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Pastoral Letter
Holy Week & Easter 2015

Bishop Paul Hinder, OFM Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia
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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you!

1. These days we read almost every day about people who are discriminated against, tortured, and even killed: some because they belong to a particular tribe or race; some because they have a different religion. During the last few months we have witnessed that people were persecuted and killed because they are Christians. Because they were killed for being followers of Christ they are true martyrs. Many of us may find it difficult to overcome feelings of hatred when we see violence and injustice throughout the world, including countries in our own region. It is important that we do not fall into the devil’s trap. He wants us to become haters as he was from the beginning, and so lose our peace of mind, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Make me a channel of your peace!

2. You may know the prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi beginning with the words: “Make me a channel of your peace!” It is obvious: we can become and remain channels of God’s peace only if the vessel of our heart is emptied of all envy and hatred, and filled instead with “the love of God which is poured into our heart through the Holy Spirit” (*Romans 5:5*). Remember Jesus whose public activity started not only with preaching and healing, but especially with driving out the evil spirits and demons that possessed and ruined men and women and made them incapable of love.

3. Because the great saints throughout history were great believers and great lovers, they have often been peacemakers. There have been many who have spoken openly to the rulers of cities and states, reminding them of their duty to promote justice and peace. I refer again to Saint Francis of Assisi, who wrote a “Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples” reminding them that they had
one day to answer to God, the divine Ruler, regarding the way they governed. He not only wrote letters, he also intervened where he saw it necessary, as the following story shows:

*When (blessed Francis with his companions) arrived at Arezzo, there was a great scandal and war night and day throughout almost the entire city because of two factions who had hated each other for a long time. Blessed Francis heard all the noise and cries night and day, since he received hospitality in a hospice in a neighbourhood outside the city, and it seemed to him that the demons were overjoyed by this and were inciting the people to destroy their city with fire and other dangerous means. Moved by pity for the city, he said to Brother Sylvester, the priest, a man of God, of great faith and admirable simplicity and purity, whom the holy Father venerated as a saint: ‘Go in front of the city gate and in a loud voice command the devils that they all leave this city.’ Brother Sylvester got up, went in front of the city gate crying out in a loud voice: ‘Praised and blessed be the Lord Jesus Christ. On behalf of Almighty God and in virtue of holy obedience of our most holy father Francis, I command all the devils that they all leave this city!’ – Through the mercy of God and the prayer of blessed Francis, it so happened that, without any preaching, shortly afterwards, the citizens returned to peace and unity. (The Assisi Compilation 108)*

4. Another time when Francis of Assisi saw that there was a heavy and lengthy conflict between the bishop and the mayor of Assisi, threatening the well-being of the whole city and its population, he added a strophe to his famous Canticle of the Creatures. The same Sylvester had to sing this in public before the two parties:

*All praise be yours, my Lord, through those who grant pardon for love of you; through those who endure sickness and trial. Happy are those who endure in peace; by You, Most High, they will be crowned. (The Assisi Compilation 84)*

In fact, the intervention of Saint Francis led to a long period of peace between the two competing powers.

**Evil is cast out and good instilled by the Holy Spirit**

5. Conflicts and wars among individuals, groups, and nations are very often
comparable to what the Bible knows as demonic possession. Warfare cannot be overcome by good words and diplomatic negotiations alone. A deeper healing is needed, in which evil is exorcised and cast out, and good is instilled by the Holy Spirit. As Christians we are therefore called to be instruments of a peace which is not simply a situation of “non-war” or of an “armistice” but the fruit of the one who came into the world in order to bring peace:

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests. (Luke 2:14)

Father, forgive them

6. The true source of peace is therefore not to be found in diplomatic skills, however important they may be, but in the one who is the source of peace, God who revealed himself in his Son Jesus Christ. According to a prophecy of Isaiah we call him “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). His first words as the risen Lord to the disciples are: “Peace be with you” (John 20:19). The peace he offers to his disciples is rooted in his love, even to the end on the cross. The letter to the Colossians leads us to the heart of this mystery:

For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross [through him], both those on earth and those in heaven. And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds he has now reconciled in body of flesh through his death, to present you holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before him, provided that you persevere in the faith, firmly grounded, stable, and not shifting from the hope of the Gospel that you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, am a minister. (Colossians 1:19-23)

Consequently the peace announced powerfully at Easter is a fruit of the sacrifice of Jesus who died on the cross, not with a curse against his torturers and foes on his lips, but with a prayer of intercession: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). The first martyr of the young Church, Saint Stephen, will pray the same way: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Many others will do the same, like the Japanese or the Ugandan martyrs. I am sure that among those killed during the last twelve months by the so-called ISIL were Christians who, with the help of God, echoed the words
of Jesus on the cross. They are the true heroes and the seed of real peace, even though the fire of hatred may not be extinguished immediately.

7. The martyrs stand for the truth of what Saint Paul says about the peacemaking power of Jesus who died on the cross:

    For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

This is true not only for the relationship between Jews and pagans, but it is true in all situations where we are divided and led into violent conflicts. On the cross Jesus destroyed the roots of hatred. We, on the other hand, have to put ourselves humbly under the cross and let his pacifying love be instilled in our hearts.

**Blessed are the peacemakers**

8. In one of the Admonitions of Saint Francis we find a short reflection on the Beatitude at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

    Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. – Those people are truly peacemakers who, regardless of what they suffer in this world, preserve peace of spirit and body out of love of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Admonition XV)

Again, it is not the ascetic effort of our will which makes us peacemakers but the love of God which transforms our hearts and bodies into instruments of peace.

9. Jesus knew that even his disciples were not free of violent reactions when they experienced repudiation, unjust treatment, and death threats. Remember the sons of Zebedee who wanted to call down fire upon the Samaritans because
they refused them hospitality \((\text{Luke 9:51-56})\). Think also about the disciple who cut off the soldier’s ear in the garden where Jesus was arrested:

\[\text{Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled which say it must happen in this way?’ (Matthew 26:52-54)}\]

The history of Christianity is unfortunately full of moments when the words of Jesus have not been heard and implemented. Violence generates violence and produces new wars. We have seen it again and again in our own lifetime.

**Peace I leave you; my peace I give you**

10. As I said earlier, true peace is not simply a status of “non-war”. In its very essence it is a gift coming from another world. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes this divine gift on the evening of the Last Supper:

\[\text{Peace I leave you; my peace I give you. I do not give it you as the world gives it. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. (John 14:27)}\]

It is obvious that this peace cannot be obtained either by weapons or sophisticated negotiations. The peace Jesus wants to give us needs a purified heart, a heart that trusts and believes. Looking into our own sinful heart and into the situation of so many regions of the world we can easily detect the enemies of peace: injustice, false ambition, jealousy, power-struggle, greed, pride, and similar vices which hinder people from trusting one another and living in peace.

**Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace**

11. As peace begins in our heart we have to remember the source of this peace:

\[\text{Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)}\]
This justification happened in Baptism and Confirmation. It is celebrated in the sacrament of love, the Holy Eucharist, in which we obtain the gift of peace Jesus gave to the disciples in the Last Supper: “Do this in memory of me.” When we have lost peace because of our sins, we should restore it by the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as is said in the words of absolution:

God, the Father of mercies, through the death and the resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace. And I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

After this the priest can say without reservation: “Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.”

The family that prays together, stays together

12. It is important that we should experience pardon and peace in our real life. For this we need what I like to call “habitats of peace.” The first place where we should experience peace and reconciliation is the family. It is based on the mutual love and faithfulness of husband and wife, and bears fruit in the children brought up in a climate of love and understanding. We know that even in the best families there are times of tension and conflict. They can be overcome when there is a common ground in God and an atmosphere of prayer. The saying is still true: “The family that prays together, stays together.” Yet, even in our families, peace is threatened when misunderstanding, mistrust, egoism, and betrayal take the lead. In such situations a process of conversion of all the members is needed. Humility is required to make the first step. We have to avoid the stubbornness of expecting the first step from the others. Families which care for a climate of love, prayer, open communication, honesty, and mutual forgiveness, are truly “habitats of peace”.

Parish community: Be at peace among yourselves

13. The same is true for our parish communities and their different groups. Saint Paul gives the following basic admonition to the Thessalonians:
Be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thessalonians 5:13)

And then he continues:

We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

It can happen even among us that power-struggles and the craving for recognition disturb harmony and peace in a Christian community. It is the surest way to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Saint Paul who had a lot of problems with the Corinthians in this regard admonishes them:

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Corinthians 13:11)

It is the same advice he gives also to the Romans and to us all:

Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another. (Romans 14:19)

Help children to deal with conflicts in a non-violent way

14. Another field where the ground for “habitats of peace” can be laid is the schools. Education should not limit itself to the best academic knowledge and performance, but be a way to develop the skills of how to live peacefully together with other religions and nationalities. Children have to learn mutual acceptance and respect as the fundamental attitudes to a life lived in peace. I thank all our teachers, whether Religious or lay people, who are helping children to deal with conflicts in a non-violent way and to develop the skills of peacemakers.

Religious: be a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit

15. I should also like to stress a particular kind of “habitats of peace”: communities of Religious men and women. As you know, Pope Francis has proclaimed a Year of Consecrated Life which started on 30th November, 2014, and will finish on 2nd February, 2016. He encourages the members of consecrated life, among others, as follows:
In a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, where the powerless encounter oppression, where inequality abounds, we are called to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters. So, be men and women of communion! Have the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one (cf. Jn 17:21). Live the mysticism of encounter, which entails ‘the ability to bear, to listen to other people; the ability to seek together ways and means’. Live in the light of the loving relationship of the three divine Persons (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), the model for all interpersonal relationships. (Message for the Year of Consecrated Life I/2)

Most of our priests belong to a Religious Order. Different male and female Congregations are working in the schools and parishes of the U.A.E. The Missionaries of Charity and the Salesian priests in Yemen have, as the Pope writes, “the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension, as a credible sign of the presence of the Spirit”.

16. I encourage all our religious priests and nuns with the words of Pope Francis in the same message:

A whole world awaits us: men and women who have lost all hope, families in difficulty, abandoned children, young people without a future, the elderly, sick and abandoned, those who are rich in the world’s goods but impoverished within, men and women looking for a purpose in life, thirsting for the divine... Don’t be closed in on yourselves, don’t be stifled by petty squabbles, don’t remain a hostage to your own problems. These will be resolved if you go forth and help others to resolve their own problems, and proclaim the Good News. You will find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love. (Message II/4)

Where people have the courage to live in such a way, they will foster an environment of peace to help overcome deadly conflicts. In each one of us, and in a particular way in each consecrated man and woman, the word of the prophet Nahum may become true: “Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace.” (Nahum 2:1)
Turning point in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi

17. As I started this letter referring to Saint Francis of Assisi as a man of peace, I should like to tell you some important elements of his life which may help us to understand better why he could become a peacemaker. It was springtime 1206 in the small town of Assisi in Central Italy. The wealthy and international textile merchant, Pietro Bernardone, goes to court before the bishop against his own son Francis. The indictment: Francis should refund the money he had taken from his father’s fortune to help the poor and to restore a chapel in ruins close to Assisi. An early chronicler reports the event as follows:

Francis said to the bishop: “My Lord, I will gladly give back not only the money acquired from (my father’s) things, but even all my clothes.” And going into one of the bishop’s rooms, he took off all his clothes, and, putting the money on top of them, came out naked before the bishop, his father, and all the bystanders, and said: “Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Until now I have called Pietro di Bernardone my father. But, because I have proposed to serve God, I return to him the money on account of which he was so upset, and also all the clothing which is his, wanting to say from now on: ‘Our Father who art in heaven’, and not ‘My father, Pietro di Bernardone.” (Legend of Three Companions, VI)

18. The shocking scene symbolizes the radical change in the life of the 24-year-old man and gives us the key for a better understanding of Francis’ further life. After a deep crisis he was no longer in the mood of playing the game of money and wealth, of conflicts and compromises, of injustice and inequality. The only way to become free of this slavery was the real experience of being the child of the heavenly Father. Unless we see this spiritual background we shall not understand why and how Saint Francis becomes “the universal brother”. By cutting ties with a world he enjoyed for many years, he opened the way to a completely new experience of freedom, the freedom of the children of God.

From the world of wealth to the world of the poor

19. As a first step we notice that Francis passes from the world of wealth to the world of the poor, living in solidarity with them and experiencing in his
own life their needs. The second step was connected to the first: He left the privileged position of Assisi’s high society and became what he should call later a “lesser brother”. Finally, the new freedom enabled him to become the “universal brother” of every human being and of all creatures. Nobody was excluded from his brotherly care: neither the sick nor the strong, neither believers nor pagans, neither friend nor enemy, neither animals nor other creatures. All of them he addressed as his brothers and sisters, because he believed and felt the same Father God in and behind all people and all things.

The spirit of Assisi – Free of fear and hatred, full of simplicity and love

20. The outstanding result of this fundamental change in his life was a complete new relationship with everyone: a relationship free of fear and hatred, but full of simplicity and love. He became profoundly a man of peace who in the midst of the crusades could meet in Egypt with the Sultan Malik Al-Khamil; with the fighting parties of the civil wars in different Italian cities, as well as with outcasts of early capitalist society. He was always the man who brought with him peace, fruit of his deep union in Jesus Christ with the heavenly Father. He laid the foundation for what nowadays sometimes is called “the spirit of Assisi”.

21. When in 1986 Saint John Paul II planned the meeting with leaders of the different religions and the prayer for peace, he first thought of inviting them to Rome. But there was some hesitation and resistance from different parts, so that he had to reconsider the location. When he finally proposed Assisi, they agreed unanimously, because all – even the non-Christians – felt at home with the town where Saint Francis was born and had died. Is this not an expression of his universal brotherhood? The powerless poor man of Assisi became a very powerful peacemaker. Is there not a lesson here for all of us?

22. Dear brothers and sisters, we live in countries where we are and where we remain foreigners, expatriates. We live together with people of different religions. Sometimes we may feel that we do not have the same rights as others. Saint Francis was able to deal with this situation in a positive way when he
advised his brothers living in a Moslem country:

As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among the Moslems ... One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but while confessing they are Christians to be subject to every human ordinance for God’s sake. (The Earlier Rule XVI)

Is not this advice still valid for us? Not disputes and arguments, but rather our personal witness is important: living and acting as children of God.

Guide our feet into the path of peace

23. Every morning the Church prays in the canticle of the Benedictus that the Lord may “guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:79). Wherever we are going, we should remember the words of our Lord to his disciples:

Into whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household.’ If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him. (Luke 10:5-6)

In such a way the vision in Isaiah may become reality:

Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. (Isaiah 11:6)

This new gift of peace is the mandate Jesus gave to his disciples before he went to offer his life on the cross:

Peace I leave you; my peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give it. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. (John 14:27)

Day of prayer and penance for the Vicariate

24. Reconciliation and peace are gifts we can obtain only through prayer. As you celebrate Holy Week and the Paschal Triduum this year, remember in particular all who are discriminated against, tortured, expelled from their homes, abused, and killed. Let us pray for persecuted Christians around the world, especially in the Middle East. I propose that Wednesday of Holy Week (1 April, 2015) be a special day of prayer and penance for our suffering brothers and sisters; a day of fasting and abstinence like Good Friday. We can
say the novena of Our Lady of Perpetual Help with this special intention as we also call Mary “Help of Christians”. Let us remind ourselves that she is the patroness of our parish in Sana’a (Yemen).

**Queen of peace, pray for us**

25. At the end of the litany of Our Lady, we invoke the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with the words: “Queen of peace, pray for us”. She is the one who gave to the world the “Prince of Peace”. Although her heart was pierced by a sword she did not give way to hatred but stayed with her Son under the cross and must have made her own the words of Jesus:

> Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34)

Let us therefore invoke the Queen of Peace that she may intercede for the whole world and especially for the Middle East. The risen Lord wants to appear again in our midst and greet us: “Peace be with you!”

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

+ Paul Hinder, OFM Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

*Abu Dhabi, 1st March, 2015.*
REGULATIONS

FAST, ABSTINENCE, HOLY DAYS OF OBLIGATION

1. **Fast and Abstinence** are prescribed for Ash Wednesday and Good Friday for those who have completed 18 years of age and up to the age of 60 years.

2. **Abstinence** is prescribed as a general rule for every Friday, applicable to those who have completed the 14 years of age. However, for the particular circumstances of the Vicariate of Southern Arabia, abstinence is to be observed on Wednesdays of Lent. Out of devotion, abstinence may be observed every Wednesday throughout the year.

3. **Eucharistic Fast**: The faithful must abstain from solid food and liquids for one hour before receiving Holy Communion. This regulation is applied to Masses celebrated in the morning, afternoon or at midnight. Water does not break the fast. Those who are sick, even though not confined to bed, may take any liquid or food as medicine at any time before Holy Communion without asking permission.

4. **Easter Obligation** may be fulfilled at any time between the First Sunday in Lent and Trinity Sunday (Sunday after Pentecost).

5. **Holy Days of Obligation**: Sundays or Fridays (where it has been decided), Christmas and Assumption of the Bl. Virgin Mary.

6. **Feastdays transferred to the following or preceding Sunday**: Epiphany (January 6th); Corpus Christi; Ascension; Sts. Peter & Paul (June 29th); Assumption of the Bl. Virgin Mary (August 15th).

7. **Special celebration days**: Mary, Mother of God (January 1st); Our Lady of Arabia (Saturday after the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord); St. Joseph (March 19th); All Saints (November 1st); Immaculate Conception (December 8th).
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P.O. Box 54, Abu Dhabi.
Tel: 02 446 1929, Fax: 02 446 1868
abuparish@yahoo.com
www.stjosephsabudhabi.org
Location: Al Mushrif, on 17th Street, between Old Airport Road and Karamah Street (near Al Khuwair British School)

AL AIN - St. Mary's Church
P.O. Box 15645, Al Ain.
Tel: 03 721 4417, Fax: 03 721 7929
alainchurch@gmail.com
www.stmarysalain.com
Location: Near Etisalat, opposite Oasis Hospital

DUBAI - St. Mary's Church
P.O. Box 51200, Dubai.
Tel: 04 337 0087 / 335 8504, Fax: 04 334 7594
stmarysdxb@gmail.com
www.saintmarysdubai.org
Location: Oudh Metha Road, close to Oudh Metha Metro Station

JEYBEL ALI - St. Francis of Assisi Church
P.O. Box 72715, Jebel Ali.
Tel: 04 884 5251, Fax: 04 884 5216
info@stfrancisjebelali.ae
www.stfrancisjebelali.ae
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
olphfujaireh@gmail.com
wwwolphfujaireh.org
Location: Close to the Water Tower, Carrefour

RAS AL KHAIMAH - St. Anthony of Padua Church
Box 10946, Ras Al Khaimah.
Tel: 07 222 2377, Fax 07 222 9618
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.ae
www.stmichaelssharjah.org
Location: Al Yarmook Area, close to Al Estiqlal Square, the Ministry of Labour

PARISHES IN OMAN

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