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Address of the Rector  
**The University, a Laboratory of Hope**  
Father Michel Saghbiny, OAM

28<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Antonine University  
Feast of Our Lady of the Seeds  
May 14, 2024

Your Eminence, Superior General, Abbot Joseph Bou Raad,  
Mother Superior, Nazha Khoury,  
Reverend Fathers Assistants,  
Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, military, security, judicial, and union leaders,  
Esteemed Board of Trustees members, faculty, administrative staff, and students,  
My sisters, the nuns, and my brothers, the monks,  
Dear sisters and brothers,

I extend a warm welcome to His Eminence, Superior General, Abbot Joseph Bou Raad, and all the attendees gathered with us on this blessed occasion, the Feast of Our Lady of the Seeds, under whose protection “we seek refuge.” On the eve of her Feast (May 15), we come together to glorify her once again and celebrate the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Antonine University (UA), which has chosen the Virgin Mary as its patron saint and protector, embracing a tradition rooted in our Syriac Maronite heritage. This tradition aligns the feasts of the Virgin Mary with the agricultural cycles of the Earth: in January, we pray for the seeds; in May, for the wheat; and in August, for the grapes. In January, we sow the seeds and plow the fields; in May, we see the wheat fields filled with grain; and in August, we contemplate the clusters of grapes hanging from the vines. Between the sowing season and the fruit-bearing seasons, winter passes with its storms and cold, snow and rain, until spring returns, and the buds sprout before blossoming into flowers and then fruits, and the herbs grow until they stand adorned with grains bearing thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

At the beginning of my speech, I wished to invoke this imagery, not because I am from the Bekaa, but because the occasion calls us to understand the essence of the Feast. These symbols may help us comprehend the nature of the circumstances, crises, and shocks we are facing, which resemble the hardships of winter endured by the crops. The prevailing living conditions, the successive economic and health crises, and the recurring security shocks we continue to experience in the region have made the level of difficulties, obstacles, and challenges extremely high. These challenges have plunged many of us into a state of confusion and doubt, despair and frustration, while others have succumbed to resignation and acceptance of the situation without resistance, and only a resilient few remain steadfast, determined to confront and surmount these obstacles. What has further

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burdened the crises is the consequences of what we may call “lack of choice,” or indecision, procrastination, forced extension, or squandering of opportunities, and other personal, collective, institutional, and national situations. We find ourselves at the heart of crises, as if in an unending “Good Friday” and a prolonged upheaval; no sooner do we bury one crisis, hoping for a resurrection, than we enter a new one. In these times of conflict, division, and extreme ideologies, amidst rights violations, hatred, and rampant hypocrisy, it falls upon the University to cast a ray of light into this deep darkness. Day by day, we recognize the significance and centrality of our mission; we cannot afford to remain idle, nor can we sit and wait for conditions to improve on their own. As Pope Francis says, “We need to rise, seize the opportunities of grace, set out and take risks. We must take risks.” (Homily 1/1/2023).

It is unacceptable to manage the present with a culture of fear and to face the future with surrender or by returning to the past. Nostalgia does not make history, and dwelling on past glories can be a tempting escape, especially for those who pride themselves on their historical lineage, clinging to what they have no contribution to. The constant longing for the past is a sign of stagnation, not of heritage or wisdom. We live in a time where we must race against it. Hence, the University becomes a beacon of hope, not by relying on its past glory, but through its vibrant present, rich with experience. Comparing our present to our past might lead us to lose hope.

Driven by our faith in God and His gifts, our faith in our nation and its mission, and our faith in our youth and their future, we are called to remain steadfast in the virtue of hope. Had the founders of the Antonine monastic life focused only on the setbacks, watching the stones they laid by day be demolished at night, they would have quickly succumbed to despair and abandoned the construction of the monastery, the mother home of the Order. But their gaze was fixed on the hope embodied in the mission entrusted to them, a mission built upon the solid rock of their calling.

Therefore, I assert that the University is a source of hope and inspiration for its students and their ideas. It is the intellectual space, the aspiration for existential aspiration, and the hub for knowledge and sciences. It contributes its vision and unleashes its full potential without restraint to keep the flame of hope burning brightly before its students. Just as one sees the Resurrection in the emptiness of the tomb, so too does it behold the light within the darkness; this is its role and essence. Confronted by the challenges of darkness, the University instills in its students the courage, capability, and certainty to build a future with creativity and innovation.

To be a beacon of hope, the University engages openly with thought and progress. What it offers is not based on illusion or theory, nor on superficial or digital phenomena, but rather on tangible, practical reality and deeply rooted sensory constants that instill in its students a hope, which draws from the successes of the past and learns from its failures, infusing the present with its vitality and pointing towards a complete future. Thus, the University,

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starting from what it currently possesses and what it has experienced at the heart of previous crises while preserving its growth and trajectory in light of its mission, is, along with its companions in the world of research, the place where students can experience and mature their sense of hope. The University is a laboratory of hope: through its fruitful initiatives on the ground, its projects capable of replacing doubt with confidence, its outstretched hands offering knowledge and sciences, and its contribution toward a more inclusive and diverse society. This hope is based on a spiritual and theistic experience, as well as scientific, research-oriented, and institutional expertise that ensures its continuity and renewal at the same time.

Hope also emerges silently like seeds sown in darkness and moisture. Let us not forget that the University also draws significant hope from its students — their ideas and creativity, commitment and efforts, aspirations and dreams, which have the potential to transform the world around us, particularly in less fortunate regions. Students can do this based on the extent of their interaction with what they experience within the University itself. Hope and resilience nurture in youth the spirit of adventure and challenge. Hope gives them roots in their surroundings, especially since they belong to a distributed and branching University, attentive to the needs of the peripheries and suburbs.

The University truly becomes a laboratory of hope as it plans for the retention and stability of students in their homeland. Our goal is for our graduates to contribute to the renaissance of our nation. The University's great challenge is to safeguard its alumni and encourage them to remain in their land, among the parents who sacrificed everything for their future. UA's aim is not to graduate students from Lebanon but to graduate students *for* Lebanon. Through cooperative agreements, we seek to adopt programs and projects and create a network of communication and relationships to keep our youth in their country. The University becomes a beacon of hope to the extent that its goal of stability in the homeland drives it, and it serves as a mission by improving the quality of life in the homeland. Beware of distorting hope or claiming it without substance — by turning it into hollow slogans without intention or intentions without local job opportunities. When students see the power of hope emanating from the University, they will naturally embody this strength. They will become dedicated citizens, enriching their communities and serving their country.

It is necessary to emphasize that the journey of a university student is not an individual endeavor but a collective and dynamic process involving parents and university stakeholders. As the University bends toward students to empower them with the necessary tools to face the challenges, it instills in them conviction, security, and hope for their future. The University is a compass of hope that students can rely on and trust to guide them.

To fully fulfill its role toward the students, the University is called upon to cooperate, collaborate, and interact not only with foreign universities but, first and foremost, with

Lebanese universities, which is our main goal. Leading universities in Lebanon are working on ongoing exchange and cooperation. They are called upon, more than ever before, to interconnect their distinct missions as a testament of hope for their students. From our side, we value and recognize the efforts of others in our country, seeking to align our university journey with the methodology of life's journey, which, despite its hurdles, always finds a way out that reinforces giving and cooperation. I believe that Lebanon, as a mission, through the cooperation of universities and the interconnection of their missions, adds to its mission of coexistence another element that reflects its cultural civilization in communication and creativity, in solidarity and keeping pace with modernity, and in integration and bridge-building.

Our youth have suffered greatly: from wars, pandemics, economic and banking crises, corruption, and instability, along with repeated disappointments, not to mention their familial, societal, and religious struggles. All these adversities leave psychological scars that linger in the depths of the younger generations. The University wants to take on this burden, to meet the expectations of these young people, and respond to their demands by listening, accompanying, and nurturing them. Their fundamental life concepts are rapidly changing, leading to deep questions and a need to search for the truth from reliable sources and guidance references. We need to create an atmosphere of trust and hope by transforming the trials of this time and its crises into opportunities, projects, and experiences. This atmosphere of trust is linked to each one of us, both individually and collectively, personally and institutionally. Whoever has hope lives differently; even with limited capabilities, the power of hope shines through. As one Italian priest (Don Oreste Benzi) once said: "Nobody is so poor he has nothing to give, and nobody is so rich he has nothing to receive." This call concerns us all. Everyone must show courage to participate in rebuilding a country that we see crumbling before our eyes, inhabited by many strangers and foreigners, and abandoned by its people and citizens.

UA's work holds strategic importance within the framework and environment envisioned for it by the Antonine Maronite Order (OAM), both in terms of development and the economy, as well as social and national levels. The University is now working to strengthen and empower what it has already begun, always placing quality assurance and continuous improvement of competencies at the forefront. As hope drives us to act without fear or hesitation, revitalizing the University life through its students, faculty, staff, and administration, we have chosen hope as our motivator and catalyst in facing challenges and solving daily problems. We have chosen it to be the driving force behind our service and mission, which will be enriched by the new programs the University acquired about 2 months ago, following the decrees issued by the Council of Ministers. These programs include a doctorate in physical therapy, a bachelor's degree in speech therapy, a bachelor's degree in medical imaging, a bachelor's degree in psychology, a bachelor's degree in translation, and a bachelor's degree in architecture. We promise to dedicate all necessary resources, especially time, to launch these programs progressively, God willing, hoping to benefit our students and their future in Lebanon. Just as life finds meaning and direction

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through hope, we build our decisions on it, striving to be better versions of ourselves tomorrow. Without hope, like life after death, honorable work after study and vigil, and a satisfying life after sacrifice and effort, then our hope is in vain.

However, the provision of hope that the students gain from the University makes them ready to face the future with complete readiness, equipping them with the necessary tools and knowledge to become intellectually, morally, and humanly competent. It is as if the University is telling its students: “Have faith! Rely on the upbringing, education, and experience I have provided you, and be confident that you can serve your community. Be creative and responsible, for you are a beacon of hope for others.”

If we ask: “How can the university be a laboratory of hope?” we answer:

1. When the university is rooted in its environment, framework, and community, prioritizing the concerns of the parents before those of the students and the service of the nation and society through its graduates.
2. When the university is innovative and creative. It grows daily and keeps pace; its teaching, research, and services are inventive and purposeful, based on cooperation and exchange.
3. When the university is determined. It has the capability to plan and execute; it has the ability to revive integrated human development and achieve it. It does not just graduate students but also skilled professionals who work efficiently and professionally at global companies.
4. When the university is an incubator that prepares for the future by understanding the past and working diligently in the present. It graduates not only specialists but also citizens who care about the needs of others and the necessities of their country.
5. When the university is open to its students, and the students are open to their university. Thus, we do not graduate mere human robots but responsible students who respect differences, rely on dialogue, and value ethical, human, and spiritual principles.

At times, I am overwhelmed by looking at what is happening around us, and I say: Where are we in the face of what is happening in the South and Gaza? And I wonder: Why don't we do something? Then I return to myself in the light of hope, realizing that it is for their sake that we continue our university journey; some want us to be distracted by “injustice toward humanity” so that time passes and delays us from educating and empowering ourselves. Indeed, the pains and crimes that are occurring around us cannot be measured or justified, and what the eye sees, if looked at, cannot but affect the heart and mind, but does that mean we should stop? I would like to remind you that during World War II, Japan dug special trenches to facilitate the safe arrival of students to their schools, fearing that it would lose its rising generation during the war. And if we wish to continue the journey of education, it is because this is how we arm ourselves and resist. Let us arm ourselves with knowledge and its quality, with experience and its effectiveness, and let us resist with true giving, with our humanity and its virtues, because even when it seems to us that darkness has overcome light, and a veil has covered many consciences, it is at these very moments that the university must play its natural role; it cannot get used to darkness, because

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through its service, it brings light, and with its human and cognitive capabilities, it instills hope. The university is like a mother whose logic of life surpasses that of death.

Finally, amidst the overwhelming circumstances, it is every student's right to draw hope from the University's educational programs, visionary research, developmental services, and creative projects. Let UA truly be this laboratory where students can tangibly experience hope, beauty, and life. The University's wish is to spread hope in Lebanon and the Middle East.

May this celebration be blessed upon all of you and the University. May the Lady of the Crops protect us, and may the seeds of hope flourish in each one of us, in our homeland and the world. "O Virgin Mary, just as you nurtured the blessed fruit of God in your womb, nurture within our hearts the seed of God's salvation and His infinite love for humanity." Amen, and thank you.