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## Address of the Rector

### **The University, a Cradle for Citizenship**

Father Michel Saghbiny, OAM

29<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Antonine University

Feast of Our Lady of the Seeds

May 15, 2025

Your Eminence Bishop Paul Abdel Sater,  
Your Eminence Bishop Joseph Naffaa,  
Reverend Abbot Joseph Bou Raad, Superior General of the Antonine Maronite Order,  
Honorable Members of Parliament,  
Distinguished Military, Security, Judicial, and Union Leaders,  
Esteemed Fathers Assistants, Members of the Board of Trustees,  
Esteemed Faculty, Administrative Staff, and Students,  
Dear Sisters and Brothers,  
Honored Guests,

Let me begin by inviting you all to stand for a moment of silence in remembrance of our nation's martyrs, in prayer for the healing of the wounded, and in hope for peace in our country and throughout the region. (Please rise.)

Today, as we mark the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Antonine University's founding, celebrated on the Feast of Our Lady of the Seeds, it is with deep gratitude and heartfelt joy that I welcome you. Despite the many trials we've endured at the start of this academic year, trials that still weigh heavily on our South, our Bekaa, our suburbs, and our Hadat, we are gathered here today not just to celebrate an anniversary, but also to remember our beginnings and the role we play in continuing our mission.

We have all tasted the bitter disappointment of preparing for what we hoped would be a normal academic year, only to see our expectations shattered by harsh realities. The brutal war has not only cost us lives, or caused wounds, displacements and emigrations—it has also left behind deeper, more insidious scars: division, ridicule, sweeping judgments, and a loss of respect—for difference, for shared grief, and even for the basic clarity of knowing friend from foe.

I vividly recall the moment we called our students back to campus. Our primary concern was to stand by them, to accompany them closely, so they would not easily fall prey to misguided ideologies or opportunists seeking to exploit their vulnerability. Since when do Lebanese students follow blindly? Just look at their peers in Europe and the United States; they protest, speak their minds freely, stand up against injustice without fear. Our students

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are no less capable of becoming free citizens, free from political manipulation, sectarian entrapment, or religious constraints.

Because of our steadfast commitment to our students and our acute awareness of what they need during this fragile post-war period that has shaken the core of our national unity, we doubled down on the efforts we had already begun. We worked to protect them from anything that might dull their civic awareness or lead them away from unity. This is the true role of the University.

A university is not merely a structure of cement and stone; it is a vibrant environment that plays a pivotal role in shaping a student's identity and reinforcing their sense of belonging. It isn't just a space of academic pursuit, filled with lecture halls, coursework, and examinations, it is also a living laboratory where future citizens are formed and national values are cultivated. It is a space for learning civic responsibility, where students discover how to contribute meaningfully to their country's development through planning, action, critical reflection, and ethical behavior. It is a space for thought, a platform for dialogue, and a real-world exercise in active citizenship. While the family plants the first seeds of our values, the university is where those values are tested and refined. Family and school are the cradle in which the citizen is born and nurtured; the university is the incubator where the citizen's potential can grow and flourish.

At this stage in life, students are exposed to diverse ideas, worldviews, and beliefs influenced by their different religious, cultural, and political backgrounds. Left without guidance, this diversity can fragment identity and erode national belonging, ultimately weakening the nation itself. But when this diversity is guided wisely, it enriches students' understanding of national challenges and strengthens their bond with their homeland.

This brings us to an essential question: What do we mean by "homeland"? It is not merely the land we share and inhabit. It is an identity we forge together, a living legacy we protect through unity, a civilization we build with our labor, and a message we write with our sacrifices. This is the true essence of Lebanon. But do we truly comprehend it? Do we realize that the cedar carries the same symbolic power for someone from the North, the Chouf, and the rest of the regions, as the olive tree does for someone from the South, or the vine and wheat for someone from the Bekaa? One symbol does not diminish the value of another. Our love for our homeland makes us fearful for its future. We fear that, like Palestine, Lebanon might one day transform from a homeland and a people into mere history, a name, and a cause, tossed around by nations like a ball on a field with no goal and no direction.

This is why, this year, I chose to focus on the University's role in shaping generations who understand their duty towards their homeland.

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## What Makes the University a Cradle for Citizenship?

**1. Cultivating National Spirit:** At the heart of the university experience, students from various regions and backgrounds come together, united by shared hopes, not only to earn degrees, but to apply that success toward serving and developing our nation. Love of the country is not merely a subject of study; it is a spirit we nurture daily, through open civic dialogue unclouded by sectarian or political divisions, in environments of mutual respect and shared responsibility. The national spirit that takes root at the University is not a fleeting sentiment; it is a deep conviction. It is what moves students to serve their communities and their nation before serving themselves. Their gratitude, in the end, belongs not to the University, but to Lebanon. At Antonine University, students aspire to be part of the country's progress, not a burden upon it. Every contribution they make to human development initiatives, co-curricular activities, discussions and dialogues in lecture halls and across campus, and community service, all of which instill fundamental values that nurture a spirit of belonging — such as civic responsibility, respect for the law, community engagement, celebration of national heritage, human generosity, and tolerance.

**2. Learning to Collaborate Across Differences:** University life teaches respect for others by bringing together students from different backgrounds. Students from diverse walks of life meet in classrooms, collaborate on group projects, and engage in cross-cultural programs where background, religion, and dialect fade, and contribution is what truly counts. Working across differences is a necessity for any thriving society. The University shows us that diversity is not a threat, but a gift. It teaches us that people are to be valued for their ethics, ideas, creativity, and character. Here, ideas coexist, and they may also clash. We may disagree, but we do not divide. We engage. This is the foundation for building a truly pluralistic society—one that respects every individual and safeguards their freedom. The experience of embracing difference and diversity lifts the veil of extremism and strips away the mask of partisanship from our eyes and minds.

**3. Building Social Cohesion:** Daily interactions among students foster diverse social bonds that transcend narrow affiliations and strengthen national unity by deepening mutual understanding. Societies often, out of fear or self-preservation, construct hostile images of “the other” and cling to preconceived notions. But in the University setting, those illusions fade. Face to face, we come to see our fellow citizens not as adversaries, but as colleagues we respect, friends we cherish, and sometimes even companions we grow to love. On campus, diverse identities don’t clash, they intertwine and enrich one another.

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**4. Preparing for National Service through Work:** The University shapes us not only as scholars but as professionals ready to serve our nation—as future engineers, developers, managers, creatives, and more. It is the place where we discover our potential, sharpen our skills, and internalize the values of responsibility and commitment. Volunteer work, for example, does not just prepare students for careers, it exposes them to real social challenges, teaches human-centered giving, and nurtures a spirit of service over self-interest. In this vast national laboratory, the University, and in the midst of this preparatory workshop for professional life, we train in problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making, teamwork, and responsible leadership. These are all essential skills for building a strong nation. The University instills in us the belief that work is an honor, and that integrity in one's work is the highest form of citizenship.

**5. Instilling Respect for the Rule of Law:** From the first day on campus, students are asked to respect rules: attendance, integrity, punctuality, participation. These aren't constraints on freedom; they are lessons in citizenship. Respecting rules is the foundation of a stable and prosperous society. The University teaches us that the rule of law is not a burden to bear, but a shield for all. Individual responsibility is the cornerstone of society. Those who cheat in exams today may falsify their work tomorrow. Those who uphold standards today will become role models tomorrow. As poet Ahmad Matar said: "They used to call it 'corruption.' They ignored it until it grew, and now it's simply the system." Training in University to combat corruption through adherence to regulations, evaluation, accountability, and transparency is one of the most essential components of citizenship, especially in Lebanon.

**6. Advancing Equal Opportunity:** One of the greatest expressions of citizenship in the University is the principle of equal opportunity. The University grants every individual the right to learn, regardless of wealth or origin. How many students of modest means have excelled? How many privileged ones have fallen short? The University becomes a mirror of the Lebanon we aspire to: a nation where people have equal job opportunities, and where merit opens doors. When students believe they are treated justly, their sense of belonging grows. So does their will to lead, not just in class, but in society.

**7. Healing Memory, Conscience, and Heart:** A final point that distinguishes our University and is essential for every Lebanese, as Pope John Paul II said in "A New Hope for Lebanon," is the "healing of memory, conscience, and heart." Through its weekly programs, Antonine University promotes holistic human development. The residues of war and corruption, prejudice, self-interest, betrayal, and despair still fester in our collective memory. Like a grain of wheat that must interact with soil, water, air, and sun to bear fruit; students need the full spectrum of what the University offers—not just academics, but mental and emotional support, wellness initiatives, and personal development programs. We need citizens with sound minds and clear consciences. For what good are eyes, if the mind is blind?

### **Conclusion: The University as a Cradle of Citizenship**

To conclude, a university does not only shape brilliant minds, it nurtures good citizens. It is the first cradle in which a person tests their values, refines their character, learns to love their homeland, to collaborate with others, and to live peacefully with anyone. In studying, one learns generosity; in research, one discovers passion; and in service, one is formed in sacrifice. At Antonine University, students live out the essential principles of citizenship. They leave with a specialized degree, yes, but also with the qualities of loyal, discerning citizens, shaped by experience and deeply aware of their belonging to a homeland distinguished by its history, geography, diversity, mission, and people.

It is often said that the Lebanese have always been merchants. I believe they are mission-bearers—for how else could Lebanon have become a message? Let us reclaim this vocation: to make our homeland a message of humanism, a homeland for all humanity. What we teach our students is that to humanize the homeland and to anchor citizenship in Lebanese identity are core components of true citizenship. Neither federalism, nor extremism, nor religious guardianship constitute citizenship. When we raise a generation rooted in the values of free and responsible citizenship, we restore our nation's sovereignty. The homeland is not lost outside of us; it is lost within us. Let us not search for it outside; it is already inside.

The Antonine Maronite Order envisioned its largest educational institution as a University that mirrors the nation itself: a space for dialogue, not conflict; for cooperation, not competition; for responsible freedom, not chaos; for service, not self-interest; for rebuilding a country worthy of its past and its mission. It envisioned the University as a laboratory for dialogue with the goal of strengthening national belonging by exporting ideas rather than our brightest minds and by nurturing and supporting patriotic spirit, working to unify and preserve the country.

Finally, as I thank everyone for their presence and participation, I hope this celebration is a blessed occasion for all of us and for Antonine University. May Our Lady of the Seeds, Our Lady of Lebanon, protect our country and safeguard our youth and their future.

“O Virgin Mary, just as you took part in God’s saving plan to free humanity from the grip of sin, teach us how to take part in that same mission, for the salvation of our homeland, our humanity, and the divine image within us.”

Amen, and thank you.