The House was filled with the fragrance of the oil (John 12:3)

Pastoral Letter
Holy Week & Easter 2014

Bishop Paul Hinder, OFM Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia
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(Portion from John 12:3)

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you!

1. A year ago Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected bishop of Rome and thus became Pope Francis. Soon after his election he surprised many of the faithful by his unconventional style of being shepherd. I remember more than one of the faithful who was shocked by a pope who had the courage on Holy Thursday to wash the feet of prisoners - one of whom was even a Muslim girl. Was it not too much? Many people reacted understandably like some of Jesus’ entourage when he ate with sinners after calling Zachaeus from the sycamore tree or when a certain “Mary took a litre of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair” (John 12:3). The Pharisees and scribes were not the only ones to be scandalized. Even the disciples of Jesus had difficulty in understanding their master. Judas, who would betray him, openly criticised him for a seemingly very honourable reason: “Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days’ wages and given to the poor?” (John 12:5). However, the gospel positively remarks: “The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil” (John 12:3). Jesus, for his part, defended the woman: “Leave her alone. Let her keep this for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (John 12:7-8). He thus indicated that her gesture would last beyond his death and be remembered on the day of his resurrection.

2. With their unconventional gestures, Jesus as well as Pope Francis indicated an important change of climate which is rooted in God’s own bounty: nobody is excluded from the love of God; nobody, however far from God he or she may seem to be, is barred from the compassion of the heavenly Father who “makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Mt 5:45). Jesus does not declare the bad as good; nor does he say that the sinner may continue on the wrong path. What he wants to show us is that God’s love is so immense that he leaves the door open even for the greatest sinner in order to give him or her the chance to
inherit eternal salvation. If Pope Francis speaks so often about mercy and compassion he does not mean that everything is now allowed and God’s commandments can be put aside. Instead, he wants us to understand that God always remains the loving and merciful Father who catches sight of the son who went astray and now makes a step towards him: “He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). What we sinners hope for ourselves, we should also always hope for others!

3. Compassion and love form the “fragrance that fills the house” (John 12:3). They change our relationship with God and consequently with others. The oil that Mary poured on the feet of Jesus was meant for the Son of God, but its fragrance filled the house, i.e. the whole environment. Is it not a powerful picture of what the Church is or what the Church should be - the space of the whole building in which the fragrance of our love for Jesus can be smelled? The love that we show for Jesus through our liturgies, prayers and personal sacrifices has to fill the whole house of the Church and even the whole world. This means that liturgy and devotion find their continuation in our love towards those who thirst for it. In this regard a lot remains to be done in our communities.

4. Saint Paul speaks in his second letter to the Corinthians about our mission in the following words: “We are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the latter an odour of death that leads to death, to the former an odour of life that leads to life” (2 Co 2:15-16). For those who are open to the gospel, our authentic Christian life is perceived as the “aroma of Christ”. For others who refuse to believe, the same aroma may turn into “an odour of death”. We should therefore not be surprised if the gospel and those who live according to it are often met with resistance and hostility in many parts of the world, and sometimes even among our own people. This is however something that Jesus had already predicted would happen.

5. The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, speaks very often about the forces that bring harm to the world and especially to
Christians. It is the bad odour that tries to overcome the aroma of Christ, as in the following vision of the seer: “Now in my vision this is how I saw the horses and their riders. They wore red, blue, and yellow breastplates, and the horses’ heads were like heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and sulphur. By these three plagues of fire, smoke, and sulphur that came out of their mouths a third of the human race was killed. For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails are like snakes, with heads that inflict harm” (Rev 9:17-19). The powerful pictures of the Bible tell us that lives of Christians in the existing world will always be under threat. Amidst this world where too often stinking “fire, smoke, and sulphur” comes out of the mouth of evil powers and spirits, Christians have to remain people who manifest the “aroma of Christ” and spread the fragrance of love, reconciliation, patience and peace.

6. In the letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul reminds us about the kind of life that pleases God and spreads the fragrance of Christ: “So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma” (Eph 5:1-2). This fragrance is present wherever and whenever we put into practice the love Jesus has given us as the “new commandment”. Our gifts for those in need are such a fragrance. Saint Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, thanks the community for their love-gift in the following words: “I have received full payment and I abound. I am very well supplied because of what I received from you through Epaphroditus, ‘a fragrant aroma,’ an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Phil 4:18). In a similar way your bountiful gifts for the work of the Missionaries of Charity in Yemen, for people hit by natural calamities as in the Philippines, for the suffering Christians in Syria, or for brothers and sisters struggling in our midst is truly “a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God”.

7. It is therefore the love among us that determines the climate and atmosphere not only in the communities of the Church within our Vicariate, but even beyond it. What happened in the house where Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with the precious and fragrant oil is
still happening in the life of the Church through the sacraments and their effects in the life of the Christians who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit. The Church has conserved, in her memory and in her practice, the symbols and elements of fragrance and aroma when she still uses frankincense in the liturgy and the holy oils for certain sacraments. During the Holy Week – in our Vicariate usually on the Tuesday preceding the Easter Triduum – the bishop consecrates in the Chrism Mass the three oils which are to be used during the year in parishes for the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, for the anointing of the sick and – a rather rare event in this part of the world – for the ordination of priests or of a bishop. The holy Chrism is also used for the consecration of a new altar in a church building, an event that fortunately is more frequent in the United Arab Emirates and in Oman. In one of his sermons the pontifical preacher, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, said: “The kings, the priests and the prophets were anointed with perfumed oil and this was the sign that they were consecrated for divine service. In Christ all of these symbolic anointings become reality. In the baptism in the Jordan he is consecrated king, prophet and eternal priest by God the Father. This did not happen through the use of material oil but through spiritual oil, that is, through the Holy Spirit, “the oil of joy,” as a Psalm says. This explains why the Church highlights so much the anointing with sacred chrism.”

8. As we do not very often speak about the symbol of the oil in the life of the Church and as we are approaching Holy Week and Easter, I would like to dwell for a moment on this topic, which is deeply related to what Mary did for Jesus before his death and what Joseph of Arimathea did for Jesus after his death. However, in both scenes, the anointing with oil points beyond the death of our Lord to his resurrection. During the Chrism Mass of the Holy Week, three different oils are consecrated which stand for three basic realities in the life of the Church: the Oil of Catechumens, the Oil of the Sick, and the Oil of Consecration (or Chrism), which is perfumed.

9. The Oil of Catechumens stands for the first call of God to a human being, a call that leads to baptism. Actually Christ touches the human
soul, which is restless in its search for God. “The oil of catechumens tells us that it is not only we who seek God: God himself is searching for us” (Benedict XVI). The oil of catechumens is used during the initiation of adults who are prepared for baptism or during the rite of the baptism of children. It tells us that God has fallen in love with every human being and therefore is in search of him or her. We are all called to give hope to people who have not yet experienced the love of God but who are on the way and are ready to open to Him the doors of their hearts. We all know people who are desperate, struggling or simply too tired to continue their journey - let us help them to discover the love of God through the love we show to them.

10. The Oil of the Sick stands for the healing of the fragility of the human body, which is very often exposed to pain and all kinds of illnesses. It is not by chance that the ministry of healing had a substantial part in the public ministry of Jesus. Consequently “healing is one of the fundamental tasks entrusted by Jesus to the Church, following the example that he gave as he travelled throughout the land healing the sick” (Benedict XVI). Jesus sent his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God. One of the most powerful signs of the Kingdom of God in our midst was, and still is, the care of the sick, the ministry of healing of body and soul. I thank the thousands of nurses and the hundreds of physicians who work in the countries of our Vicariate while taking care of the sick, healing them and giving them relief in their suffering. There are many faithful engaged in visiting the sick: extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist who bring the sacrament to the bedridden, members of prayer groups and associations who visit those who are hospitalized or cannot come anymore to church, and of course, the priests who heal souls in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and are called to anoint with oil those who are seriously ill. I do not forget the Missionaries of Charity in Yemen, who look after mentally and physically disabled persons in a way that touches even the hearts of many who do not believe in Christ. They are the “aroma of Christ” amidst the bad odours of the wounds and neglect for those who are sick and abandoned!
11. The Oil of Consecration (or Chrism) is the perfumed chrism and stands for the priestly dimension of every Christian life and for the special ministry of ordained priests. The Holy Scripture speaks several times about the priestly dimension of those who belong to the people of God. Listen to the promise of the prophet Isaiah: “You yourselves shall be called “Priests of the Lord,” “Ministers of our God” you shall be called” (Is 61:6). In the book of Exodus, God consecrates his people in the following way: “You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). In the New Testament, Saint Peter uses the tradition of the Old Testament applying it to the Christian faithful: “But you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pt 2:9).

12. The “royal priesthood” of which Saint Peter speaks is constituted in baptism and confirmation. Therefore every baptized and confirmed member of the faithful enjoys the dignity of this royal priesthood which enables him or her to be an active member of the Church and a missionary through the witness of Christian life. It grants the right to receive the sacraments of the Church, to listen to the Word of God, and to be an active part of the communion of prayer of Christ’s Body. Anointed with the holy chrism, each member of the faithful is called to contribute, through his or her Christian life, to the fragrance in the Church and to spread the aroma of Christ in the world.

13. In order to guarantee the continuity of the royal priesthood of the faithful, the Lord has given to the Church the sacred ministers who serve the Church as bishops, priests or deacons. Priests and bishops receive on the occasion of their ordination the special anointing with the consecrated chrism as a sign that they will act on Christ’s behalf each time they administer the sacraments of the Church and deliver the Word of God in the name of the Lord. Unfortunately the individual priest may not always measure up to the height of the call of Jesus and to the expectations of the faithful. However, Christ desired that despite the human limits of priests and bishops, their sacramental ministry remain fully effective. Each time a priest or bishop administers
the sacraments, it is Christ himself who acts independently of their personal holiness or sinfulness. That is why Saint Francis of Assisi could give the following powerful witness in his Testament only a few weeks before his death: “The Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had as much wisdom as Solomon and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not preach in their parishes against their will. And I desire to respect, love and honour them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords. And I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others. I want to have these most holy mysteries honoured and venerated above all things and I want to reserve them in precious places. Wherever I find our Lord’s most holy names and written words in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place. And we must honour all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us spirit and life.” The statement of Saint Francis is, of course, not an excuse for the sinfulness or laziness of any priest who has to take responsibility before the Lord for what he is doing or not doing. However, it leads us back to the essential and to see behind the priest the one who is the priest par excellence, Jesus Christ.

14. The holy chrism is also used for the consecration of an altar. The altar is the real centre of every church because it represents Christ who has given his life for us. All the other liturgical requisites receive their importance from the altar, whether they be the pulpits from where the Word of God is read and explained, the tabernacle with the reserve of the Holy Eucharist, the Crucifix, the pictures of the saints or many other similar holy items. In fact, what is celebrated on the altar gives real life and meaning to the rest. In the second half of this year, we shall have the joy of blessing two new altars in the respective churches - in St. Joseph’s and St. Paul’s, Mussafah - both in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. May these two worship places with their altars become sources
of grace from where the faithful are enabled to spread “the aroma of Christ”!

15. In the Prayer after Communion of the Chrism mass during Holy Week, we ask: “May we merit to become the pleasing fragrance of Christ!” This is what we are called to be. It is true for every Christian, and remains a particular task of priests. We should never fall into the calculating, businesslike mentality of Judas Iscariot, which leads straight to betrayal. Those who are anointed with the chrism have to be humble lovers like Mary. Thus they spread the fragrance of Christ’s love, wherever they are and by whatever they do - in the words of Saint Paul, becoming “the odour of the knowledge of Christ in every place” (2 Co 2:14).

16. May I summarize: The church and the world are in need of the oil of promise that God is always in search of us; the oil of the Good Samaritan to heal our wounds, to prevent them from becoming worse and even more painful; and finally the scent and fragrance of the oil Mary poured on the feet of Jesus against all the bad odours of sin and destructive behaviour, which sometimes occur even in the Church. As we are approaching Easter, these symbols assume an even more profound meaning. In the story of Lazarus, Jesus approaches the tomb and says: “Take away the stone.” Martha, the dead man’s sister, said to him, “Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days” (John 11:39). However, Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, overcomes the stench of death and wakes Lazarus up from the dead. This is a sign and omen of the Lord’s own resurrection which will bring the fragrance of life everlasting. On Easter day, in contrast to the imagery of the horses in the book of Revelation mentioned earlier, spitting “fire, smoke and sulphur”, the risen Lord appears, bringing peace and breathing on the disciples the Holy Spirit. In him they will be able to spread “the aroma of Christ”.

17. Dear brothers and sisters, this is my wish to all of you on the occasion of the Paschal Mystery that we are celebrating during Holy Week and Easter: may you be filled with the life-giving fragrance of Christ and overcome the bad odours of sin in your lives. Thus you will
become witnesses of the immense love of Christ who was not ashamed to take a human body and experience the bad odour of a world full of injustice and hatred, and to overcome it with the fragrance of his compassion and love; He wants us to do the same.

May you experience in your personal life, in your families, in your parishes and wherever you reach out, the fresh breath of Christ who helps you to "fill the house with the fragrance of the oil" and thus give new hope to a depressed world.

Happy Easter to you all! May the Lord bless you and keep you!

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Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Abu Dhabi, 31st March 2014
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AL AIN - St. Mary's Church
P.O. Box 15645, Al Ain.
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www.stmarysdubai.com
Location: Oudh Metha Road, close to Oudh Metha Metro Station

JEBEL ALI - St. Francis of Assisi Church
P.O. Box 72715, Jebel Ali.
Tel: 04 884 5251, Fax: 04 884 5216
info@stfrancisjebelali.ac
www.stfrancisjebelali.ac
Location: Jebel Ali Village, behind the Jebel Ali Hospital/ Al Muntazah complex in the churches' area

FUJAIRAH - Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church
P.O. Box 1168, Fujairah.
Tel: 09 223 1377, Fax: 09 222 3238
olphfujairah@gmail.com
www.olphfujairah.org
Location: Close to the Water Tower, Carrefour

RAS AL KHAIMAH - St. Anthony of Padua Church
Box 10946, Ras Al Khaimah.
Tel: 07 244 4320, Fax 07 244 4321
Location: Take Exit 119 of E311 towards Al Jazeera Al Hamra. The church is situated near the tall chimney of the glass factory.

SHARJAH - St. Michael’s Church
P.O. Box 1745, Sharjah.
Tel: 06 5662424 / 06 5662049, Fax: 06 5663324
stmichaelsch@emirates.net.ac
www.stmichaelssharjah.org
Location: Al Yarmook Area, close to Al Estiglal Square, the Ministry of Labour

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