

Historical evolution of the maronite church and the dynamism of enculturation



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First: A Historical Interpretation of the First Millennium

1. The Syriac Dimension

During the first Christian centuries, The Maronite Church was predominated by the Aramaic-Syriac character. Despite the diversity of cultures, the Maronites in Lebanon and Syria were set apart from the Byzantine Roman society. They were distinguished from the Christians of the big cities by holding their faith to the monks of Saint Maron and their principles. The Syriac dimension is mentioned in the ritual books which represent an essential reference to the genuine Maronite heritage. It was important for the maronites to keep the syriac language until recently because they were really attached to this culture.

2. The Antiochene Chalcedonian Dimension

The Maronites were extremely attached to their Christianity by sticking to the the chalcedonian policy. Asceticism, a characteristic of the spirituality of our Church, is not a rejection of what life offers in physical and material dimensions, however it is the participation of these dimensions in man's spiritual journey in directing it toward its Creator. Via the virtues of the Chalcedonian doctrine, the Maronite became convinced that through his relationship with his fellow human beings and nature, is able to elevate to meet his Creator. As such, the work of the Maronite person on the land became part of his prayer, and an expression of his eagerness to fulfill his encounter with his Savior.

3. The Lebanese Dimension

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The Christian religion existed in Lebanon since its beginning. It developed suddenly when the inhabitants of the Lebanese mountain discovered Christianity at the hands of St. Simon the Stylite through the merits of the evangelization campaign launched by the disciples of St. Maron headed by Abraham of Cyrrhus. This people preserved their characteristics, rituals and distinctive customs which did not contradict with their new faith. The many temples which were transformed into churches, some of which are still standing, are a living witness to this cultural interconnection between the different historical epochs.

Second: Interaction with the Arab and Islamic world

1. First Encounter with the Arab Culture

While the region was under Islamic rule, despite all the tensions, the Maronites were able to protect their spiritual and cultural landmarks that lasted for more than one thousand years. In this epoch, many manuscripts were written like the St. George School in Bqorqasha, where the Reesh Qurian. Actually, Maronite manuscripts stand as witness to the use by Maronites of Syriac and Arabic script during that epoch. Kitaab Al-Huda (The Book of Guidance), which was translated into Arabic in 1059, is proof of the early adoption by Maronites of the Arabic language and its use in expressing their collective social, spiritual and cultural affairs.

2. Maronites and the Arab Renaissance

The essential role that the Maronites have played in the history of Arab culture started in the early seventeenth century with Archbishop Germanos

Farhat (1670-1746), Father Boutros at-Toulaawi (1657-1746) and others. They launched initiatives and fundamentals of an all-encompassing Renaissance which preserved Arab culture, reviving it and reinstating its distinctive position in the face of the Turkish cultural onslaught, then prevalent.

3. The Period of Arab Enculturation

As a result of this interaction of the Maronite Church with the Arab culture, the latter became one of the elements of our ecclesiastical heritage. Ritual prayers and Church hymns were translated into Arabic. This language was used for writing theological, spiritual and liturgical essays to form the basis of a Christian Arab thought that had to be revealed, evolved and manifested.

Third: Interaction with the Western World

1. The Unity of Faith with the Christian West

The Maronites bumped into Western culture early on through the merits of their attachment to the unity of faith with the Roman Catholic Church. The arrival of the Europeans with the Crusades contributed in the opening up of the Maronites to new cultural dimensions in the same Christian faith.

2. The Maronite School in Rome

Since its foundation, the Maronite School in Rome played an important role in many fields, especially in religion and science, and in politics and education. This School brought wealth to East and West through the achievements of the scholars who graduated from it.

3. Between Openness and Authenticity

Despite the unity in faith with the West, and the Maronite awareness of their need and the need of their Eastern societies of the benefits of the cultural Renaissance and modern western science, they were all the more aware of the hegemonic dangers that this culture might impose on their authentic cultural heritage and identity. Thus, the Maronites were able to preserve this heritage and to propagate it through the early introduction of the printing press to Lebanon (1585). Further, their openness to the West and their mastery of its many languages opened to them and to their country a window overlooking modernity and its different cultural influences, including modern science and its technology.