



مكتب راعوية المرأة
الدائرة البطريركية المارونية



Ecclesiastical and Cultural Identity Working Document **Maronite Virtues: A Journey to Holiness**

The Pastoral Office for Women
The Maronite Patriarchal Curia – Bkerke

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I. Introduction

The Women's Pastoral Office, in fidelity to Article 72 of the foundational document of the current synodal process "The Vocation and Mission of Women in God's Plan and the Life of the Church and Society" (2023), is entrusted with the responsibility of preserving, promoting, and transmitting the Maronite identity across generations and contexts. This article highlights, in particular, the role of women as essential agents in safeguarding the cultural, spiritual, and ecclesial heritage of the Maronite Church and in ensuring its transmission within families, communities, and societies. This document emerges as a direct response to this entrusted mission. It is not simply a theoretical reflection, but an expression of what it is called to undertake: a work of reflection and action through which this responsibility can be consciously assumed and concretely lived.

This work is situated within a broader continuum of ecclesial and synodal processes: the Maronite Patriarchal Synod (2003–2006), the synodal process on women, and the wider Synod on Synodality. It intentionally adopts and reflects the spirit of synodality, understood as a way of walking together through listening, discernment, participation, and co-responsibility. In this sense, the document is not conceived as a closed text, but as an open and dynamic contribution to an ongoing ecclesial journey.

Conceived as a work of reflection and engagement, this document proposes a path that unfolds across multiple levels of ecclesial life: the individual, the family, the parish, the diocese, and the institutional level. It does not seek merely to describe Maronite identity, but to accompany a process of re-appropriation, encouraging a conscious and lived engagement with this identity in daily life. At the same time, it explicitly invites the reader to enter this process, to question, to reflect, and to contribute personal and communal insights that enrich and actualize this identity.

The reflection developed in this document is grounded in three fundamental components, drawn from the Maronite Patriarchal Synod (2003–2006), which together express the ecclesial, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of Maronite identity: the monastic values (poverty, obedience, and chastity), asceticism, and attachment to the land. These components are approached not as abstract notions, but as living realities that require renewed understanding and concrete actualization within contemporary contexts. It is important to note that these components do not exhaust the richness of Maronite identity. Other essential dimensions, such as the Syriac language and the liturgy, remain equally constitutive and call for dedicated reflection in complementary works.

This document is the result of a sustained process of research and discernment. It draws on a mixed-methods study (quantitative and qualitative) on monastic values, qualitative research conducted with diverse profiles within the Maronite community, including youth, women, priests, consecrated men and women, couples, and academics, ensuring diversity within each group, consultations with experts, and a review of key ecclesial texts, particularly the Maronite Patriarchal Synod (2003–2006). While these studies have led to some practical insights, this document does not present itself as a prescriptive manual. It adopts instead a reflective approach, opening a space for understanding, discernment, and appropriation, and inviting the reader to actively engage with the content by contributing reflection and insight at every stage.

Each section of the document focuses on one component and follows a clear structure: it begins with a definition drawn from the Maronite Patriarchal Synod (2003–2006), then presents the key results drawn from the research, reflecting how participants perceive, understand, and currently express each component in their lived experience, and subsequently proposes pathways for its contemporary actualization, consisting of the suggestions and propositions formulated by participants to live these components within today's context. Each section concludes with a spiritual reference drawn from the Maronite saints. Throughout these sections, the reader is invited not only to receive the content but also to engage with it, reflecting, questioning, and contributing personal insight. In this way, the document seeks to connect reflection with lived experience and understanding with concrete practice.

II. The Monastic Virtue of Poverty

1. Definition

Poverty is an interior disposition of freedom toward material goods, where one chooses not to be possessed by what one possesses. It is not deprivation for its own sake, but a conscious simplicity rooted in trust in God.

Traditionally understood as material scarcity, poverty is reinterpreted in a contemporary social context as mindful consumption, spiritual freedom, and generous sharing. It involves a detachment from the desire for non-essentials to achieve spiritual redirection toward the Creator and toward others.

2. Results

Poverty is understood primarily as detachment and interior freedom, not material destitution. A key distinction emerged between “need” and “greed”. Participants emphasized contentment and sufficiency as the antithesis of overconsumption. It is an intentional choice to live with the necessary, even when capable of having more.

3. Practical Propositions

Personal Level

- Live simplicity and generosity as one movement: intentionally limit material and attentional consumption, manage money consciously, and redirect surplus (time, attention, resources) toward God and others; this expresses freedom from being possessed by what one possesses.
- Cultivate interior freedom from dependence: regularly step back from comforts, habits, and sources of validation to verify self-sufficiency and trust in God rather than in possessions or recognition.
- Live poverty as thirst for the Lord, not merely material lack: cultivate a heart that wants more of Christ, not more of the world.

Family Level

- Form a culture of shared simplicity: teach money and generosity, resist entitlement and comparison-driven needs, prioritize relationships over comfort, and make collective decisions that simplify life and reveal attachments (e.g., sharing, simpler celebrations).
- Practice non-possessiveness in relationships: treat children as entrusted persons (not extensions) and evaluate habits and traditions to keep only what serves real family communion.

Parish/Diocese Level

- Align structures with mission: limit fundraising dominance, share resources concretely with the needy, distinguish mission from maintenance, simplify structures, and allocate time and money to what serves evangelization rather than self-preservation.

- Institutionalize transparency and generosity: ensure ethical resource use, prioritize the poor in policies, and form a culture where simplicity is visibly modeled in leadership.

Institutional Level

- Structure for ethical simplicity: ensure transparent use of resources, prioritize the poor, promote generosity, and avoid both consumerism and power accumulation by framing leadership as service.
- Reorient institutions toward incarnational witness: the church is not a social club, but a body united by liturgy and theology. Measure institutional health by faith coherence, not by external markers of success

————— **What would you add or adjust from your own experience?** —————

4. Questions and Exercises

Personal

- What do I consume (materially and digitally) that does not serve what is essential?
- Where does my use of money reflect freedom, and where does it reveal dependence or insecurity?
- What am I afraid to lose, and what does that reveal about my attachments?
- Do I give from surplus only, or does my giving reflect real trust and detachment?

Family Level

- What in our household do we treat as “necessary” because of comparison with others?
- Do our spending habits strengthen relationships or replace them?
- Where do we resist simplifying together, and why?

Parish/Diocese

- What activities or structures exist mainly to sustain themselves rather than the mission?
- How are resources actually distributed, and who benefits most from them?
- Does visible leadership reflect simplicity or subtle forms of excess?
- Where could subtraction clarify what is essential?

Institutional

- What financial or structural decisions are driven by growth rather than mission?
- Where is efficiency prioritized over human dignity?
- How does the institution define “success”, and what does that exclude?
- What would it mean concretely to prioritize the poor in current structures?

5. Connection to Our Maronite Saints

Saint Rafqa is most known for having suffered out of love for Christ and in imitation of Him. Yet she was able to do so because of her exceptional poverty and her complete detachment from everything, including bodily health, which is often considered the most precious good.

Rafqa never showed concern for the goods of this earth; instead, she sought the riches of heaven since her youth and found in Christ her greatest treasure. When her eye was accidentally removed, and she lost her sight, in addition to when she became unable to move due to complete paralysis resulting from her painful illness, she did not complain, nor did she seek attention or service for herself. Rather, she continued her life and service with great joy and gratitude, through her continuous prayer and the work of her hands, so as not to become a burden on her sisters.

In this way, Rafqa offers us an exemplary model of evangelical poverty from which we are called to draw lessons.

III. The Monastic Virtue of Chastity

1. Definition

Chastity is the integration of one's affective, relational, and bodily life in truth and love. It governs how one looks at, relates to, and loves others.

Beyond sexual abstinence, chastity signifies relational integrity and seeing others as complete individuals deserving of absolute dignity. It is reinterpreted in a contemporary context as emotional regulation and the fostering of authentic, respectful communication within families and society. Chastity frees the heart to love authentically rather than possessing or objectifying others.

2. Results

Chastity is conceptualized more broadly than sexual abstinence. Participants described it as the purity of the relationship and the freedom of the heart. Critically, the data distinguishes between chastity (faithfulness within one's state of life) and celibacy. There was a strong emphasis on Theology of the Body: viewing the body as a Temple of the Holy Spirit.

3. Practical Propositions

Personal Level

- Integrate perception, emotion, and action: guard what you consume (media), develop emotional awareness, and use pauses, silence, and restraint so that responses respect the other's dignity rather than projecting, anticipating, or possessing.
- Maintain relational freedom: notice patterns of attachment or projection and create space (including reduced contact when needed) so that others are encountered as they are, not as extensions of the self.
- Understand chastity not primarily as physical restraint but as inner purity. Chastity is the condition for loving universally, not narrowly.

Family Level

- Educate for relational integrity: combine open dialogue, moral formation, parental modeling, and media boundaries with disciplined communication (pausing, not rehashing past faults) so that each member is treated with dignity.
- Teach children that chastity is not a set of prohibitions but a freedom to belong to God and to all.

Parish/Diocese Level

- Foster a culture of dignified relationships: provide formation, accompaniment, and healing; ensure healthy environments; and discipline communal processes (clear communication, distinguishing facts from interpretations, avoiding emotionally driven decisions).

- Form people to see chastity as relational universality, not merely sexual morality. Accompany both married and consecrated persons in understanding that chastity is a state of being, not an achievement. Reject the false separation of body and soul; chastity is incarnational, not dualistic.

Institutional Level

- Form people, not functions: implement affective education, safeguarding, and resources that shape perception and relationships in truth; address digital distortions; and refuse to reduce people to economic output.

————— **What would you add or adjust from your own experience?** —————

4. Questions and Exercises

Personal

- How do my thoughts and perceptions shape the way I see others?
- When do I react emotionally rather than respond with clarity?
- Where do I project assumptions onto others instead of encountering them as they are?
- What relationships reveal attachment, dependency, or possessiveness?

Family Level

- How are emotions expressed and guided within the household?
- Do our patterns of communication respect each person's dignity?
- Where do we revisit past conflicts instead of addressing the present?
- What role does media play in shaping how we see relationships and others?

Parish/Diocese

- Do our interactions reflect respect and dignity, or hidden tensions and assumptions?
- How are emotional pressures influencing decisions?
- Are people accompanied in their struggles, or only managed functionally?
- Where does communication create clarity, and where does it create confusion or noise?

Institutional

- Are people treated as persons or as functions within the system?
- How are relational boundaries protected and formed?
- What cultural norms shape how people relate within the institution?
- How are contemporary distortions (digital, cultural) addressed concretely?

5. Connection to Our Maronite Saints

Throughout his monastic life, Saint Nimatullah Al-Hardini was distinguished by the virtue of chastity. What he lived in his own time may appear as an extreme form of practice from the perspective of contemporary understanding. However, the saint made a firm decision to live a heroic chastity, away from any temptation or anything that could hinder his complete consecration to God.

His life clearly shows that chastity is not merely bodily abstinence, but rather a fullness in one's relationship with God and with others, and an openness to God's universal love. He used to say to his disciples: "Chastity is not deprivation, but the freedom of the heart to love God and all people sincerely."

IV. The Monastic Virtue of Obedience

1. Definition

Obedience is a free and loving alignment of one's will with the will of God, expressed through attentive listening, dialogue, and responsible action. It is not blind submission but a path of freedom and truth.

Rather than submission to arbitrary authority, obedience is defined as communal discernment and participation in collective wisdom. It is rooted in love and trust, where individual choices are aligned with communally discerned values and the needs of the family and community. Obedience functions as a social virtue by establishing networks of guidance and receptive listening across generations.

2. Results

Obedience is described as communion-based and liberating rather than top-down submission. Participants explicitly rejected blind submission and "hard power" (shouting or force). Instead, obedience is an act of love and freedom carried out for the sake of Jesus. It is a shared journey of listening to the will of God through the other.

3. Practical Propositions

Personal Level

- Practice discerning listening: attend to God (Scripture), to correction, and to conscience so that decisions increasingly align with truth rather than self-will.
- Practice obedience as loving listening, not submission. The only difference between obedience and submission is love. Obedience flows from relationships, not fear. Cultivate interior freedom to choose what is true because it is loved.

Family Level

- Build a listening family structure: exercise authority with love and clarity, create shared decision spaces, model obedience to God, and regularly examine habits together to discern what truly serves the family.
- Practice parents' obedience to God and children not through control but through witness. Remembering that a child becomes an adult through their parents, who teach obedience by their endurance, their giving of life, and their tireless service without complaint. Understanding family obedience as mutual and loving.

Parish/Diocese Level

- Practice synodal discernment: implement participatory listening, transparent authority, clear processes, accountability, and formation so that decisions arise from communal listening rather than unilateral control.
- Teaching that obedience is not about hierarchy but about love-made-concrete. Encouraging mutual obedience between leaders and the community, since all obey Christ.

Institutional Level

- Govern through discernment: delay decisions under pressure, resist reactive responses to external demands, and communicate proportionately to real needs.

————— **What would you add or adjust from your own experience?** —————

4. Questions and Exercises

Personal

- What voices do I listen to when making decisions?
- Where do I resist correction or guidance?
- How do I discern between my will and what is true or necessary?
- When obedience is difficult, what am I afraid of losing?

Family Level

- How are decisions made within the household?
- Do children experience authority as arbitrary or meaningful?
- Where is listening present, and where is it lacking?
- What habits do we maintain without questioning their purpose?

Parish/Diocese

- How are decisions formed: through consultation or imposition?
- Are people genuinely heard, or only informed?
- What structures allow or prevent real participation?
- Where does authority serve, and where does it control?

Institutional

- What pressures influence decision-making processes most?
- Are decisions based on data, interpretation, or urgency?
- How is dissent or feedback handled?
- What would more faithful discernment look like in practice?

5. Connection to Our Maronite Saints

Few are those who truly know how Brother Estefan Nihmeh reached the state of holiness. This monk was a man of prayer, poverty, chastity, and obedience, which were manifested in his deep humility, his spirit of service, and his diligent work, especially in the fields and in carpentry.

His life of obedience was not limited to submission to the orders of superiors; rather, it was first a submission to the holy commandments of God, secondly, a fulfillment of the commandments of the Church, and thirdly, a complete fidelity to the observance of monastic rules.

His obedience reached its peak in the final period of his life, when he carried out the task of defining the boundaries of the lands of the Monastery of Our Lady of Mayfouk with intelligence and trustworthiness despite his great fatigue. He then returned to the Monastery of Kfifane while being ill, and there he submitted his soul in a state of contentment and total surrender to the will of God.

V. Asceticism

1. Definition

Asceticism is the intentional discipline of one's desires, habits, and lifestyle to prioritize God, grow in interior freedom, and become more capable of loving others. It is not rejection of the world, but the reordering of one's relationship with it.

In the Maronite tradition, asceticism is a distinctive spiritual trait understood as spiritual liberation rather than physical deprivation or denial of material existence. It is a positive, voluntary process of using physical and material life to guide spiritual growth toward the Creator. Rather than being an end goal, asceticism serves as an instrument for "centripetal opening", strengthening the individual's core self to avoid egocentrism and redirecting personal resources toward the service of others.

2. Results

The data demonstrates a clear departure from a purely corporal or punitive understanding of asceticism. Instead, asceticism is redefined as Inner Freedom. Participants described it as a voluntary discipline of desire that serves as an antidote to consumerist culture. It is not about hating the world but about detaching from it, specifically for the sake of serving it. The Maronite spiritual heritage specifically ties this to "Evangelical Poverty" lived by Christ.

3. Practical Propositions

Personal Level

- Order desire through concrete disciplines: simplify lifestyle, fast and moderate, establish daily silence, limit media/status pressures, and actively redirect surplus to those in need, so that desires are reoriented toward what is essential.
- Understanding that asceticism flows from joy, liberty, and love, not from grim self-denial. Recognizing that the three vows (poverty, chastity, obedience) cannot be separated, and that asceticism cannot exist without freedom.

Family Level

- Adopt shared disciplines: set limits (no to excess), practice periodic fasts (screens, spending, food), reduce noise and distractions, and explain these practices as paths to freedom, presence, and solidarity.

Parish/Diocese Level

- Witness through restraint and focus: organize formation and seasons (Lent/Advent), keep events moderate, model simplicity in leadership, and reduce communicative and organizational excess to create space for depth.

Institutional Level

- Reduce systemic excess: simplify structures, eliminate habitual or redundant processes, limit unnecessary meetings/communication, resist urgency and metric absolutism, and model disciplined, sustainable use of resources.

————— **What would you add or adjust from your own experience?** —————

4. Questions and Exercises

Personal

- What habits shape my daily life, and which of them are necessary?
- Where do I avoid discipline in favor of comfort?
- How do I use silence, fasting, or limits to reorder my desires?
- What concrete practices help me become freer and more available to others?

Family Level

- What rhythms define our family life (consumption, activity, rest)?
- Where do we struggle to say “no” as a household?
- Do our practices create presence or distraction?
- How do we explain and live sacrifice as something positive?

Parish/Diocese

- Does activity reflect depth or simply busyness?
- Where can simplification create more space for prayer and encounter?
- Do events reflect moderation or excess?
- How is asceticism visibly lived in leadership and structures?

Institutional

- What processes exist only because of past complexity?
- Where does urgency override discernment?
- How much communication is necessary vs redundant?
- What would simplification change in effectiveness and clarity?

5. Connection to Our Maronite Saints

Saint Charbel Makhlouf, the monk, priest, and hermit, embodies the highest model of prayer and asceticism. Raised toward love for God and prayer from his early childhood, he chose monastic life and then the priesthood, until his deep love for prayer and his passion for Christ led him to seek a life of reclusion. From that moment on, his entire life became a continuous state of prayer.

He prayed through his silence as much as through his work, obedience, and fasting. The culmination of his prayer was the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, during which he lived in a state of complete immersion in contemplation and union with the sacrifice of the Son of God offered before him.

Charbel, “the man intoxicated with God”, left us a profound spiritual model of asceticism lived in a heroic way. He chose to eat and drink only what was necessary to sustain his spiritual endeavor, contenting himself with remnants of herbs and dry bread once a day. He wore sackcloth and spiked iron and endured extreme heat and bitter cold in his hermitage. He also labored diligently in the monastery vineyards without tasting their fruits and did not drink wine except when it became the Blood of Christ, mingled with the bread of His Body.

What Charbel lived in terms of ascetic practices was not contempt for earthly goods, but a penetrating spiritual vision that allowed him to see the vast difference between the goods the world offers, legitimate yet passing, and the spiritual goods that contain eternal salvation for the soul and contribute to its ascent toward the heavenly paradise, where it can behold God face to face.

VI. Attachment to the Land

1. Definition

Attachment to the land is an emotional bond where the land is regarded as a “loving mother” who unites her children in closeness and cooperation. It is a main characteristic of the Maronite cultural and social identity, acting as a source of simplicity, contentment, stability, and giving. Historically, this connection was forged through agricultural labor, which was viewed as a form of ascetic practice and a “school of life” that shaped the community’s resilience.

Attachment to the land is not mere ownership or emotional nostalgia. It is a lived relationship with a place understood as a gift, a responsibility, and a mission. The land is received, cultivated, protected, and transmitted. It is both physical and spiritual: a space where identity is formed, history is rooted, and God is encountered.

2. Results

Analysis of participant responses reveals that “attachment to the land” transcends geopolitical nostalgia or mere property ownership. Participants consistently framed the land as a spiritual trust and a theological reality rather than absolute personal property. There is a distinct Maronite spiritual geography identified in the data: the mountain is the place of encounter with God, the coast signifies openness, and the valleys and grottoes represent resilience and history. The land is understood as the locus where identity, ancestry, and divine creation intersect: where God is encountered in nature as Divine Revelation.

3. Practical Propositions

Personal Level

- Live rootedness as responsibility: know your history, engage nature, practice stewardship, learn traditional skills, and maintain ties to homeland, treating the land as a gift, a task, and a place of encounter with God.
- Understanding attachment to the land not as mystical roots but as memory, language, liturgy, and the people who formed us.

Family Level

- Transmit identity through practice: pass on stories, language, and traditions; create place-based experiences; and foster a lived relationship with the land as a space of belonging and faith.

Parish/Diocese Level

- Embed land in communal life: pilgrimages, catechesis on creation, traditional feasts, and visible heritage spaces that connect faith, history, and place.

Institutional Level

- Sustain identity and stewardship institutionally: integrate ecology in curricula, promote heritage, conserve land, deepen formation (beyond scholarships) in language/history/land, support diaspora identity, and resist fragmentation of ancestral lands.

————— **What would you add or adjust from your own experience?** —————

4. Questions and Exercises

Personal

- What is my relationship to my place of origin or belonging?
- Do I experience the land as a resource, or as a gift and responsibility?
- How do I engage with nature in a meaningful way?
- What practices connect me to history, memory, and identity?

Family Level

- What traditions or stories are actively transmitted in our home?
- How do we create experiences tied to place and memory?
- What connection do children have with the land and heritage?
- What elements of identity are being lost or preserved?

Parish/Diocese

- How is the connection between faith and land made visible?
- What communal practices reinforce shared identity and history?
- Are traditions lived meaningfully or only repeated?
- How does the parish engage with its local environment?

Institutional

- How is ecological responsibility integrated concretely?
- What role does heritage play in institutional identity?
- How are younger generations formed in connection to land and history?
- What risks threaten continuity of land, culture, and identity?

5. Connection to Our Maronite Saints

Saint Maron lived in the open air, practicing asceticism in nature, thereby expressing his attachment to the land as a space of encounter with God.

For him, nature was no longer merely a place to live, but it became a space for contemplation and union with God. The land became a school of prayer and asceticism, an expression of spiritual steadfastness and of attachment to the earth as the roots of faith; for whoever remains firm on mountain peaks and lives in their austerity becomes strong and steadfast in God.

The disciples of Maron formed the nucleus of the Maronite Church, where the land for them constituted identity, mission, and a school of prayer. It was a way of living both simplicity and asceticism, with absolute trust in the grace and providence of God.

VII. Conclusion

This document has aimed to initiate and accompany a path of reflection on a way of living the Christian life, rooted in a specificity that the Maronite Church has embodied and transmitted over time. What has long been lived as part of the Maronite experience is revisited here, expressed, and actualized within contemporary contexts. This process of re-articulation does not aim to limit these elements within a particular community, but rather to shed light on their deeper meaning and relevance today.

While grounded in the Maronite tradition, the components explored in this document are not exclusive to it. They reflect fundamental human and Christian virtues that can contribute to shaping a meaningful and dignified quality of life. In this sense, this work extends beyond its immediate ecclesial context: it is an invitation addressed to other Churches and to other religious traditions to engage in a reflection on these values, to recognize how they are lived within their own contexts, and to explore together how they may serve the humanization of societies and the promotion of a more authentic quality of life.

In continuity with the synodal spirit that underlies this work, the document remains open. The questions proposed throughout the sections may be discussed either within each part or collectively at the end through a Google Form accessible via the QR code that you can find below. This space is intended to extend the process of listening, dialogue, and shared discernment.

Readers are invited to contribute their reflections, insights, and experiences, and to remain in contact through the email address provided.

This work is the fruit of a sustained collaborative effort. We are grateful to those who accompanied the research process and contributed to the drafting of this document.

Contact: wpo.bkerki@gmail.com



[Click here to access the Google Forms](#)

VIII. Annex

This working document was developed by the Women's Pastoral Office and several collaborators, each involved in specific aspects of the research process:

Prof. Mirna Abboud Mzawak and Clara Moukarzel, who led the project's development. Their work included the design of the research framework, the formulation of questionnaires, the facilitation and synthesis of discussion groups, and the development of the main conceptual axes of the document.

The IDEES Multidisciplinary Research Group at the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) accompanied and supported the research and reflection process throughout the development of the document, ensuring academic and methodological consistency and contributing to the collective elaboration of its content.

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