among all the Churches which must be in their essence only one Church. The Exhortation mentions also the events in our Arab societies, because we are a part of these societies. The Exhortation directs us to define our role and to know our place in these events. First, the Christian must know himself in order to know what he has to do. In the Arab world today, with all its unrest, and with all its political and social revolutions, and in Israeli society, with all its components, peaceful or oppressive, there is perplexity, anxiety and fear from the future in the hearts of many faithful. We say: a Christian, a true believer, does not fear. A Christian cannot remain in perplexity. A Christian knows in whom he has believed. He knows that God is father compassionate and merciful, that His goodness will prevail against all manifestations of evil of which we suffer today. This is a "year of faith", one of whose goals is to invite the Christian to know himself and to know his place and role in his society, in the plan of God, in His Providence and His love. Our Lord Jesus Christ told us that a believer can move mountains, which means he can change these societies. We are believers. So we can change them, with the strength and love of God.

We are going through a necessary yet difficult historic period, with its revolutions and with all the new forces it brings. These are difficult days for us and for all our compatriots. Jesus said: "Every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid" (Matthew 10:30-31; cf. Luke 21: 18). We have to seek out the grace of God in all these events, even where there is death, blood, forced emigration and persecution. We have to search for the will of God in all these events, what is the will of God for us and for all our countries, and what is our role in this tempest that rages around us. Jesus tells us also: "Your perseverance will win you your lives" (Luke 21:19).

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We embark on this “Year of Faith” with a heightened awareness of our responsibility. We desire to transmit our faith, particularly to the coming generations, who will ensure the continued witness to the Risen Lord in His land. In particular, we want to focus on our children and pray that they may find in us, their parents, their pastors, their teachers, their catechists “*a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord*”. Ultimately, the faith we seek is a grace and so we pray that our Risen Lord might indeed increase our faith and make us joyful and hopeful witnesses to Him.

We seek to renew the determination with which we concluded the General Pastoral Plan: “*Our Church is a living Church. Whatever the difficulties, obstacles and failures, she opens her heart to the grace of the future, which comes to her from her Lord. This is the future we want to build together in hope and action, in joy and zeal, depending on the grace of God, which renews us and renews our Churches, placing them at the service of the Kingdom and of humanity, and depending too on the presence of Christ among us, “He who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow” (Hebrews 13:8)*” (Together towards the future, General Pastoral Plan, 190).

In conclusion, we turn our eyes to Mary, “*the Mother of God, proclaimed “blessed because she believed” (Lk 1:45)*” (Porta fidei, n. 16), daughter of our Land and its queen, that she might intercede for us and serve always as our model in being always focused on He who is our Savior and Redeemer.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,
and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,
who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross,
disregarding its shame,
and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
(Hebrews 12:1-2)*

We ask that Almighty God bless you all – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

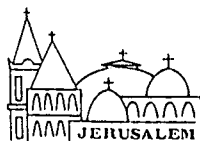
+ **Fouad TWAL**

Patriarch of Jerusalem for Latins
President A.C.O.H.L.

+ **Elias CHACOUR**

Greek Catholic Melkite Archbishop of Akka
Vice president A.C.O.H.L.

مجلس رؤساء الكنائس الكاثوليكية في الأرض المقدسة



אספת ההגמוניים הקתוליים
של ארץ הקודש

THE ASSEMBLY OF CATHOLIC ORDINARIES OF THE HOLY LAND
Latins, Melkites, Maronites, Syrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Custody of the Holy Land

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Secretary General

Jerusalem, October 7, 2012

Feat of Our Lady of Rosary