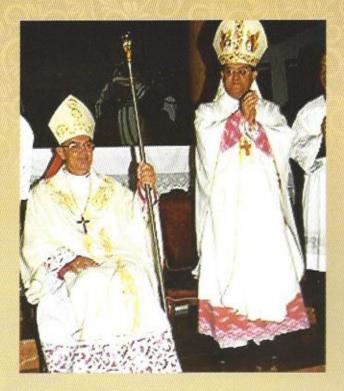


IN THE VINEYARD OF THE APOSTOLIC VICARIATE
OF NORTHERN ARABIA: A DECADE AFTER
2005 - 02 SEPTEMBER - 2015





Newly ordained Bishop Camillo Ballin shares a few moments with his sisters after the Ordination. (Sr Angela Rosa Ballin, PSSF, Sr Bertilla Maria Ballin, PSSF and Sr Anna Lucia Ballin, PSSF.) The sisters came from Italy to attend the Ordination.

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To all the Priests and Faithful of this Vicariate

from

Bishop Camillo Ballin, mccj

Apostolic Vicar of Northern Arabia 02 September 2015-2005



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Dear Fathers, dear brothers and sisters,

Peace be with you!

As I write this, it is with joy that I remember that afternoon of September 2005,02 when the Cathedral of Kuwait, so with its halls and courtyard were packed with crowds of people. With us, were Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe, the then Nuncio Archbishop Giuseppe De Andrea, my beloved predecessor Bishop Francis Micallef, Bishop Paul Hinder, two other Bishops, all our priests of Kuwait as well as priests and pastors from non-Catholic Churches. They were all there to witness the solemn day of my Episcopal Ordination as Bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Kuwait.

And that was exactly, ten years ago!

Coincidentally, it was also in 2011 that the then Vicariate of Kuwait was enlarged to become the "new" Vicariate of Northern Arabia, comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Looking back, I would like to share my reflections of these ten years, with all the priests and faithful of this Vicariate.

To begin with, I would like to thank you all, priests and faithful alike, for your human and spiritual support. If, after ten years, I am still in good health and happy with my ministry, it is due to the bounty and love with which you have shared since receiving me. The Lord will reward you abundantly, because

"Whoever receives you receives me and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me" (Mt 10:40).

At the same time, I want to ask your forgiveness for my mistakes, limitations, and shortcomings. Despite my failings, I would like to assure you of my love and commitment to continue serving you as long as the Pope allows me to.

1) Our Vicariate

In our Vicariate, we are an image of the world. Our people belong to many nationalities, and as such, have very different mentalities, languages, and traditions as what can be expected even in only one country. Furthermore, we celebrate our faith in six different Rites: Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara, Maronite, Coptic, Byzantine (Ukrainian), and Latin, which, in itself, is celebrated in twelve languages. We really are an image of the world!

Except for a very few cases, our faithful are composed of migrants. This means that they cannot remain in a country of this Vicariate for life as they are mere residents, not citizens. Once their work contracts are terminated, they have to leave. Their children can remain in a country until the secondary school, but for their college education, they have to leave.

Our people left their countries of origin in order to have a better life. With a very big percentage of them coming from very poor origins, and considering the meagre salaries received, they cannot bring their families along. As a consequence, we have many people who are alone, their husbands or wives are left back home. So, we have single persons, "single-married", families whose children have already left for their collegiate studies, or have gone back to their countries of origin, while others have immigrated to Western countries. As a result, we have many Baptisms, First Communions and Confirmations, and some weddings for most are usually preferred to be done in their respective countries, but almost no funerals.

Our Christian society is formed mostly of people who are alone. Even though their salaries allow some of them to bring their own family here, still, most of them have left back home relatives and friends.

This situation can explain the personal, moral, and emotional difficulties, as brought about by solitude, which our faithful face in their lives. In all the ten years that I have spent in this Vicariate, I have met many people who, in their not being able to tolerate anymore their loneliness as brought about by solitude, have resorted to contracting very strange marriages.

Solitude is the main cause of personal, moral, and spiritual imbalance. In this situation, the Church has a big role to play, in giving spiritual and human support, by forming communities and groups in which everybody can find new friends and have a more normal human life.



For this reason, clubs and associations are spread in every country and, to some extent, may offer an important human support to their members.

2) Our Pastoral work

There is no doubt that our pastoral work is strongly supported by the continuous prayer of our faithful. We have, in every parish, a chapel for daytime perpetual adoration, and it has been noticed that never is a chapel empty! Besides that, prayer is also done outside before the grotto of the Virgin Mary and in the church itself. The constant intercession of our faithful is the fundamental pillar of our ministry.

We have to recognize that our pastoral work is, first of all, based on the transmission of moral doctrine, the attendance to the Sacraments, the devotions, and the discipline of the Church.

In some parishes, however, I have felt that there is no desire for something different, but just to continue with what has always been done. This mentality cannot ensure the future of the faith among our faithful. If we look at the average group of our people, we may find that young families and young workers are very little represented, as they are busy with their jobs. The very praiseworthy tradition of saying the Rosary in the family every day is now conducted, to a very large percentage, only by the parents, for the adult children are not there as they are busy with the Internet, their jobs, their social life, and other concerns.

We can say the same for the most essential celebrations of our Christian life, like Mass and especially confessions. Secularization has greatly influenced our Vicariate! To counter this, we cannot just continue to do what has always been done. We have to scour other ways for the transmission of our faith.

What then are we giving to the new generations? Is it a personal experience of Jesus Christ, or some traditions which cannot endure more than some years? Oftentimes, we are afraid to enter into new ways, or look at them with suspicion or even reject them outright, for we are more at home and confident with what has been done for many years.

In this situation, what is needed more is the spirit of "risk", which means the boldness to discover and to accept the action of the Holy Spirit who invites us to follow him in a newness of our spiritual life and of our pastoral ministry. Pope Francis is very clear on this aspect when he said: "If we allow doubts and fears to dampen our courage, instead of being creative we will remain comfortable and make no progress whatsoever. In this case, we will not take an active part in historical processes, but become mere onlookers as the Church gradually stagnates" (Evangelium Gaudium, 129).

Our vocation

After ten years of observation, I now ask myself: What is the vocation of our faithful? In this Vicariate, we are not like any other Diocese in the world, because we are all migrants, without a fixed domicile. After a lifetime of work, our faithful have to go back to their home countries or immigrate to countries which would give them a new nationality and accept them for the rest of their lives. Our priests are the most movable persons of the Vicariate, after some years, they go back to their religious province of origin. I, also, am here temporarily, even though I have acquired a Bahraini nationality. On 24 June 2019, I shall reach 75 years, have to resign, as it is the law of the Church.

If our being in this Vicariate is only dependent on the duration of our work, what then may our mission be? Our mission is the world! We come from many countries and we shall go to many countries! We are not Christians for our Vicariate only. We are Christians wherever we shall go. We are Christians for the world. We are called to be the salt and the light in many parts of the world (Cf Mt 14-5:13).

With this enthusiasm in our hearts, we are not to fear the newness that the Holy Spirit gives us. We are called to be missionaries and our field is the whole world. But, we have to be missionaries not only when we shall leave the Vicariate and go to other countries for the rest of our lives. From now, while still in this Vicariate, we have to open our hearts to all, and look outside the church.

In our Vicariate, according to my calculation, we have 30 to 35 percent of the faithful who come to church. This is a big percentage in comparison with those in other parts of the

world. Hence, our churches are packed, and this is surely a big consolation for us pastors. However, let us not forget that outside there is the remaining 65 or 70 percent! However, I know that many cannot come to church, due to their very difficult work time-table, but we cannot remain comfortable with having only a third of our faithful.

We are called to be missionaries. As such, we are to communicate, when and how it is possible, to our friends, collaborators, colleagues, and neighbours our joy of being Christians. "We cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings, We need to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry" (Evangelium Gaudium, 15).

4) Jesus Christ in the centre

As missionaries, it is required of us to live in a deep and personal communion with Jesus. It should be remembered that we don't communicate to others an idea but a person, Jesus, who enlightens our lives and gives us peace, consolation, fraternity, and joy, in spite of the daily problems that we have to face. For this reason, it is worth putting to heart the inspiring words of Pope Francis: "I invite all Christians, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come

to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms" (Evangelium Gaudium, 3).

We fulfil our vocation as pastors or as simple members of the faithful if we have Jesus Christ in the centre of our hearts, if we consider only what guides us to him as valid. This is the core of any evangelization.

When I was a missionary in the Sudan, I had to face every day the problem of hunger that many people faced. Their food was only a handful of beans at 10:00 in the morning. The next meal was only the same handful of beans, the following day, at the same time. Once, I met in Italy, an old Comboni Bishop who had lived all his life in South Sudan and told him my problem. "What to do? How can I help those people to ameliorate their lives?" I asked. He answered: "I know very well that situation, but you preach Jesus Christ; this is your mission!"

As regards this mission, there have been many times, that I have had the perception that our communities are more worried in keeping and celebrating their traditions than to aim at Jesus Christ. Traditions are valid only to the extent that they announce Jesus Christ and help the people to imitate him, the friend of all mankind. For this reason, we have to go back to Jesus Christ for the dynamism the present needs and the courage to face the future that he is able to give.

5) Our priorities

Liturgy is our special way of worship and evangelization. Prayers, readings from the Bible, the homilies of the priest are moments in which God moves and passes through. Novenas, rosary, and others are praiseworthy moments of prayer but they are not Liturgy, the prayer of the whole Church because its origin is Jesus Christ himself. He instituted the seven Sacraments and we cannot put Liturgy at the same level with private prayers.

To make the faithful better distinguish between Liturgy and private prayers, all the Parishes are now following the instructions that private prayers have to be conducted by lay people and not by priests, who are there for Liturgy. However, some people leave the Liturgy (Mass) because the novena (said before or after the Mass) is not conducted by a priest.

This is a sign that the people don't know yet the essential difference between Liturgy and private devotions. Hence, it is our responsibility, as pastors, to help our faithful understand that the Liturgy is different from the novenas, and that the novenas do not diminish in value if conducted by a lay person.

During novenas, the priest has to be in confessional to administer the Liturgy of Reconciliation. It has been noted, however, that people go to confess freely during the Mass but not during the novenas. This reveals that, for them, the



novenas are more important than the Mass, and that private prayers are more important than Liturgy instituted by Jesus Christ himself!

As mentioned above, in our Vicariate, we celebrate our faith in six Rites. It is absolutely necessary that every Rite be celebrated according to the norms established by competent authority. The Pope has also appointed me in charge of the Oriental Rites. Hence, it is my duty to see to it that every Rite is celebrated according to the rules of its Sui Juris Church.

At the same time, we have to understand that problems of space and time cannot allow us to celebrate every Rite, as frequently as it is in other countries, where every Sui Juris Church has its own church. We have, in almost all our parishes, only one church for all. However, sometimes, this limitation is not well understood by some people.

I urge myself, first, and, secondly, all my priests to very well prepare the homily. This means that we have to see what these readings tell us personally. A homily is not a doctrinal exposition of the truths of our faith but a sharing of what God tells us through those readings. The people immediately feel if we are giving a lesson of theology in the homily or if we are speaking from our heart.

Reconciliation is another sacrament which is fundamental in our Christian life. I appreciate the initiative of some parishes for having fixed some hours in a particular day of the week for confessions. **Word of God.** Let us recall the healing of the Centurion's servant (Lk 10-7:2). As Jesus was going to the house of the Centurion, he received messages from him saying: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof . . . but say the word and let my servant be healed When the messengers returned to the house, they found the slave in good health".

This pagan Centurion believed in the power of the word of Jesus. Following the example of the Centurion, we should read every day a few verses of the Bible and have a short prayer inspired by that passage. If we are faithful to that, gradually, our lives will be deeply changed, precisely because the Word of God is powerful.

The Word of God is, likewise, able to re-create not only ourselves, as individuals, but also as a community. When a community is regular in meditating on the Word of God, there is no danger of divisions.

I know that there are many Bibles circulating in our churches and among families. I invite all to use only a Catholic Bible, which means the one that has the so-called deuterocanonical books in the order as established by the Catholic Church.

Allow me to explain. There are seven books in the Old Testament that are not accepted by the Jews, for two reasons. First, they were written in Greek and not in Hebrew which is considered by the Jews as the language of revelation; and

second is that, they were not written in the Holy Land but in the Greek area. These books are, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), Baruch (including the letter of Jeremiah), 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, plus Additions to Daniel (90-3:24).

To distinguish themselves from the Catholics, the Protestants adopted the Jewish Bible, so they rejected the seven books. The Catholic Church considered the seven books inspired because Jesus himself quoted passages from them. Hence, I invite all to have a Catholic Bible. To know if your Bible is a Catholic one, a simple check can be done to find if it contains the afore-mentioned books. If not, like the "Good News Bible", with a yellow cover, it is not a Catholic Bible.

There are editions of the Bible, even approved by many Catholic Bishops, where the seven books are all placed together at the end of the Old Testament. I don't accept this solution because the Catholic Church has her own theology in keeping the seven books in their respective places in the Old Testament. Therefore, I invite all our faithful to have a true Catholic Bible. As we spend money for computers, and other electronic gadgets, let us be generous first with the Word of God, by choosing and buying a true Catholic Bible.

Community. The community is the third pillar on which we have to build our spiritual life and pastoral ministry. In our Vicariate where many faithful are alone and have family members, relatives and friends left behind in their respective countries, belonging to a community is especially a table of salvation.

Hence, it is very important that everybody belongs to a community, where each one feels welcomed and loved. However, a Catholic community can better fulfil her role if based on the other two pillars: Liturgy and the Word of God. Otherwise, it becomes a mere social gathering where misunderstandings, conflicts, and gossips will cause more divisions, separation, and solitude.

As I have said, we are missionaries. This also means that every community has to be open to other communities and not closed in itself. Known instances where people have been sent away from the church with the words "This is our Mass", must never happen again. We cannot call God "Our Father" if we are not brothers to all.

We have to create, in the community, an ambience of fraternity, mutual understanding, and forgiveness. This is possible only if we firmly keep the Liturgy and the Word of God as our living principles. Jesus did not come to found a new religion, but to start the Kingdom of God, where love is the basic component.

Every community should realize in itself the Kingdom of God, where God makes his dwelling among us (Cf Jn 1:14). This requires attention to the poor and the afflicted. If our hearts are open to others, our eyes can see the pain and suffering of those who have been suddenly terminated from their jobs and have families to feed, or those who are sick or in prison.

Except for schools, it is not prudent for us, in our situation, to open social works. However, we can spread the Kingdom

of God everywhere, even in the hospitals and in prisons. Our mission is to plant the Kingdom of God wherever we are. It is the best social and human help that we can offer to the people.

The Parish is the place for regular meetings of all members of communities, where they are open to each other, speak with each other, and together collaborate for the good running of the Parish, her spiritual ministries, and humanitarian services. As I have mentioned, the associations have an important role to play in keeping a community alive. However, associations must not assume authority that is parallel with that of the Parish priest. Likewise, associations should be at and for the service of the Parish and not a Parish in the Parish.

The priests of our Vicariate cannot be much involved in these associations, because they are priests for all. And being so, should not only serve certain communities, even though they are in charge of these particular communities.

6) Conclusion

After ten years of my Episcopal ordination, I see, in the future, a need to walk towards a new level of Evangelical life, in order to pass to a new and higher phase of a Christianity more inspired and motivated by Jesus.

Hence, in conclusion, I invite myself and all of you, priests and faithful, to a deeper and more personal conversion to Jesus Christ. If we, Bishop and priests, recognize our mistakes and

our sins, we are on the way of conversion, and, as a result, our faithful will be much encouraged to go back to Jesus Christ and find in him the companion and saviour who gives us true consolation, joy, peace.

Soon, we shall start the construction of our Cathedral, dedicated to Our Lady of Arabia, patroness of our Vicariate. May the Virgin Mary, whom we like to invoke as Our Lady of Arabia, intercede for us all and continue her mission, to give Jesus Christ to the world and the world to Jesus Christ.

Your Bishop, + Camillo Ballin, mccj

02 September 2015, the tenth anniversary of my Episcopal Ordination.

Bishop CAMILLO BALLIN, mccj

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