

# **CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Lecture addressed

by

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“The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” is what the book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us (11:26). Or, when a sinner suddenly turns to virtue, as the French saying goes “Il a trouvé le chemin de Damas,” which is a reference to Saint Paul the Apostle, who found Christianity on the road to Damascus.

This is my land in the Middle East.

We will speak about that part of the Middle East which speaks the Arabic language, and that means the following countries: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt.

## **1. The Historical, Geographical, and Cultural Importance of the Middle East.**

The Middle East is a record of human history. Different societies, civilizations, kingdoms, and settlers passed through it. Its land was and is a stage for human interaction from the dawn of history and until this very day. Its climate and location between the continents of the ancient world helped bring this about. Thus, it became a commercial channel and human passage that linked the different corners of the world. It has witnessed cultural exchanges since ancient times (the castles, ruins, and palaces remain witnesses to the richness of the region's history), where settlers overlapped and different civilizations interacted, struggling with each other. It has witnessed nations and peoples, of various ethnicities and with varying ambitions, on a scale which no other land on earth has seen.

In it are prehistoric remains, and it is the home of the first civilization. The civilizations of the Nile Valley, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia thrived there, and there Hellenic civilization met and interacted with Eastern civilization, there human creativity in religion and art blossomed. In it the human heritage with its composite elements and rainbow colours was formed.

Here, history becomes an epic, as the land was trodden upon and occupied by various peoples and many nations: Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Arameans, Amorites, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Egyptians, Nabateans, Arabs, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Franks, Mongols, Tatars, Ottoman Turks, and others all left their mark. It is a land that has melted peoples of different ethnicities, each of them has rose and aged leaving behind them their ruins and buildings which remain before our eyes until this day.

This land is considered the birthplace of many ancient civilizations. It is rich and strategically placed, which has made it a theatre for many wars and military expeditions in both ancient and modern history.

It is a land that had been despoiled, devastated, destroyed, colonised and re-colonised; it has suffered ethnic cleansings and times of great flourishing. It is a land that had seen many times of sorrow and adversity. However that failed to prevent the gushing of life toward progress, building, and continual renewal so that it would remain a witness to human perseverance and greatness.

## **2. The Spiritual Importance of The Middle East.**

This is the land of the monotheistic faiths; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Therefore, the religious character will always remain the strongest in this area. The light of the belief in the living God proceeds from the Middle East, and from there to the whole world. It is the place and the geography in which the Biblical events happened, and its peoples still practice the rituals and ascetic practices in the seasons and times which were practiced by the generations of the Holy Bible. There, society, founded on the idea of the family and the clan, i.e. the patriarchal establishment, is still the living and active form practiced in the region's communities.

Most importantly, the Middle East is the place from which Christianity had shown forth and enlightened the entire world. It is the land of divine transfiguration, and the location that the Lord God chose when he became flesh to fulfil the mystery of his economy and sacrifice for all humanity. It is a land which was sanctified by the presence of Christ himself. Should Christianity become weakened or disappear from it, that would be a great loss for the entire Church. The Middle East is, without rival, the richest region in the world for its ancient Christian ruins; in fact, it is the land that contains the most sacred sites of Christianity in history, which witnessed and continues to witness to Christ, the incarnate living God.

The lands of the Middle East witnessed the most important and greatest theological disputes between Christians. In it, the monastic and ascetical way of life was founded and spread to the entire Christian world. That way of life continues there to this day, witnessing to the spirit of the Gospel. On the other hand, the many persecutions, torments, and tribulations, which the churches had to endure, saved them from the delusions of worldly glory and made them preserve evangelical simplicity.

## **3. A Historical Summary of The Founding of Christian Churches and Sects in The Middle East.**

Our Lord Jesus founded one church with Himself as its head, and this foundation was completed on the day of Pentecost when the Apostles went out to preach the Good News. So the first churches were formed in Jerusalem among those of the circumcision, and in Antioch among the nations, where the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). In the first

centuries the great churches in the main cities of the empire rose up: Rome, the capital; Constantinople, the new capital; Alexandria; Antioch; and Jerusalem. These churches were called Apostolic Churches.

The church struggled against many heresies and strange teachings which began to spread all across the world. This forced it to formulate the correct teaching of the Christian doctrine in the common language and the language of educated people of the time, i.e. Greek. Local and Ecumenical Councils were held to achieve this, but the diversity of cultures, languages, and liturgical practices did not allow for an agreement on uniform expressions to describe the mystery of divine economy. Therefore, schisms and disputes tore the church apart. Dogmatic reasons were essentially behind these schisms in addition, of course, to many political, social, and national reasons, which played an important role in the process of dividing the church.

The first schism occurred after the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (431 AD). This resulted in the creation of the Assyrian Church, which is also called the Church of the East, or the Assyrian Church of the East. This church declared its break in communion with the Mother Church formally in 499 AD, and endorsed the Nestorian teachings.

The second schism occurred after the Council of Chalcedon, or the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451), and this resulted in the creation of non-Chalcedonian churches. The initial signs of the creation of these churches began when some objected to the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. Their formation was completed in the second half of the sixth century, after many attempts to solve this complicated situation failed. These churches are:

- ❖ The Coptic Church: It was called thus because most of its members were Copts, the descendants of the ancient Egyptians who formed the majority of the inhabitants of Egypt.
- ❖ The Ethiopian Church: Its formation goes back to the fourth century. Because it was auxiliary to the Church of Alexandria, it followed suit in the fifth century and rejected the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon.
- ❖ The Syrian Jacobite Church: Syrians are the ancient people of Syria, who converted to Christianity from its beginning. They are one of the essential elements in the Church of Antioch. They were called “Jacobite” because of Jacob Baradaeus who played a crucial role in its creation and in its formal rejection of the Council of Chalcedon in the second half of the sixth century. Auxiliaries of this church include the Syrian Church in India and Malabar, which eventually broke from it in 1964.
- ❖ The Armenian Church: The founding of this church and its organization goes back to the beginning of the fourth century. It did not participate in the Council of Chalcedon because of the war that raged between the Armenians and the Persians, but it declared its formal rejection to the Council of Chalcedon in the sixth century.

One branch of the Syrian Church did not reject the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon, and it came to being as an independent group in the late seventh century and the beginnings of the eighth. This group was called the Maronite church, which endorsed the Monothelite teaching.

Then Islam entered the story and took over control of the Middle East, the churches were divided among the following groups:

1. Melkites: The Roman (Orthodox)
2. Jacobites: This church used the Western Syriac dialect
3. Maronites: This church also used the Western Syriac dialect
4. Nestorians: They used the Eastern Syriac dialect
5. Coptic: in Egypt

These five churches are the original churches whose roots sink deeply into the land of the Middle East. The Armenian Church, however, began moving into the region from the beginning of the tenth century.

In the eleventh century, after the great schism took place between East and West in 1054, and after many attempts to restore unity failed, the Church of Rome began pursuing a method of inclusion and resorted to proselytism.

As a result of the Crusades which the West had launched against the East and the early efforts undertaken to send missionaries, monastic orders, Western diplomats, free educational institutions designed for Eastern Churches in Rome, schools, aid, and so on, Rome was able through many conflicts to add to its jurisdiction a part of each of the aforementioned churches in the Middle East. In that way, it had seized small groups from these churches, westernized them, and added to them Latin elements. Not a single church escaped the evils of this partition.

- ❖ The Maronite Church adopted the Latin customs and united with Rome completely in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1741).
- ❖ The Catholic Melkites seceded from the Orthodox Melkite Church in 1724.
- ❖ The Chaldean Catholics seceded from the Nestorian Assyrian Church and founded an independent church since 1553.
- ❖ The Syrian Catholics seceded from the Syrian Orthodox Jacobite Church and founded an independent patriarchate in 1662.
- ❖ The Coptic Catholics seceded from the Coptic Church and founded an independent patriarchate in 1947.
- ❖ The Armenian Catholics seceded from the Armenian Church and founded their first patriarchate in Lebanon in 1742.

From the sixteenth century, and following the breaking away of the Protestants from the Church of Rome and establishing Protestant churches in Western Europe and America, and as a result of continuous wars and colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Protestant missionary campaigns, aid, schools, and so on, Protestant churches in the East were established as well, also at the expense of the mother churches in the region. That is how Presbyterian and Anglican churches arrived in the scene. Most recently many cults, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelicals, Seventh-Day Adventists, Baptists and others, entered on the grounds that they were preaching Christianity in the land of its origin. This is what led to increasing disunity, division and conflict in the body of the church, which has led in turn to severe weakness in the Christianity in the land of Christ, and even to its disappearance in some parts.

#### **4. The Intellectual Mosaic in The Traditions of Middle Eastern Churches.**

In reality, there is no such thing as a Christian East. In other words, we should not think that such a unified entity exists. The Middle East contains a great number of varying and differing churches. The Christian East is closer to a mosaic in its variety than it is to a uniform unit. The complexity of its human geography is amazing in its diversity, especially in a piece of land which occupies but a small portion of the earth's surface.

From the mother church in Jerusalem, which formed a spiritual pole at the centre of the three contents of Asia, Africa and Europe, the good news spread gradually to Asia Minor, Armenia, Central Europe, Northern Europe, and the Slavic world during the first millennium of Christian history. In the East, on the other hand, soon after the evangelization of Eastern Syria and Mesopotamia, the good news spread to Persia, India, and Central Asia. To the south, the good news spread through Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, along the Nile Valley to Ethiopia, and covered all of North Africa, Libya and Morocco.

As a result, the diversity of the indigenous cultures affected the churches that then formed and influenced each of them in its own unique manner. This uniqueness was often seen as a barrier which isolated one church from another. Some churches are culturally Greek; others are Syrian or Aramaen. Some churches are Egyptian, containing the culture of the Coptic and Ethiopian Nile Valley. Some are culturally Armenian, not to mention those which adopted Latin culture or were influenced by it after their union with Rome. After the invasion of the region by Protestant missionaries, many of these churches were divided and split up into ever smaller groups.

This is one side of the issue. The other side resulted from the Islamic conquest which occurred in the seventh century, the "millet" system under Ottoman rule (where each church became a "millet" or sect with its own unique character), and the policies pursued by the great countries in the Middle East during the first half of the twentieth century. All this history left an amazing Christian variety for current generations, which one could classify as such:

1. The Greek Orthodox Church (the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem).
2. The Greek Catholics Church (the aforementioned patriarchates under one leadership).
3. The Syrian Orthodox Church (the patriarchate of Antioch).
4. The Syrian Catholic Church (the patriarchate of Antioch).
5. The Maronite Church (the patriarchate of Antioch).
6. The Assyrian Church of the East (the Catholicate of Seleucia and Ctesiphon).
7. The Chaldean Catholic Church (the patriarchate of Babylon and Baghdad).
8. The Armenian Orthodox Church (the Catholicate of Cilicia, Lebanon, and the patriarchate of Jerusalem).
9. The Armenian Catholic Church (Patriarchate of Cilicia).
10. The Latin churches (the Patriarchate of Jerusalem).
11. The Coptic Orthodox Church (the Patriarchate of Alexandria).
12. The Coptic Catholic Church (the Patriarchate of Alexandria).
13. The Protestant churches, and most the important among them are the Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Anglican.

One could add to these the modern groups which branched out of American Protestantism and formed in the region during the second half of the twentieth century.

This diversity does not prevent the people of God who exist in this area from being a people formed by the breath of the Holy Spirit, even though the hands of humans caused it to become scattered. In the little country of Lebanon, for example, where the land does not exceed ten thousand square kilometres, the churches of East and West are all represented in the one and a half million Christians living in it. This cultural diversity had played a role which led to division and isolation at one time, but each church today carries its traditions, liturgical practices, and spiritual heritage, and meet with other churches to introduce a diverse harmonious unity and shining activity.

As for the language of the region, it had been one of the languages which carried the Christian faith during the first seven centuries: Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, and later Arabic.

Hellenic Greek, which carried the culture of the region from the days of Alexander the Great, continued over the years and remained inscribed on the currency until the beginning of the eighth century. This same language was predominant in theology, ecumenical and local councils, and remained, way after the Islamic occupation, the language of authors such as Saint John of Damascus. However, in terms of liturgical, oral preaching, and missionary work, it had given way gradually to local languages.

The Arabic language, on the other hand, was the language of travel and trade between the different Arab tribes. This language began to enter slowly into Christian liturgical practice starting with the eleventh century approximately, especially through the translation of holy books. The entrance of the first printing press to the monastery of Qozhaya in Lebanon in 1610 under Emir Fakhr El-Din II is the greatest indication that Christians were interested in the Arabic language and had adopted it. The Arabic language progressed at the hands of Christians, who made it a modern, literary, and scientific language, and as a result of their efforts, the renaissance came along in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Turks, Kurds, Mamluks, and Ottomans had fortified political Islam in the region, but Christians were the ones who saved intellectual Arabic from its distinctive religious character. Therefore, the Arabic renaissance is, at its roots, a Syrian-Lebanese achievement, and specifically Christian.

## **5. Christianity and Islam in the Middle East.**

The relationship between Christianity and Islam in the region has a long history, since the founding of Islam. Eastern Christians had lived with Muslims in the Middle East for many centuries, often through unstable conditions, some difficult and some harmonious. For this reason, one must study the relationship between the two in depth, taking into consideration what had accumulated over time, the positive and the negative, without stalling in a framework of ordinary and superficial dialogue as is the case many times. One must also understand the images which the Muslim conscience developed about Christians. The Muslim image of Christians has the following characteristics:

***The First Image:*** The Christians are the “Nasara” because the Quran does not use the word “Christians.” Christians may accept this title as followers of Jesus of Nazareth, but they reject it because it was the name of a specific group of Christians that appeared in history; that group was Jewish in character and rejected the divinity of Christ.

***The Second Image:*** Christians are the “People of the Book,” and that is another Quranic expression. Islam admits that Christians are one of the monotheistic faiths, but it accuses them of distorting their scriptures since these are not compatible with the Quranic revelation.

***The Third Image:*** Christians in Islam are “dhimmi” people, which means that they are among those who are granted protection and peace in the house of Islam (Dar Al-Islam). Christians had been subjected to paying “Jizya,” (The “Jizya” was a tax enforced by the Muslim ruler on Christians in return for allowing them to remain in the Christian faith and because they refused to convert to Islam; in return they would be granted protection since they are residing in Muslim land. This was imposed on every capable adult male, and often it was even imposed on all, including women, children, and the elderly, depending on the ruler and the circumstances). Christians also had limited personal freedoms, were forced to wear distinguishing clothes, and were forbidden to ride horses or practice certain crafts and trades. In worship, these prohibitions included forbidding processions, ringing of bells, and building churches. In civil life, they were forbidden from taking on positions of responsibility or participating in politics or the army. This was the case in the past; however, remnants of these practices remain in effect in different countries, depending on their constitutions and how much secularism had seeped into them.

***The Fourth Image:*** The name “Rum.” When Muslims took control of the Middle East, they defined the Christians who shared the same faith as the Byzantines as “Rum.” Since Muslims often confuse faith and politics, Arabism and Islam, some of them still consider the Christians of the Arab World as citizens of another empire, which puts the Arab Christians in an awkward position, as if they are not Arab citizens.

These conceptions made the relationship between Christians and Muslims often uneasy. Certainly, it is necessary to do everything which could help clear that image and calm these conditions. This initiative should come from the Christians most of the time.

Therefore, the relationship between Christians and Muslims is grounded in two levels:

**First:** Coexistence. The Christians of the Middle East as well as its Muslims live in one country and one land, sharing the same culture and speaking the language of the Quran and Islam. The Christians know in depth the Islamic books, customs and rituals, and they have shared the same history with Muslims, both in its joys and its sorrows. This makes the Christians of the Middle East the most experienced among Christians in coexisting with Muslims and the most capable of having a dialogue with Muslims.

**Second:** Christian diversity. Christians witness to Christ and the Gospel in a living and steady way which exposes the virtues of the Gospel, even though religious tolerance in the Islamic mentality allows for freedom of worship but not for freedom of conversion to a religion other than Islam. Muslims completely forbid leaving Islam.

Despite this, Christian groups in that region, even after thirteen centuries, and especially after the twentieth century, have proven that they are minorities that enjoy resilience and motivation, which move the majority and prevent it from becoming dormant.

## **6. The Current Situation.**

It is worth noting that the inhabitants of this region, Christians and Muslims, are subject to the affects of their shared history; they have concluded from it one culture and mentality that form their common humanity. Western modernity seems, in many instances, to take on an atheistic and immoral appearance, or as a cultural invasion which threatens the region’s status quo. Therefore, some struggle against it with all their might.

The interests of powerful western countries sneak in skilfully through the doors of religious sectarianism, since religion is one of the elements that form identity, and it is used often to divide people from one another. The political struggles that are taking place now in the region negatively affect the lives of Christians, both as citizens and as Christians. The Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands makes daily life difficult on many levels, whether in freedom of movement, livelihood, or religious life. Reaching the holy sites depends on a military pass, which is given to some and denied for others. The wars which took place displaced Christians as well as others, and Christians became strangers in the land of Christ. Also, the instability in Lebanon displaced its Christians. As for the war in Iraq, which unleashed the forces of evil in religious sects, Christians were its main victims since they formed a numerically smaller and weaker group; meanwhile, international politics did not account for them at all.

What makes the situation more difficult is that many groups in the Middle East confuse Christianity with the West and do not distinguish easily between what is political and what is religious; this causes severe harm to the churches of the region. The truth is that, even though western culture in Europe and America has Christian roots, the system by which these countries are run is certainly secular, and even far from Christian principles in terms of its politics. If we examine history closely, we will see how the politics of western countries had a negative effect on the Christians of the East, who are considered by many native inhabitants as allies of the West just because they are Christian. The churches of the region still pay an enormous cost because of these policies.

Another issue that threatens Christian existence in the East is the disease of migration, which has infected all the members of the churches in the Middle East: in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. It is a real bleeding that makes some who watch the situation predict that if the situation remained as it is, only a small fraction of Christians would still exist in the region, especially since the reason for migration is no longer to pursue daily bread and better livelihood, but because Christians feel insecure and afraid. The conditions of war forced the Christians of Lebanon, and now those of Iraq, to migrate to any place under the sun where they could live in peace. The Arab Christian still departs from his homeland to this day. For more than a century, the Christian inhabitants of the Middle East have been scattered all over the world, their numbers in the millions. They are being uprooted, and this is a tragedy that people forget and ignore.

Since the situation now is a matter of fact, that is the existence of the Eastern church in the West, it is the duty of the West to closely get to know Eastern traditions and help preserve their links with their roots, traditions, prevent them from melting and getting lost in western societies, and to work on strengthening these churches in their original homeland.

However, the Christians, although they now form a simple minority in Middle Eastern countries with percentages ranging from approximately %1 to %10, with the exception of Lebanon, are active, dynamic, and brilliant. They love their land and have not stopped communicating with it even if they have parted from it, and they live their faith with sincerity in their public and private lives.

I can describe the current situation of the churches with more preciseness in the area I was born and lived in: Syrian and Lebanon. Christians there are citizens who enjoy completely equal rights. The government even supports and protects them. I believe that Syria is the only Islamic state which has regard for Christian's main holidays, such as Christmas, New Year's, Western and Eastern Easter; these are regarded as national holidays by the state. It is the right

of Christian public employees to be late for work on Sundays; they may arrive at 11:00 AM rather than 8:00 AM if they wanted to attend a Divine Liturgy. As for the building of churches and monasteries, the state is supportive through tax exemptions and providing services to them.

Our churches are active and enjoy many projects, youth activities, educational institutions, charities and so on. There is Christian education, proclaiming the Gospel, which occurs through homilies, liturgical services, Sunday Schools, as well as through magazines, books, bulletins, and the Internet. The work of the Church occurs also in a great number of social projects, clinics, hospitals, orphanages, elderly homes, institutions for the disabled, schools, and others. The laity play a central and essential role in these services.

These schools and church institutions perform an important role in deepening the ties between all children of the same country; they are open to Muslims as well as Christians. They create a chance for better common understanding which helps prepare people who are capable of discerning the positive from the negative in order to hold on to what is better, especially since the Christians of Syria and Lebanon have played an essential part in the past century, both in public and national causes, and have participated in a distinguished manner in attempts for renewal and revival.

It is worth mentioning that meetings of Christian churches and dialogue between them occurs mainly with the framework of the Council of Churches of the Middle East, which brings together the churches of the region in four families, and these are: the Chalcedonian Orthodox family (Greek Orthodox Church), the Non-Chalcedonian family (the Coptic, Syrian, and Armenian churches), the Uniate Catholics (Catholic Greeks, Syrians, Armenians, Maronites, and so forth), and the Protestant family (Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other denominations). This continuous meeting and dialogue has helped in removing so many obstacles which had existed between the churches of the region, and has helped unite points of view in order to solve many of the problems and difficulties which disrupt their path.

## **7. Hopes and Expectations.**

We, the groups which reside in western societies and come from roots in Middle Eastern countries, which have not cut and will not cut our bonds with our Eastern roots, belong to the Middle East and show solidarity with it, and we form an essential element in it. We participate, as citizens, with Muslims in all responsibilities of building and developing, even on the levels of education, culture, social or economical works, and so on. We look forward to working in a spirit of love and sincerity to make firm the complete equality of all citizens of all levels: political, economic, and religious, to declare the Word of Truth in the face of the powerful and in the face of policies that bring harm to the various country's interests, to emphasise a culture of peace and non-violence, and to take part in defending all human rights in the face of any extremism or violence and to stop the spread of extremist ideologies which harm society and form a threat to its people, Muslims as well as Christians, which leave a resulting negative effect on Christian existence in the East.

It is our obligation, as Christians, to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, who participated in a great way in their societies and played an essential role in developing their countries. Our presence, despite our small numbers, especially in our own institutions and others, is worthy of appreciation. Our statistics prove that the participation of the youth in the church and their active presence in its institutions indicate that the church there, despite its

afflictions, is active and a witness to the world, and that it is performing its pastoral role in preserving its children and serving everyone without discrimination.

We believe and teach that no matter how much our church is in pain, and no matter how much it suffers in the East, its living Master is in it, and it is alive in Him; it hears his voice saying to it, "Do not be afraid, little flock."

**In this regard, we would like to tell the following story which occurred in Damascus:**

In the beginning of the Twentieth century, under Ottoman rule, the patriarchal see of the Antiochian Greek Orthodox Church was held by Gregory Haddad. Poverty and starvation was upon all people, and Russia was sending wheat for aid to the Patriarchate of Damascus, where they were making bread and distributing it to those in need without discrimination between Christian and Muslim. The need and suffering became so great that the bread was no longer enough for everyone. When the supplies were running out in the patriarchate's warehouses, the nun responsible for distributing the bread asked the patriarch whether it would be possible to have it distributed to the children of the denomination only. The patriarch answered her in a calm voice, knowing what he intended to do, "Do not worry my daughter; all you have to do is bake the dough today as usual, and prepare the bread for tomorrow. I will go to the bakery at night and put a name on every loaf. Then, all you'd have to do tomorrow is give the loaf to the person whose name is on it." When the next day arrived, the nun went to distribute the bread, but to her amazement, she did not find a single name on the loaves of bread. She rushed back to ask the patriarch about the work and found him walking in the yard as if he knew what would happen. Troubled, she asked him: "Your Beatitude, I have not found a single name on the bread, so how am I to distribute it? And to whom shall I give the bread and to whom shall I not give?" His Beatitude smiled and answered her, "Listen carefully my daughter. Each person in need who comes to you asking for bread you shall give him, without asking him about his name or religion, because each loaf that has no name on it belongs to him who asks for it." And it was so.

Patriarch Gregory had visited Tsarist Russia, and the Tsar presented him with a precious and adorned cross. When the patriarchate ran out of wheat and no money was left in its treasury to buy more, the patriarch sold this cross in Sarsaq Market in Beirut, which was famous back then, in order to buy with its price more wheat and distribute it to all who ask. The merchant who bought the cross was a wealthy Muslim from Beirut. On knowing that the Cross was that of Patriarch Gregory, he travelled to Damascus and went into the patriarchate to meet with the patriarch. When he met him, he quickly took the Cross out and presented it once more to the patriarch as a gift, thanking him for his love and charity for all without distinction. Remarkably, the patriarch sold the Cross three times and it always returned to him in a similar way!

Glory to God!