

THE MONASTIC ROOTS OF THE MARONITE CHURCH

(With a Personal Look at ST. SHARBEL)

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
The Maronite Roots, a Main Vein in the Maronite Church	
PART I – A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW	3
A. The Monastic Life in the Maronite Church Today (The Religious Orders)	3
B. Before the 18 th Century (Places, Names, Roles)	5
C. The Foundations (Between the V and VIII Centuries)	11
PART II – EASTERN MONASTISM AND MARONITE ROOTS	15
A. The Common Denominators	15
B. The Special Notes of the Maronite Roots	19
PART III – THE MEANING OF THE ROOTS	21
A. The Personality of SHARBEL	21
B. Faith and Work (Logo of the Maronite Diocese-U.S.A.)	21
C. The Monastic Life in America	22
CONCLUSION	23

INTRODUCTION

The Monastic Roots, a Main Vein in the Maronite Church

I am thrilled, yet a little scared, to see so many of you interested in Monastic topics, as practiced in our Church. This kind of life is not easy to follow, not even easy to hear about. It deals only with a particular path flowing within the Maronite Church. It involves the lives of people – men and women – who chose to dedicate themselves fully to God in an awkward and sometimes shocking way. You will witness examples of which most of you are not aware; you will hear strange names which most of you never heard before. But no matter how unusual the names and eccentric the examples, you will find out, at the end, that all of them meet where everything in Christian life and ideal meets, the Alpha and Omega of all, I mean: the Lord Jesus. This fact makes them close and familiar to us, and in an uncommon way, they seem to be our very own contemporaries.

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The Maronite Way arose from the heat of a monk in a faraway hermitage. It grew, spread and stood alive for centuries in the shadow and spirit of a monastery, which took its inspiration from this monk. As a matter of fact, the monastic roots, in all their forms – be it the solitary life, the cenobitic life or others – are not mere accidents in the entire body of the Maronite Church. Rather, they constitute a main vein within this body. During the past few years, this kind of historical and spiritual truth was strongly and attractively embodied in the personality of ST. SHARBEL. On October 9, 1977, the Catholic Church canonized him, thus solemnly consecrating, in the eyes of the whole world, not only the man himself, but also the way that gave birth to SHARBEL, I mean: the monastic roots, the one and only source of inspiration to his whole life.

The American people are becoming more acquainted with this new figure of Eastern Maronite Christian commitment. In a first move, they may look only at the “magic” side of his life. They may go to him manly to find answers for their questions, solutions to their problems and cures for their illnesses. There is nothing wrong with this. SHARBEL is here for these reasons, too. However, I hope that the American people won't stop at that aspect of SHARBEL'S message. I hope that they will see in SHARBEL what is beyond him and what

actually molded him – the monastic roots. Here lies the core of the message. One of the most representative and influential voices in modern American spirituality already set the tone: “(SHARBEL) is my new companion,” said Thomas Merton when he first met with SHARBEL. Struck by him, he went on declaring: “My road has taken a new turning.” Aren’t we allowed to foresee through this statement a new turning point in the American vision of a representative of an Eastern spirituality?

In the outline of my talk, I chose first to give you a retrospective view of the theme, going backward into history, in order to trace the link between SHARBEL and the one who was at the origin of the way, MAR MAROON himself (Part I). Then I will try to establish a comparison between what is Eastern in general and what is Maronite in a particular manner (Part II). At the end, I will try to address myself to you as a group of people who want to know their roots and who as well as clearly love to relate to them today (Part III).

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PART I – A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

A. The Monastic Life in the Maronite Church Today (The Religious Orders)

ST. SHARBEL is not a lone ranger in the monastic life. He is the heir of a continuing, living tradition of Maronite monks and hermits. He actually belonged to a religious order which is today a leading order in the Maronite Church.* We have many of them for men as well as for women.*

1. **The Lebanese Maronite Order** – the order of SHARBEL – was founded in 1695 and has about 450 members. It counts sixty-one institutions among monasteries, schools, centers of education and hospitals... It serves Maronite missions in Africa and Latin America. It has an official representative in Rome. It founded the only private Lebanese university – Holy Spirit University of Kaslik.

2. **The Aleppine Order** (which changed its name into the **Mariamite Order** a few years ago) founded at the same time as the **Baladi Order**. They number approximately 100-150 members.

3. **The Antonine Order** (Order of St. Isaiah) prepared before the Lebanese Order but not founded until 1700. They have more than 100 members.

4. **The Society of Lebanese Missionaries**, known as KREIMIEH (from KREIM, near JOUNIEH, where they started and had their general quarters). They were founded in 1865 by Bishop HABIB to spread the word of God through preaching and retreats, and to put themselves at the disposition of the local Maronite bishop to whomever they were assigned in Lebanon or elsewhere.

5. Among the religious orders for women, the **Antonine Order** was founded in 1700. It counts today about 250 members. In the 1940's, they entered the Apostolic life, directly. It is a “women” branch of the Antonine Order for men, and has special ties of spirituality and jurisdiction with it.

6. **The Lebanese Order of Nuns**, tied to the Lebanese Order for men, founded in 1740 which numbers about one hundred members. In 1940, they also entered the Apostolic life.

7. **The Nuns of St. John the Baptist of HRASH** were founded in 1726. They number about thirty-five members. In the 1960's they entered the Apostolic life directly, after a complete life of “cloister” for more than two centuries.

8. **The Holy Family Order** founded in 1895 by Patriarch ELIAS AL-HOUWAYEK. They number 300-350 members, and dedicate themselves, since the beginning, to education and hospital care.

9. **The Order of St. Theresa of Little Jesus** was founded in 1935 with approximately one hundred members.

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The main objective of these orders, in a very broad way, was meant to follow the original rule of the monastic life – that is: a life of separation from the world in a total dedication to the Lord and within the communal life of the chorus which is mainly concerned with canonical prayers. The choice of the Apostolic life came later on, as above mentioned, as a response to the needs of the Maronite life. Still, the vein of the monastic life as it used to be in the hermitages is open in this century just as it was in the 17th century and before. We have found a strong switch of monastic life in the Maronite Church. It seems to be modern today. People may call it a reform. I would not say it is a reform, but rather a switch in which there is openness to the world and, at the same time, calling for the old cause. And why did the monastic ideal switch to the Apostolic life? I, myself, believe beyond all other reasons that it is the calling of the Spirit, the needs of the times. There is an untold truth of a deeply rooted, fortified need of the Maronite soul which is: the monk cannot be away from his people, and the Maronite people cannot be away from their monks. It is because of this truth with which I begin my speech – that we belong to the monk, and we will live for ever in the shadows of monks and monasteries. Sometimes it is hard, but we accept it.

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B. Before the 18th Century (Places, Names, Roles...)

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This new type of organized institution in our monastic life started at the end of the 17th century. When Bishop GABRIEL BLOUZANY,* later Patriarch, founded the monastery of TAMISH in the center of LEBANON, a new era of monastic life began to take place. During the first years of the 18th century, he founded the Antonine Orders. In 1695, ABDALLAH CARALI, GERMANUS FARHAT, YOUSSEF EL-BANI and GABRIEL HAWWA, four young men from Aleppo (Syria), went to Patriarch STEPHEN DWAIHI (1672-1704) and asked for his permission to found a new style of monastic life, inspired by the rules of the Western orders. They not only received his blessing, but the Patriarch gave them the Monastery of MAR MOORA in EHDEN (North Lebanon) along with the canonical consecration of their rules.

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Prior to that, the monastic life was flourishing in all its aspects. Patriarch DWAIHI, in his *“History of Times”*, said: “The mountains of Lebanon, its alleys and caves were crowded by hermits and monks.” They lived in groups within monasteries, while, at the same time, some separated from them to go into caves and grottos. Each monastery was independent in itself. Its monks lived under the leadership of a master. The monastery communicated spiritually with other places, always keeping its jurisdictional independence. From these communities, living in these monasteries, monks who asked for the hermitage lived there under the supervision of this leader – the master.

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I can name you many places. For us, there are places in which we can still hear and listen to the spirit living in our communities. “In the year 1112,” recalls DWAIHI, “the Maronites began building up churches and monasteries. In the early years of the 16th century, the number of those monasteries reached one hundred.”

The first place to be mentioned is QANNOUBIN (Greek word meaning “the monastery”, “the community”), in the Holy Valley. In 1388, the King of Egypt, AZAHER, paid a visit to this very flourishing and influential place.

Near QANNOUBIN stands the MONASTERY of QOZHAYA. This is a Syriac word to say “the Treasure of Life”. It really meant what it said. In the 13th century, they founded at the top of the Holy Valley, in the cliff of the mountain above QANNOUBIN and QOZHAYA, the MONASTERY of OUR LADY OF HAWKA. This place later on became the first seminary in the Middle East. In 1533, in the upper part of the Holy Valley, they founded the MONASTERY OF ST. ELIJAH (MAR LICHA).

The places continue to spread, more and more, from the north toward the central part of LEBANON, in a spiritual conquest of the country. The MONASTERY OF ST. SHALLITA, in GHOSTA, was the first to be built in KESRAWAN, right in the middle of Lebanon, in an area which was slowly Christianized. In 1673, OUR LADY OF TAMISH; in 1698, the MONASTERY OF ST. ISAIAH in BROUMANA; later OUR LADY OF MASHMOUSHI in JEZZINE, right in the south of Lebanon. These Maronite places peacefully covered the whole geography of LEBANON, giving to it its unusual aspect of Christian country, among others which belong to other faiths and creeds. Still, the roots came first from the North...

These groups, communities, independent monasteries, hermitages were people living by themselves according to the Spirit inherited from MAR MAROON and his way. These places built hermitages around them or gave permission to monks to build places the way they wanted in order to live spiritually at ease and according to their own callings. It was a small tent, or under a cliff, or a grotto. Each chose his own way, his own style, always supervised by the master in order to control the monks in the true way according to Oriental rules and traditions.

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We find the description of those hermitages from Western travelers, visiting priests and Pontifical delegates. Here is what JEROME DANDINI* says about the hermits living in those places: “They infiltrate in the most isolated places in the mountains, far away from any contact with people. They live under high cliffs, in caves and grottos in the flanks of the mountains which look more like nests for animals than dwellings for human beings.”*

The traveler, De Laroq, after visiting the hermitages, writes: “Some of them are engraved into high cliffs climbing the top and least accessible mountains, which made us imagine that they were suspended between heaven and earth and impossible to be reached.”

The most famous of them are MAR BISHAI and ST. MICHAEL in QANNOUBIN, ST. ANTHONY in QOZHAYA, ST. ANTHONY and ST. SIMON in FRADISS, ST. SARKIS and ST. APON in HADETH, ST. SHALLITA in KFARSAROUN... Later on OUR LADY OF TAMISH and ST. MARON in ANNAYA (SHARBEL).

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The people who lived in those places are the predecessors of SHARBEL. They filled his life with their examples and challenged him to follow them. Their lives in hermitages followed two stages. The first one imposed on them to live within a monastic community at least for three years. Those years were considered as a time of probation. After that, in the second stage, they were permitted to join the hermitage of their choice or the one vacant. For some time, they kept some rare links with the community until they entered more and more into a complete solitude and isolation in which their days and nights were filled only by that strange and unique relationship with the world, themselves, the Enemy and their Lord.

Dead to life, here begins the story of their real birth, to true life.

History gives us many names. I am not going to stop here to mention each one, but I am going to take some in order to give you an idea. The hermitage of ST. MICHAEL in QOZHAYA left us a long list of holy names and especially of a certain dynasty of people. We

have MICHAEL THE FIRST from EHDEN. After him HANNA (John) from EHDEN took his place when MICHAEL dies. And then MICHAEL THE SECOND came from EHDEN to take HANNA'S place. And afterward, his nephew GABRIEL came to take the place of MICHAEL THE SECOND. Then MICHAEL THE THIRD from EHDEN (+1617) came to take GABRIEL'S place. All of them, according to flesh, born in the same homeland, wanted to be living in the same hermitage according to the Spirit, to their vocation, were anxious to inherit these holy places in order to perform their love or their mortification. They cherished those places and wanted to carry on the tradition of the holy men who lived there before them. We have the description of one hermit, YOHANNA EL-MATRITI in the 16th century (1526)*. He served his Lord for fifty years. He used to eat only once every two days, to fast from Pentecost until Christmas. He drank water only on Saturday. During Lent, he used to kneel until the sweat completely overcame him. In Holy Week, he performed the Metany up to 24,000 times. Metany is a prostration performed by the monk. He kneels on both knees and, with hands extended in front of him, would prostrate himself on the ground, a sign of penance and adoration.

Another example, his disciple, HANNA from LEHFID, lived in this place for twenty-four years during all of which he was sick. In spite of this, however, he out staged his master; he performed the Metany 126,000 times during Holy Week alone.

His disciple, GABRIEL of EHDEN, would perform one thousand Metany every day during Lent. In Holy Week, he would never stop doing the Metany. Besides that, he was a well-known copist of liturgical manuscripts. He kept copying books and manuscripts of his rite "until", it was said of him, "the whole Lebanon was filled with books copied in his fine writings."

We have MALKA from BKOUFA (+1560). He spent sixty years in hermitages and was buried with the Patriarchs in order to honor the sanctity of his life.

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Those places and those men had such an appeal for people that they had followers from Europe. In the 16th century, a young man from France, FRANCOIS DE CHASTEUIL, attracted to this way of life, came to Lebanon. He isolated himself first in the monasteries of ST. JAMES (MAR YACOUB) and ST. SARKIS in EHDEN. Before his death, he left them to join the main monastery in QANNOUBIN where he was instantly welcomed among its monks because of the reputation of his holy life. He used to spend his days in continuous prayer and to whip his body. He was very learned in Holy Scriptures. At one time, the Maronite community decided to elect him Patriarch. He died in 1644.

Four other young men came after him and asked Patriarch GEORGE from BSEB'IL to receive them into the Maronite monastery among the hermits. They lived in different hermitages, completely dedicated to this new style of monastic life.

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Those men and those places had a tremendous impact upon the Maronite Church, upon its history as well as its spirit. They acted like the very conscience of the community. They embodied the spirit of its identity. At the same time, they were its true leaders. From among those hermits and monks, the Maronites chose scores of their Bishops. Many of their Patriarchs also came from among their members.

Let me tell you this beautiful story of one family, the RAZZI Family: MICHAEL RAZZI went to the hermitage of MAR BISHAI of QANNOUBIN, dedicating himself to mortification. In 1567, he was called and told that he was chosen to be Patriarch. Scared to death, he ran away and disappeared. For ten days, nobody knew of his whereabouts. He refused to be Patriarch. But, this being a call of duty not of honor, he finally consented. As soon as he left the hermitage, his brother, SARKIS, ran to inherit his place. He lived there until 1581. That year, the Patriarch, his brother, died. SARKIS was elected Patriarch. Like his brother, he resisted then bowed before God's calling. As soon as SARKIS left the hermitage, his nephew, YOUSSEF, came to live there. In 1596, the community elected him Patriarch which he served until 1608.

In this story, we have a spiritual dynasty going from one brother to another on to a nephew. Upon becoming Patriarch, they took upon themselves the official leadership of the community, clergy and laity, in order to rule the Church. They did not want to become Patriarchs. They did not prepare themselves academically for that. They were simple monks, living monastic lives for their own sake. This example shows us the appeal of this life, and that the need for leadership is not in books or in external qualities. The people found that those men who lived for themselves alone, dedicating themselves to God, had real leadership and ruled very strongly. The second one, SARKIS, was humble like a monk but yet also stubborn as a monk. As Patriarch, he stood before Rome, because they wanted to change things. He said, “No, I don’t want to change the traditions of my Church.”*

In this long period, between the 8th and 17th centuries, we saw hundreds of hermits and scores of holy places in Lebanon. This flourishing of the monastic life began in Lebanon only after they left Syria following the persecution. It was the fruit of a new situation for the followers of ST. MARON. Only in Lebanon could the Maronites organize themselves as a Church and as a nation. This new situation, that is, a Church with its prerequisites and a nation with its own people, gave us the most beautiful fruits among the saints. Then we had a strong Maronite identity developing itself based on new factors, like the attachment to the mountains and to its land, the involvement in a special history of its own and the new challenges of the spirit. At the same time, this new identity kept firmly attached to the old foundations of the monastic life.

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C. The Foundations (Between V and VIII Centuries)

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Those foundations came from the Monastery of MAR MAROON, from the disciples of MAR MAROON and from MAROON himself. “It was a huge monastery,” writes the Arab historian, AL-MASOODY in 957, “surrounded by more than three hundred hermitages filled with monks.” Bishop THOMAS AL-KFARTABI (12th century) declared: “The number of monks in the monastery of MAR MAROON was at least eight hundred.” Those monks showed leadership in the Christological crises of their times before other monasteries and within the whole Church. But essentially the life in there was the life of asceticism and Christian perfection. At the same time, they took care of the community of people living around them in their shadows, an organized community which is a new aspect in a monastic way.

In the first aspect, people kept coming after them, looking for leadership. They received them, reached them, organized them, protected them, but with the ministry of MAR MAROON.

“The religious superiors of those monasteries looked like generals of armies for the defense of the faith, their monks like soldiers, their monasteries like strong fortresses in which each one could find his refuge. The common people followed the steps of their spiritual leaders and entrusted to them their human as well as their religious needs.” (Bishop DEBS, *History of Syria*)

In all this, we witness the impact of the monastic life as it was growing in the Eastern Church. And we see, as I said the care of the monks for their people in an organized style

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These places were spiritually prepared and founded by a great number of direct followers of MAR MAROON. In that sense, they were the fathers of SHARBEL. The carried the flame all over, passing it from MAR MAROON in QANNOUBIN, to SHARBEL in ANNAYA. Those disciples – we know a few of them – had beautiful and strange lives; and each one of them followed the way MAROON created, a very genial way in its inspiration, but simple in its realization. They would live in small places outdoors, no roofs, in tents trying to be away from the world. If the world came to you, they preached to them. If not, you were busy with God.

We have LIMNIUS, also called TALASIUS, who lived in a small, open shed of stone with a narrow opening to communicate with those who came to him, looking for counseling.

We also have JOHN THE HERMIT who lived in complete solitude in the northern mountains of CYR, “having the sky for a blanket and the land for a bed.”

We have ANTCHIOCHUS and ANTONIUS who both converted to the ascetic life in their old age, praying, fasting and remaining in an endless vigilance.

We also have JACOB THE GREAT – MAR MAROON who loved him a lot. He outstaged his master, MAROON himself. He stayed in the hermitage, outside in the wilderness, in the open air with nothing and exposed himself to the weather, to the sun as well as the rain and snow. He exposed himself to something worse in his eyes than the weather – that was the curiosity of people gathering from various places in order to witness his strange life. This is one of the most difficult temptations for someone who has run away from the world. He was exposed to them with nothing to hide his spiritual privacy.

We have ZABINA, the old man. MAROON himself called him “father and teacher”, and loved him very much. ZABINA died first, and MAROON expressed the wish to be buried next to “ZABINA, my friend”, when he dies. The ascetical way he chose was the standing position.

Last but not least, we have SIMON THE STYLITE (Style=column), the most famous of them all. This man was also fond of the vertical dimension in his own way. He started his monastic life with a community, but he was restless and so demanding from his community nothing would satisfy his thirst for more. Friction rose up between him and the community; so he quit and began a new life on his own. He chose an empty well for an abode. He stayed there praying, reciting psalms, singing, praising the Lord, and mortifying himself, day and night, until exhaustion. Later, they found him lying there half dead. They sent him a rope and pulled him out of the well. He still didn't like the life of the community. He kept turning his eyes an interest toward the mountain facing his new place. One day, he took off and went up. He prepared a small place for himself. He built a low wall in order to keep his privacy from the curious visitors who soon started coming. After a while, he looked at one of the stones in the middle of this place and said, “Why don't I sit on this?” and so he sat on this stone. People started to come to look at him as he sat on the stone. Then he said to himself, “No, I don't want to be disturbed by them.” So he added more and more stones and sat higher and higher. At the end of his life, he had reached fifty feet of his strange climbing.

There are two very interesting reasons for this. First, he wanted to be away, not to be disturbed. The other reason was that he wanted to be higher, higher and higher, because he said, “I fought the devil on earth, and now I want to fight him in the air.” He wanted to live his life for Christ, even when he had all those stones under him.

Let us also mention another disciple of MAR MAROON, ABRAHAM THE HERMIT, the one who moved to Lebanon and preached the monastic spirit of MAR MAROON there.

Among the women disciples, we have MARONA and KOURA, two beautiful girls from ALEPPO. In their desire to imitate MAROON, they chose to live in a narrow place. Their main ideal in ascetic life was the practice of silence. No words had to take away their attraction from the internal communication with their Lord. DOMNINA was another disciple of MAROON. She lived in a small tent and spent her life in prayer and penance, listening to the Lord.

The great THEODORET, bishop of CYR and valuable historian of our monastic roots, said that “many women embraced this way of life, choosing the community life or the life of individual solitude. At one point, their number reached 250 girls. They ate the same food, slept on the floor and knit the cotton while singing continuous praises to the Lord.”

Those places were spiritually prepared and founded by a great number of direct followers of MAR MAROON. In that sense, they are to be considered as the spiritual forefathers of SHARBEL.

They carried on the flame, passing it from one place to another, from century to century, to people here and there, until it reached ANNAYA, where SHARBEL lived.

We know only of a few of those disciples. They lived for the Kingdom.

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Like SHARBEL and before him, all those people were totally inspired by one man, the same one, MAR MAROON. He was, for them when, as for us now, the leader, the master, the founder and the father.

We always go back to him. We are all BET MAROON, his people and family. We know that we come from him. We know that God called him for a special mission of unique and incredible fatherhood: a spiritual and a physical one. He is the only saint in the whole Christianity to be father in spirit and father in blood, because the whole Maronite people – we even say: the Maronite “nation” – are indeed his disciples in spirit and his children in blood.

Within the Church, he came up with a new way of life, which we inherited. In recent times, we saw it brilliantly confirmed in SHARBEL'S life. It provided SHARBEL with a fatherhood, spiritual as well as physical. From MAROON down to SHARBEL, throughout centuries and despite all kinds of loopholes in human history, there is a continuity of the spirit bound to a continuity of the blood.

This main vein in the Maronite body is still flowing strong and pervasive.

It is sort of a stigma of the Maronite identity.

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PART II – EASTERN MONASTISM AND MARONITE ROOTS

A. The Common Denominators

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Between the Maronite Church in particular and the Eastern Churches in general exist common denominators. The Maronite Church is part of the Eastern Churches. The Maronite way is one way among many other Eastern ways. Sometimes I look at somebody who calls himself, who acts as, an Easterner, but I can't see if he is an Orthodox, or a Melkite, or a Byzantine, or an Armenian or a Maronite. There is confusion, and confusion will not help anyone. The authenticity in identity is the main thing. The more you are yourself, the more you can meet with others; the more we are genuine and authentic, the more we can bring ourselves to share with others. (Just to give you a blunt example: We do not need another Hector Doueihi. One is more than enough; two would be a disaster for humanity!) the monastic life in the Maronite Church was bound to the Eastern life, because it is part of it and started from the same point, in Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Capadocia... Here and there, differences and new aspects came out according to the calling of the spirit in each group and place. But all of them meet in the ideals of the Gospel. At the beginning and end, they all meet in Christ, Himself. And no monastic way would have any meaning for us either today or in the past if it did not bring us toward Christ, in order to know Him, to love Him and to witness Him.

Besides, the Eastern Church was divided, in time, into different churches or rites. Many were the factors: theological, ideological, political and cultural.

The monks and hermits in each group committed themselves to the causes of their churches. They strongly took part in the ideological struggles opposing different Sees of Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem or Alexandria.

However, this division into different rites was never an obstacle for the unity of the monastic life. When it came to the spiritual ideal and life as such, all of them were linked among themselves by the spirit of evangelical life and by the "art" of the love of God. They considered themselves all as disciples of Christ. All of them tried to put into practice in their lives the teaching and the life of Jesus, Himself. It is an historical fact that the old monastic rules were one in spirit, in way of life, in activities in community, in origins and in ideals.

The monastic life produced a new and shaking existence of the core of the church at the end of the third century. We are used to it now, because it has been there for centuries. But, at the beginning of the fourth century, the church had emerged from the dark times, times of persecutions and catacombs. She was trying to adapt herself to a world of freedom and wealth. She slowly slipped away from some ideals of the Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus the Poor, Jesus the Suffering, Jesus the Praying and dedicating Himself to God, Jesus sharing with the abandoned, the weak.

So young men like ANTONIUS, PACOMIUS, BASILIUS and EPHREM stood up and said, “No, this is not the whole Gospel. There are aspects of the Gospel which have been forgotten.” The monastic life then shook the whole body of the comfortable church and created a new presence within it, the presence of Christ persecuted, praying, suffering, dedicating Himself to His Father and to the least ones. This new presence was a challenge for the church herself as well as for the world. It was also a demanding appeal to go back to the authenticity of the Gospel so the new freedom and wealth of the church within the world wouldn't forget and betray.

The monastic life stood in the face of this world as being the danger and the enemy for the church. Being part of this same world, human nature seemed to be for the hermits as an obstacle for the evangelical ideals. They had to overcome it in order to let the spirit win and to reestablish the relationship with Christ in all its purity and integrity. In order to have peace again in this world, it has to be won. The road leading to that ideal was thorny. It had to go through struggles, a kind of holy war. The hermit, in his achievement, had to play the role of an athlete in an arena. “Beyond the thorny road of suffering and the tiresome strife with the human needs and human nature, there waits a sweet, undisturbed and all-comprehending place. But before one reaches this goal, one has to wander a long way that is full of obstacles. In fact, this way demands all the physical and psychical strength. One has this experience not only in the beginning, but continuously, ceaselessly carving piece after piece out of the resistance of nature. This is a way that leads through the terrain of loneliness, depression and eternal drought... These experiences have convinced the monks that this way of life is the hardest. The term ‘athlete’... has remained as their most favored expression of describing the pursuance of this kind of life...” (Voobus, II, p.256).

In the Eastern Church, the “athletes” of the monastic life followed almost the same pattern of ascetic practices which, by methodical training, shaped their lives – practices that built up, for example, SHARBEL’S’S life and sanctity.

I am going to outline a few of those ascetic practices:

a. First of all, virginity was in high esteem. More and more, in time, it took a strong stand on this. Monks refused to see women. Nuns refused to see men. You have monks who would never talk to women. If they had to talk to women because of their spiritual duties, they would commit themselves to never seeing their faces, even their own mothers’. You have the example of SHARBEL which shakes us completely. We do not understand it today. His mother came to see him. He talked to her from behind a barred window without letting her see him, nor letting himself see her. Another example is one candidate to the hermitage life, presenting himself to be one of the monks, would not be accepted if he did not have a beard. His face without a beard would be like a woman’s face. I may go further, not to shock you, but to illustrate how seriously those people took this aspect of their lives. In some circles, personal castration was held in very high esteem. On the opposite side, spiritual marriage was practiced. A couple would perform a human marriage and live together in order to prepare themselves to someday leave together this world and dedicate themselves to a spiritual life, he among monks and she among nuns. There was another kind of spiritual marriage in which a hermit would have by his a sister. They would live together without any human relationship, dedicating their lives to serving the Lord together. This multiple concept of virginity was always experienced in order to offer a total dedication to the Lord, Jesus.

b. Another practice was poverty. The abdication of worldly goods was always considered as a fundamental principle, in theory as well as in practice, for the monastic life. Those who dedicate themselves to the Lord felt that they did not need anything besides Him.

c. A third practice is fasting. It was first instituted in imitation of Christ and his disciples in order to act free from desires. ST. EPHREM used to say, “Food kills the spiritual life.” Fasting helps to be in good health, spiritually.

d. The fourth practice concerned sleep. From the beginning there was a principle which postulated that only wakefulness and vigilance were consistent with spiritual health. Thus, one must always be awake. Those few moments of a monk in sleep would be considered as a good opportunity for the devil, the enemy, to strike.

e. The fifth practice has to deal with attire (dressing). The abdication of profane garments was also considered necessary during important cultic acts of worship. It was even requested from lay people. The monastic life considered the choice and use of a garment an important factor, showing the kind of life they want to live in complete abdication of profanity in dressing.

In the beginning, it did not impose any uniformity in this practice. As far as color was concerned, the black color was favored, because it seemed to be the proper color for abdication. “The use of commonplace and contemptible dress for acts of worship was regarded as a sign of spiritual health... What lay people could (wear) on themselves only for a while, the monks regarded as a lasting duty, and thus poor and miserable dress became the external stigma of a genuine monastic mentality.”

f. A sixth practice dealt with movement. Here we find both extremes. On one hand, there was an absolute limitation of every movement. A complete stillness was chosen in order to concentrate in meditation, prayers, lecturing and the vision of spiritual ideal. On the other, we find an excess of movement, a restless and continuous roaming, traveling, going places in order to keep chastising the body and imitating the Lord, Jesus Who had no place to lay His head.

g. A last practice regarded hygiene. Monks did not pay much attention to it. For them, every hygienic means loses its sense and meaning. They let their hair grow long. They neglected to wash. “By the washing of the body,” it was said, “the soul becomes polluted.”

Practices of that kind built up saints like SHARBEL.

All those practices were not followed for their own sakes. They were sought for spiritual ideals to be perfected in those who exercised them. First of all, they were applied for the sake of meditation which was considered the most important monastic activity. They were applied, also, for prayer in order to draw strength and sustenance and to seek in it refuge from errant thoughts and temptations. They were applied for lection and recitation of canonical books, in order to reach concentration and grab more penetration into the world of Biblical thought and expression.

Finally, they were sought in the line of a spiritual competition and creativity in the art of loving the Lord.

SHARBEL followed that kind of example.

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B. The Special Notes of the Maronite Roots

The Maronite roots grew in these practices in all Eastern ways. They followed the ways of ST. ANTONIUS, which means the hermit living by himself under a superior. The PACOMIUS way called for an organized monastic community in a convent. They also knew the BASILIAN way which calls for prayers, study and work. The Maronites also know the EPHREMIAN way, calling for a monastic life alone in a hermitage and also in preaching. The Maronites roots, more than any other roots, grew and flourished. They kept growing and expanding themselves where the other roots disappeared. This is an historical fact which no one can deny.

There is another aspect of the Maronite roots which is very unique: it's the linking of those roots to one church – the Maronite Church; to one people – the Maronite people; after the 8th century, to one land – Lebanon. And those monastic roots kept their loyalty to that land. They physically created the land by their work.

Another aspect of Maronite roots: yes, they were monastic, but they were always associated with the service of the community.

I believe that in the forties, when the monks wanted to introduce themselves into the Apostolic life by teaching and serving the sick, it was with this idea: to always be able to stay close to their people and not to let the people stay away from them, the wings of the monastics.

When we face a crisis like today; when Lebanon is in danger, the first to stand up are the monks. Not because they are good soldiers, not because they deny their mission, but because it is a part of their mission to be there, to be part of the spiritual crises as well as of the temporal ones. The human history of their people is their own.

Another aspect of our monastic roots is the contact with the Holy Scriptures. In our canonical prayers we say: “We remember our fathers who, during their lives, told us to be the children of God and whose eyes were obscured from the reading of the Scripture.” It means that the eyes of those monks were fixed only on Scripture. They lost their eyesight because of reading Scripture, not because of old age.

Another aspect of the monastic roots, as I told you, is the Metany. This act of prostration means that you physically adore in humble penance; it means that you do not stand up vertically in front of the Lord. You are horizontally in front of the Lord. He is the Lord, but at the same time it also means that you make penance – a most important part of our liturgy. Penance in front of the Lord. We are the children of God, yes, but first of all we are His servants. If we are children of God, it is because He has gratified us, and this aspect of servant is very important. Metany means this complete change of the “old” man into a “new” man in front of God – the concept of St. Paul. These men took Christ seriously. For us, SHARBEL is a sign of these roots.

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PART III – THE MEANING OF THE ROOTS

I told you that the monastic life is a main vein in the body of our Maronite community. We are called today to discover this vein and to embrace it according to the new callings of the Spirit. If we want to be authentic to ourselves, if we refuse to be just another denomination in America, we need new reading of our monastic roots.

Actually, we dispose of two signs indicating for us the way to follow.

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A. The Personality of SHARBEL

SHARBEL is here to lead us toward that kind of spirituality. SHARBEL is the heir of that long ascendancy of monastic athletes. For centuries now, many examples of sanctities were added to the Maronite calendar and venerated by the Maronite people. For centuries, foreign traditions and customs infiltrated their own, following various historical circumstances. In spite of all this, the Maronite people kept, deep down, authentic to their original ideals. They feel that SHARBEL, all those who preceded him or followed him in this kind of monastic life, realizes sanctity according to their own Maronite way. They feel also that SHARBEL and the others live presently at the core of their history and consciences. Our Maronite way is basically monastic. The Maronite people, as a whole, represent a monastic community of its own: in its structure, in its mentality, in its traditions, in its practices and in its all historical dimensions. The Maronite people, as a whole, did not find themselves and were not recognized by the others if not as people of the mountains or of the valleys – mountains and valleys, homesteads of the monks and hermits, places for the monasteries and hermitages.

SHARBEL, as such, is the continuation of our roots. He is, at the same time, a calling as well as a challenge for them to be translated by us into our personal life.

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B. Faith and Work (Logo of the Maronite Diocese – U.S.A.)

The logo proposed by Bishop Francis Zayek in his coat of arms is our second inspiration. FAITH and WORK condensed in themselves the whole monastic spirit in the Maronite tradition. FAITH relates us to God. It represents the vertical dimension in life. WORK opens us to the world and to the history of salvation. It represents the horizontal dimension in life.

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C. The Monastic Life in America

In a casual conversation with Archbishop Jean Jadot, the Apostolic Nuncio in Washington, the question of a monastic life for the Maronites in America was raised. Archbishop Jadot said, “A monastic Maronite American life should come up from America itself.”

CONCLUSION

We live a revival. We hear a calling. We face a challenge. The Maronites in America are called to witness Christ in present time according to their own roots. Those roots are not behind us. They are not dead letters. They are in us, with us. They indicate the way to follow and to be.

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