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Copy of speech delivered by John Farry prior to the special Mass at St Josephs Cathedral Dunedin on 27th November 2011 in celebration of “The Gathering,” organised by The Cedars of Lebanon Club.

I am deeply honoured to have been accorded the privilege of speaking to you this morning prior to the special Mass being celebrated as part of “The Gathering” held in Dunedin over the weekend. This is in every sense an historic occasion.

A very long history precedes our gathering here today and that history begins thousands of years ago, before the time of Christ – back to where the Pharaohs of Egypt were plundering the Cedars of Lebanon to build their ships and their splendid structures.

Lebanon was, and is, a tiny strip of land on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It is a country with a very colourful history. Lebanon is within walking distance of Galilee and is mentioned in the Old Testament no fewer than 71 times. Let me read you some selected quotes –

Psalm 92

The righteous flourish like a palm and grow like a cedar in Lebanon

Ezekiel 31:3

*You are like a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful shady branches.
A tree so tall it reaches the clouds.*

Psalm 72

*May there be plenty of grain in the land.
May the hills be covered with crops,
As fruitful as those of Lebanon.*

Song of songs 4:11

*Your lips distil nectar my bride,
Honey and milk under your tongue.
The scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon.*

Several passages in the New Testament indicate that Jesus walked in Lebanon. There are references to the towns of Tyre and Sidon, which exist to this day in the south of the country.

All things considered we must conclude that the land of our ancestors is an integral part of the cradle of Christianity.

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The country has been conquered, invaded, occupied and placed under foreign Mandate several times and in recent years suffered the ravages of a lengthy civil war, extending over almost 20 years. In spite of all the upheaval, injustice, deprivation and conquest, Lebanon remains a fiercely independent nation to this very day.

It was from this tiny country that our courageous ancestors set forth into the new world.

The historian Philip Hitti described Lebanon as a country “rich in time but poor in space.” By the mid 19th century the predominately Christian country was under Turkish domination and Christians had become second-class citizens.

The new world beckoned and held out the prospect of a brighter future. Lebanese people were emigrating to the United States of America and Canada, to Argentina and Brazil, to South Africa and Australia; and to a little country at the end of the world known as New Zealand.

Why did our ancestors choose New Zealand? No one really knows. Some would say they came to Dunedin because the ship would not sail any further and they wanted to be sure to get their money’s worth on the voyage. The truth is that in the mid 19th century the city of Dunedin was the commercial capital of the country. Whatever the reason one or two found their way to this city and there followed, in the ensuing years, a chain migration as those who were established invited others from the village, and elsewhere, to join them.

What did our ancestors bring with them? Did they bring jewellery, antiques, designer clothes, and wealth? They brought none of these things, as they were dirt poor. They travelled in steerage at a cost of 5 pounds for their voyage. What they did bring with them was a desire for a better life, a capacity to work, a will to succeed and above all from the cradle of Christianity they brought with them a deep and abiding faith, a love of their God plus the wisdom of the ancient land symbolised by those magnificent cedar trees.

When I think of the rocky mountains of Lebanon and the village of Becharre I am reminded of a passage from “Jesus Christ Superstar” when Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and the people were crying out with joy

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and excitement as he passed by. The Pharisees were trying to quieten the people but the followers of Jesus sing a song which begins –

“Why waste your breath moaning at the crowd. Nothing can be done to stop the shouting. If every tongue was still noise would still continue – the rocks and stones themselves would start to sing – “hosanna, hosanna, hosanna etc.”

Our ancestors were like the stones and cedars of Lebanon, they sang out in joyful praise of their Lord.

So what did they find, here in New Zealand? A completely different climate (they came from a land of 300 sunny days.) They found a language they could not speak or understand and a culture that was totally alien to them in almost every way. They looked different from the predominately European settlers. The staple food in those days was meat and three vegetables. No one had heard of

olive oil, tahini, hummus, yoghurt, pita bread, tabouli, cracked wheat etc etc. What an opportunity we missed letting others fill the supermarket shelves with all those products, which have their origins in the homeland of our ancestors.

As poor immigrants and being considered aliens meant that the early days were difficult. They purchased cheap housing in what became known as the "Devil's Half Acre" and as a result they formed an absolutely unique community. They lived in close proximity to one another. The men worked and the women managed the household. Family love and a tight knit community sustained them.

When I came to live in Dunedin the community had already begun to disperse and move into other parts of the city and well beyond the city. Nevertheless I was blessed in that I had many "aunties", "uncles" and "cousins" who were not related to me by blood but by virtue of the fact that they were part of this unique community – a community, which were one in joy and one in sorrow. No – they weren't all perfect human beings but they did possess a fidelity and a loyalty to one another and they embraced this Cathedral as their Mother Church – their place of worship, their place of prayer. One of the older generation once said to me that the walls of the Cathedral are "soaked in prayer."

As they trudged up Rattray Street to attend Mass on a cold bleak winter's morning (no one had a car in those early days) and when they remembered the Mediterranean climate from which they had come they said "Aish jebnie ah hull bled?" which means "What brought me to this country?" But trudge they did and pray they did.

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I do not wish to guild the lily for it needs to be stated quite clearly that they suffered prejudice both in the general community and within the Church at times and in the schools but they kept the faith and in this Cathedral they were baptised, received the sacraments, attended Mass, married and lay before this very altar to receive their final farewell.

I ask you today, what did they teach us? What did they give us? What did they bring with them from the ancient land of the cedars?

They taught us to be proud in the face of adversity and prejudice. They taught us to be proud of who we are and of the heritage from which we came. They taught us to be proud of our love of our home and our family and our faith. They taught us to always make visitors welcome and to love one another as Jesus taught us. They taught us to pray hard, to trust in God but always tie your camel to a tree. And they taught us to be true to our faith, whatever the challenge.

I respectfully suggest that it would be appropriate today on this special occasion in this Cathedral to remember them, to honour them for their courage, their tenacity, their fidelity and above all for loving us unconditionally. For coming to this blessed land in pursuit of a better life for each one of us. Generally speaking they were uneducated, some were illiterate but they were imbued with an abiding faith.

It is appropriate also today to remember all the priests of the Cathedral Parish who have faithfully served the Lebanese community over the years. We remember them today, and always, with affection and gratitude. Currently our priest is Father John Harrison who is offering Mass for us today. Thank you Father on behalf of the community, past and present.

Today we honour all those who have gone before us, all who are unable to be here today, all our families and we remember with gratitude and pride our long, successful and happy history on Aotearoa New Zealand.

No one says it better than Kahlil Gibran -

“They are those who left Lebanon penniless for another country with hearts fired with enthusiasm and resolution to return with the plenty of the earth in their hands and the laurel wreaths of achievement adorning their brows.

They adapt to their new environment and are esteemed wherever they go.

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These are the sons and daughters of my Lebanon, the unextinguished torches and the salt that cannot be corrupted.

They walk with sturdy feet toward truth beauty and perfection.”

In this wonderful Cathedral on this historic occasion may I ask you to please rise and, with love and gratitude, give a standing ovation to all those who have gone before us. May they be at peace.

JOHN FARRY
Sunday 29th October 2011