

Lebanon: What is Next?

A lecture by Dr. Daniel Alberto Ayuch

The situation yesterday and today. On Tuesday, August 4th, 2020 at 6:00 p.m., after a long day of online work that didn't take into account the summer or the heat, I was finally able to take a walk with my daughter and her dog through the village we live in, around 12 km from Beirut. Eight minutes later, we were so shocked by an eerie trembling explosion sound that we feared the worst. Eternal seconds of uncertainty passed. Then came the commotion, the screaming and the attempt to get in touch with our loved ones despite the overloaded networks. This is how I experienced the *Beirutshima*; that is the name the media has given to this terrible explosion. But it was nothing compared to the pain of mothers who lost their children and the suffering of homeless families and sick people out on the streets after the destruction of hospitals.¹

“But how did Lebanon get into this situation?”, you might ask. Lebanon has faced a number of major challenges over the past twenty years, including the 2006 July War, which destroyed important parts of its modern infrastructure, including the airport, highways and power plants; as well as internal terrorism that has killed so many politicians, journalists and activists. In addition, from 2011 on Syrian refugees arrived in such large numbers that today they represent more than a quarter of the local population. And since October 17, 2019, large parts of the population have been rising up against the impending financial collapse. They called this movement the WhatsApp revolution in the early days because it started with a demonstration against a tax on app users. The financial crisis was not long in coming and increased the poverty rate from thirty to over fifty percent in the course of the first year. However, none of this came close to the Covid19 crisis, which has slowly and secretly been creeping up since mid-February 2020 until it interrupted and completely paralyzed the daily activities of society and fundamentally changed the rules of the game in fields of work, education and society as a whole.

The attacks of the 21st century. Of all the attacks after 2000, the one on Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri is the most infamous. He was murdered in broad daylight on February 14, 2005 in Beirut while on his way home. His death marked a turning point in Lebanese politics. Mainly because shortly after this terrible event, the Syrian army left the country after 29 years of continued presence bringing fully into light the two major political blocs and resulting in a rift in the country that continues to this day. Minister Bassel Fleihan (April 2005), journalist Samir Qassir (June 2005) and journalist and politician Gibran Tweini (December 2005), and many others, were also killed in the ongoing drama of attacks.

¹ According to official data, the tragedy left 190 dead, more than 6,500 injured and 300,000 homeless. The World Bank estimates that the overall damage from the blast in Beirut could be up to 4.6 billion dollars. Source: “BM estima en hasta 4.600 millones daños por explosión en Beirut.” Online at <https://www.dw.com/es>. Seen on 02 November 2020.

A few years later, the attack on the chief of police intelligence, Wissam Al-Hassan, shocked the country; he was killed by a car bomb in the Achrafieh district of Beirut, a predominantly Christian area, in October 2012. The press linked the attack to the war in Syria.

This was followed by the November 13, 2015 attacks in the Bourj el-Barajneh district, a mainly Shiite district in Beirut, in which around forty people were killed. Two suicide bombers detonated all of the bombs. A leader of the Hezbollah security system was killed in the attack. A day later, attacks were carried out in Paris in which 131 civilians were killed; these attacks are known as the terrorist attacks on the Paris stadium and that the Bataclan theater attacks. Again, the war in Syria could destabilize Lebanon's security. These were days of anger in the Islamic State, which also left its mark on Beirut.

And modern history, what does it tell? Even if modern Lebanon celebrates its 100th anniversary this year,² the history of Lebanon is as old as its cedar forests, which were already mentioned in the epic of Gilgamesh and later in the Bible itself. Indeed, the shield of the Maronite Patriarchate quotes Isaiah 35:2, "The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it," emphasizing the persistence of its people. The majesty of the Baalbek Temple in the Bekaa Valley and the Phoenician walls bathed by the Mediterranean Sea in Batroun bear witness to this ancient history which we Lebanese are so proud of. This is where the letter and the alphabet were invented, a folk wisdom that is proudly repeated in front of visitors from other countries.

After all, one cannot talk about the modern history of this small country of only 10,452 km² without referring to the years of civil war that began in 1975 and ended in 1990 after more than 120,000 deaths and the displacement of nearly a million people.³ The end of this war implied the beginning of the second republic in which we live today, in which Christian communities act more and more as a minority and in which sayings such as "the pearl of the East" or "the Switzerland of the Middle East" already belong to history, despite and because of many who not only attacked the coexistence of religions and the liberal culture of Lebanon, but also destroyed and undermined its natural resources. How far away are these poetic songs from back then, which celebrated the beauty of its places, the abundance of its fruits, the purity of its atmosphere and the joy of living there.

The million-dollar question. Back in 2011, filmmaker and director Nadine Labaki asked the same question in her celebrated film that we all ask ourselves today in Lebanon: "Where are we going now?" The last scene featured a funeral procession that did not know which direction to turn to bury a young man of undefined religion who had died in his small town as a victim of religious fanaticism. Today we keep asking ourselves where we should go with the burden we carry on our backs in order to be able to leave a viable country for future generations.

² Proclaimed by France on September 1st, 1920, as a result of a territorial division after the First World War and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Lebanon gained its independence in 1943 and France eventually left the country permanently in 1946.

³ Ochsenwald – Kingston. Lebanese Civil War. In: *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020, URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Lebanese-Civil-War>. Seen on 02 November 2020.

In this critical and difficult setting of Lebanon, the Middle East and even the world at large, a contextual theology must be practiced that offers some useful contextual perspectives. But this should take place without forgetting one's own specialist knowledge and the mission of theology, which consists in reconciling man with himself, with his fellow men and with the Creator. This would be an impossible mission if we do not work with the other humanities to channel the Church's message within society, which in the case of Lebanon is ravaged by poverty and corruption. In addition, it (the Lebanese society) shows a clear rift, mainly caused by politics and religion. Lebanon needs to integrate its communal identities, falsely labeled "sectarian", so that they can be reconciled within a Lebanese national identity. There is a need to create public spaces that can help overcome divisions in the community and promote belonging to a citizenry.⁴

Advocate for social justice. One of the foundations that guides the reconciliation between the conflicting parties and leads to a solid reconstruction of society is justice. The concept of justice is a divine principle that has coexisted with man since the ancient civilizations the inhabitants of Lebanon interacted with for millennia.

And the God of revelation, the God of Abraham, who is common to the three monotheistic religions of the Middle East, is shown as the source and model of justice. That is why to seek God is to seek justice. Psalm 42:1 already calls out this thirst for a righteous God: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." With this opening the psalmist expresses the impotence of the exiled man, who feels plagued by injustice. This helplessness expressed by the psalmist in the face of oppression and the abuse of authority is the same as was felt by the majority of Lebanese when they fell below the poverty line. And so, do those who encounter so much suffering that they are moved to go out and help their compatriots.

In this context, several private initiatives have been set up or mobilized in Lebanon, in addition to certain NGOs and existing religious associations that have recently shown a high level of activity to help those most in need and the victims of the economic and social crisis and the explosion of the port of Beirut.

There are more than 60 large associations⁵ that are in direct contact with those affected, and their staff can often be found on the street, in the media, in supermarkets and on church doors. This is a response, a civil-society initiative that, despite the relatively active support from abroad, is insufficient for the country to reappear in an orderly and sustainable manner over time. Many of these institutions are trusted by the people and are backed by promotional campaigns that are hopefully true to reality. Yes, something is being done and various international initiatives support and encourage the work to get the funds to those who really need them. Of course, these efforts will help the marginalized so these people can breathe for a while, but they are far from a long-term solution.

⁴ This is affirmed and developed in depth by Tarek Mitri in his lecture on "Lebanese National Identity and Culture" given at NCSU in September 2015. Online at <https://lebanesestudies.ncsu.edu/Mitri.php>. Seen on November 7, 2020.

⁵ From the MTV News with the entire list, issued on November 11, 2020: <https://youtu.be/TyQSGHgvmyY>.

That is why this commitment to social justice should also have its place among the members of the Lebanese political elite who have ruled the country for decades. In this context it is interesting to mention the message of the Archbishop Emeritus of the Mountains of Lebanon, Mons. George Khodr, an important theologian, and thinker of the Antiochian Church, who already pointed out in 2009 that the good administration of a government should be measured by its behavior towards the poor.⁶

If the authorities of the country and its citizens help out of conviction, i.e. if they do good to others, as Bishop Khodr says, then they offer a service of love. Hence social justice manifests itself in the practice of the commandment to love one's neighbor. What splendid words, but how important it is for Christians to profess their faith not only to their friends and relatives, but also to those who show a certain hostility and reservations towards their community. Here the words of the Gospel can be heard, which calls us to love not only our neighbors (Mt 5:43; 19:19) but also our enemies (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27).

A year later, in 2010, Archbishop Khodr said that authority is expected to place its power in God. In the purely monotheistic Christian-Muslim environment of Lebanon, this invites a discourse reflecting on what the people in power are actually doing. Nobody expects them to really turn their offices into an instrument of God, but nevertheless that they no longer commit the kind of crimes the people publicly denounced during the unrest in October 2019. It is clear that only divine authority can practice just and transparent justice, and it is for this reason that the God of Revelation is expected to become the example to which people in power refer.⁷

More than a week ago, in light of the critical situation in which The Cedar Country finds itself, Bishop Elias Aude, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Beirut, complained in his televised Sunday sermon that charity "has become a rare coin in our country." He also pointed out the state of mind of people "tormented by many burdens" and denounced the officials "who care about only one kind of love, namely narcissism, which is love for the ego, because they only care about their own ego." He added that "the economic, social, health and educational storms are keeping citizens awake, while our government's first and only concern is who will take over this or that ministry, who will gain this or that position and who will prevail the competition of delving deepest into corruption."⁸

The need for transparency. Indeed, corruption has been denounced by various quarters. It is sharply criticized by the Christian and Muslim religious authorities, and a number of local institutions and associations document the lack of transparency in public administration on a

⁶ "Woe to Him Who is cursed by the Poor Citizen." Annahar newspaper, May 7, 2018. Online. It is a reprint of an article previously published in 2009: Available at <https://www.annahar.com/arabic>. Seen on November 16, 2020.

⁷ "The Authority." Annahar Newspaper, 19 June 2010. Online. Reprinted:

<https://www.beirutobserver.com/2010/06/annahar-18/amp/>. Seen on November 16, 2020.

⁸ Source: "Aude to the Politicians: All the sanctions imposed on you are nothing compared to the punishment of the Hereafter." The National News Agency ANN. Available at: <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/513987/>. Seen on November 15, 2020.

daily basis. I have to say that corruption is a chronic disease of society, not only in Lebanon but around the world.

Aside from the fact that the international community is talking about this wave of corruption like never before, society needs to free itself from this burden in order to regain mutual trust. According to transparency.org, Lebanon ranks 137th out of the 180 countries surveyed with a score of 28/100.⁹ The local association for the defense of transparency documents all kinds of cases, including bribery, nepotism, favoritism, patronage, embezzlement, and vote buying.¹⁰

As a result of this corruption, the national health system is collapsing, not only because of Covid19, but also because it is impossible to maintain the deficit of hospitals, health centers and the National Social Insurance Fund (CNSS in French). Public education, which has suffered from cuts and budget shortages for years, is suffering from a similar situation, a fate that is now shared by private education as well. This is very sensitive, as private education, which is largely secured by Christian institutions, has a good reputation in the region, which has contributed to the fact that society has been able to produce several generations of solidly educated people who later became serious and professional specialists for the country and for the world. Today the education system is yielding significantly reduced results and needs a national program of restructuring and support.

Family Guidance. Given these challenges, such as the lack of work, poor wages, rapid inflation and the deterioration in health care and children's education, it is easy to imagine that the family is in serious danger in the face of this drastic situation. According to His Beatitude John the Tenth, Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, the family is the core of society, its heart and its conscience, so its consolidation should be a central issue for the Church.¹¹ The family in Lebanon needs support not only from the state, but also from the churches and the Muslim denominations. In this way families would receive adequate support and guidance in making vital decisions. In October 2019, a special synod on the family was held in the Orthodox Church and a document entitled "The Family, Joy in Life" was published, in which the Synod of Antioch not only called to open family counseling centers, but also recommended the launching of training programs for clergy and pastoral workers so that a stronger culture of accompaniment can develop in the churches.¹²

The churches for the integration of people. The churches in Lebanon must work together on long-term projects that will restore citizens' trust and be committed to education and dialogue. The political "consensus" mentioned over and over again will not become a reality if people are not really integrated with one another. So far, sectarianism has triumphed with every ruler fighting for the rights of his own community, disregarding the unity of the country. This sectarianism will be overcome by breaking down the barriers within which people have

⁹ The lower the score, the lower the degree of transparency in the country.

¹⁰ "Corruption in Lebanon." Available at: <http://www.transparency-lebanon.org/En/Corruption/16>. Seen on November 16, 2020.

¹¹ See the introductory message to the Pastoral Letter of the Holy Antiochian Synod with the title "The family, joy of life." Damascus 2019.

¹² Antiochian Synod. *Pastoral Letter: The family, joy of life*, Damascus 2019. Articles 58-63.

been locked up by the political elite. It is the duty of the churches and all religious authorities to restore people's confidence that there is life outside of these micro-societies and that everyone can work and live with others.

Sectarianism is a term with special connotations in Lebanon because the independent Lebanese state of 1943 was founded based on an ideal of participation of the various denominations (often incorrectly referred to as sects due to a mis-translation of the Arabic term *Ta'ifah*). One of these denominations is the Maronite Church, which defines itself as *the* authentic national church and which at that time claimed most of the power distribution for itself. After the 15-year civil war, the desire to end this sectarianism was officially announced in the Taif Agreement (Saudi Arabia 1989). The priority of the Taif Agreement was the gradual abolition of sectarianism. However, 30 years have passed since then and sectarianism continues to shape all aspects of Lebanese political, economic and religious life. The aim of the Taif Agreement was to avoid a new civil war. But in reality, for more than thirty years, the deal has paralyzed government reforms, propped up power quotas in favor of the elites and plunged the country into gigantic public debt.

Opposing ideas. This socio-political reality requires the cooperation of representatives and heads of every denomination so that the country can overcome these difficult times. The lack of dialogue is often to blame for the fact that there are so many contradicting ideas about the future. Should Lebanon be a country that reflects more of an Eastern or perhaps a Western culture? Should Lebanon focus more on the Mediterranean Sea or should it orientate itself more towards the Syrian desert? If we want to keep Arabic as the official language, which Arabic should it be? The language spoken by all Lebanese, or the classic language that is only written and read on official matters and on some prime news?

It is difficult to reach a compromise and get all parties and denominations to accept that Phoenician, Arab and Syrian cultures are the basis of modern Lebanese identity. And that's just an example. Whether our children should learn French or English as a second language is also a question of identity for many and is so controversial that some can hardly accept that both the one and the other educational model can coexist and enrich the country. There are so many questions that are asked in defining Lebanese identity that every gesture and every little success of one denomination must immediately be offset for the others as well, and in reality, this is a vicious circle that has no end.

Talita Kum! There is no end, because there is no will, because each community restricts its view only to itself, its representatives and its leaders. This is exactly where a culture of dialogue and integration should develop. This is an evangelical imperative for Christians. The commandment to accept others, to share and to believe in communities that are reconciled to themselves and to God. How much could Lebanon benefit if the churches worked to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberation from oppression and injustice to prisoners, so that vision may be restored to those blinded in ambition and injustice. How beneficial it

would be for society if the churches worked to proclaim a time of forgiveness and encounter.¹³

Imagine how good it would be for people if Christians followed the evangelical example and committed themselves to helping the families affected, as Jesus did when he restored health to the centurion's house by healing his son (Mt 8:5-13); or when he took pity on a widow who was mourning the death of her only son in Nain (Lk 7:1-17). Jesus visited these ruined houses and brought them back to life and joy. And Jesus did not prefer either Jews or Gentiles but addressed the afflicted people and returned them to their original condition. So he responded to the requests of the Canaanite (Lebanese) mother and made her sick daughter well again. Likewise, he also visited the home of the synagogue ruler named Jairus and saved his little daughter from death. "Talita Kum!" Or in English "Girl, get up!" How nice it would be if the churches in Lebanon could proclaim these words as a performative statement that would not only be the mere repetition of the words, but actually cause a change and makes the word a real action.

I conclude this lecture here and dream of the churches returning to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and to God what belongs to God, just as the Lord said in the gospels when he accused the temple authorities of their efforts to preserve what the system granted them (Mt 22:21; Mk 12:17). It is true that institutions need a solid framework in order to be able to perform their services, and therefore it is important to acquire and manage resources. There is no doubt about that. However, institutions should not exist just to feed themselves and spend most of their time managing their resources. On the contrary, the bulk of the work of Christian institutions is expected to be directed toward society and those who need its help and impetus to move forward. So, the assets and funds belong to the Caesars and it is crystal clear that the Caesars will die in time. While the people who are mirrors of Christ on earth are really those who must be tended as the Lord's vineyard, since they are to be brought back to their Lord safe and sound.

In conclusion. Lebanon's Christian heritage is immense. Not only its great historical monuments like the ancient monasteries that rise in its mountains, or the cathedrals of Byblos, Tripoli or Sidon, but also those small village churches that hold so many treasures, their manuscripts and the ancient customs that people still practice today. Without a doubt, Lebanon is of immense value to the religious culture of the Eastern Mediterranean.

But people need a sustainable present for the individual, for families and for their institutions. It is important to look at the past with admiration and pride, but the young people and children cannot eat or educate themselves in an overcrowded museum, no matter how precious its treasures may be. In summary, I therefore believe that Lebanon should free itself from separatist practices and create a national identity for today and for the future. On the other hand, government agencies need to be healthy and operate with transparency, equity and dedication. Lebanon can be attractive again for its sons and daughters in the diaspora.

¹³ An interpretive reading of Luke 4:18-19.

They all look to the east with nostalgia, yes, but also with the desire to change the situation for the good of their people.

The churches are expected to inspire this transition and to become instruments of this change, as they have done so many times throughout history thanks to the commitment of their people. Reconciliation, dialogue, and guidance are services that the churches can contribute so that the Lebanese people can truly reunite and become the prosperous and productive country we all long for.