

Mor Ephrem is an inspiration of our time

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Shlomo w shaino lkoukhoun, malfoné w Havré.

First of all, I would like to present you the greetings of the ‘Knoushto D-Mardouto Suryoyto’ from Levnon; with a word of gratitude to the Somec-society for inviting us to this distinguished convention;

We had the opportunity of attending the Mor Ephrem Convention in Aleppo Syria during May 2006. It was a precious opportunity to enhance our knowledge and relationship with the great Saint.

The convention was titled “Mor Ephrem, a poet for our days”.

We discovered that he was more than a poet, he was a model of holiness and an inspiration for our days.

It is not easy to talk about Mor Ephrem, because of the abundance of attributes and virtues that distinguished him.

In addition to being a great teacher and poet, he was so humble that he refused the sacrament of priesthood for he considered himself unworthy of holding the body of Jesus Christ in his hands.

Mor Ephrem was a higher model of humility, piety and service.

On the other hand, he was a man of prayer, meditation and knowledge. He transferred the spirituality and vision of the old Testament to the new one. He kept on teaching for 38 years until the end of his life. He also wrote abundantly especially in poetry about 3 million verses. These theological poems spread in his days and we still draw from his love of God and the Virgin Mary of whom he says: “My bones shout from the grave that Mary has given birth to the son of God”.

Through the mother of God Mor Ephrem has defended all women and raised their status. His Influence was indelible on the monastic life, which flourished in the Syriac levant during the centuries to come.

Father Dr. Youssef Mouannes said: “Mor Ephrem lasted since he dwelled in the word which is God; we don’t remember much of the names of his contemporaries. Only the words that he wrote, the poems he composed and the thought he proposed were stronger than time, the envious people and those distracted by the appearance of existence”.

In our contribution Today, and in an effort to make a new approach to the influence of Mor Ephrem, we started from the fact that he was claimed "Malfono of the universal church" by Pope Benedict 15 in 1925. So our search will be shifted from the influence of Mor Ephrem to the lessons that he gives us from his life his writings and his sanctity.

1- the first lesson is about the importance of the one Christian faith

2- the 2nd lessons is about the priority of resistance & rooting.

3- the 3rd lesson is about the commitment to the Aramo-Syriac identity.

1- Lesson one; Mor Ephrem was contemporary with the theological problems since their beginning when he attended the Nicee council in 325 (as a companion to his master Mar Yaccoub the bishop of Nisibis).

On one hand the theological problems dealing with the three Divine mysteries: trinity, incarnation and redemption caused dissensions throughout the ages, as the human mind is unable to encompass the divine mystery. On the other hand, Mor Ephrem held strong to the dogma especially regarding Mary the mother of God; as his numerous writings on the subject are still a matter of prayer and meditation.

In the Syriac Maronite church in Lebanon, we find two faces of this Marial theology:

- One face lies in churches and monasteries, as the absolute majority of the Maronite patriarchal monasteries were built in the name of the virgin Mary. The Maronite church has put itself under the protection of St Mary since its foundation and through the eras of ordeal and persecution.

Father Boutros Daou, in part 8 of his encyclopedic work entitled "History of the Maronites" counts around 506 churches in Levnon named after the virgin (Levnon being only 6000 square miles).

- The second face of the Marial theology is found in the Maronite liturgy: the prayers of the Maronite church hold a great space for the virgin Mary. These prayers are known as the 'Ephrems' or "Ephremiates" and are used in many occasions during the liturgical year. These prayers and psalms had a major role in conveying the Marial theology to the mass in a simple manner far from the theological complications.

It looks as if Mor Ephrem has drawn the most important issue from the first ecumenic council. Which is the Nicean Credo, foreseeing its final form in the Constantine council ending with "One Church ,Universal Sanctified and Apostolic".

We wish we could take this conclusion as our first lesson in the one Christian Faith.

2- Lesson two is derived from the life of Mor Ephrem as he had his share of political and military upheavals; In fact he was displaced to Urhoy because of the Persian occupation of Nisibis where he was born and raised, and where he was teaching in its famous school.

He then continued his teaching mission in Urhoy's school for the remainder of his life. He died in 373 at the age app. 67.

This displacement is very important in Mor Ephrem's life for it teaches us about the priorities in militantism and in goals.

Mor Ephrem didn't lose hope with the fall of Nisibis nor did he fall back in front of the competition between the theological school of Nisibis and Orhoy, because his goal was equivalent in our modern terminology to: "The glory of God and the salvage of souls"

The life of Mor Ephrem was one of work in the church and the parish with perpetual and deep prayer through monachism, following the antiochean syriac monastic tradition.

This commitment to the cause of the Syriac people is the second lesson we have to follow in the priority of resistance and rooting.

The ongoing ordeals and consecutive occupations that took place in our Syriac Levant had negative effects on national and cultural levels as well as on military and political effects.

During the days of Mor Ephrem in the fourth century, the Aramo- Syriac Levant was unified on cultural, civilization, linguistic and religious levels and remained so until the seventh century. The Arabo Islamic occupation beginning in 636 enforced a new religion "Islam" and a new language "Arabic". "The language of the people of heaven" as the Coran states.

But this Arabo-islamic high tide or "Raz de Maree" was not total and complete, for some regions and people resisted and fought back in different ways to maintain their existence, identity and freedom. One most important resistance was embodied in the Syriac Maronite people of Mount Lebanon where they maintained their freedom and independent entity for about seven centuries. So much so that the Saint King Louis IX in his letter to the Maronite Patriarch around 1250 described them "as a rose among thorns".

Dr. Anis Freiha wrote many books about the enduring Syriac identity in the 20th century; the Syriac language hasn't died and is still spoken in its oriental and occidental accent in many parts of the Near East as well as in different liturgies.

Syriac is still used by the following churches in their liturgical prayers:

The syriac Maronites, the syriac orthodox, the syriac catholics, the Assyrian and the chaldean churches.

Dr. Freiha edited a dictionary of the villages in Lebanon with Their origins, and the obvious conclusion was that the majority of these villages had a Syriac origin to their names....

Other contemporary Malfoné are currently editing works relating to the Syriac influence on the Arabic language; especially the spoken language which has Syriac syntax in addition to multiple terms and expressions that are Syriac.

I will mention especially Malfono Joseph Asmar Melki in Kameshly, Syria and Malfono Ellia Issa and Ossio Roger Khoury in Levnon.

3- Lesson three relating to the subject of identity is a very crucial one: Mor Ephrem is not known by the City or the region that he lived in Since old times the term Syriac was concomitant to his name, and Syriac is synonymous to Aramean as Malfono Henry Kifa states in his studies.

The most important proof about the merging of syriac and Aramean identity comes in these verses from St. Yaccoub of Serroug's Mimro in the sixth century, speaking about Mor Ephrem:

"He became a crown for the Aramaic nation."

"He became a great rhetor between the Syriacs."

The use of the terms Arameans and Syriacs in two consecutive verses is proof enough that these two words had the same meaning.

The merging of the Aramo-Syriac identity in the sixth century when Mar Yaccoub of Serroug wrote his Mimré and the upholding of this unified Aramo-Syriac identity for centuries to come is an important basis in the commitment to our Christian Levantine identity.

The Syriac people have to imbibe themselves of this all encompassing ideology as they are indeed arameans by history and heritage Syriacs by language and culture and of course Christians by religion. All these parameters constitute our special “national identity” in this pluralistic levant.

This being the third lesson in upholding the Aramo-Syriac identity. As Mor Ephrem had a very specific sense of identity, writing in defence of Christian faith against the Persian pagans, and using the melodies of Bardisan and folk melodies to spread the Nicean faith. Mor Ephrem is indeed the first militant faith and identity.

The dangers and challenges facing the Christian Levantine people have been the same through history: they are the recurring attempts to take our souls by changing our identity.

The military war has ended in Levnon since 1990, but another war has not ended, it has been going on for hundred of years sometimes in the open and sometimes implicitly, its name is islamization, dilution and arabization.

The road is hard and long, that’s why we ask for support especially from emigration to all the movements and political parties that claim plurality and freedom to all Lebanese groups.

We join our voice with Mr. Alain Desremaux from the society of Syriac studies, center of Semitic studies, Paris institute; he formulated a statement during the convention of Aleppo saying; and I quote:

"We state our attachement to the syriac language, and we express our gratitude to the syriac civilization for all that it carried to Syria and Mesopotamia, to Asia and Europe, Syriac is an esteemed language, rooted in the old Aramaic history, so that it was a wonderful expression of philosophical, theological, medical and scientific civilization."

Many houses and villages are still speaking in this mother tongue for them. And humanity is indebted to this spiritual and culturel heritage.

This is why we formally urge the political leaders and education executives in our countries to make the teaching of Syriac language and culture an inseparable part of our cursus.

We pledge to help the groups protecting Syriac cultural wealth, so that they could edit manuscripts repair architectural sites, preserve and protect Syriac heritage altogether.

In Levnon the on-going struggle for revival of Syriac identity is being lost slowly because the Christians of the Levant tend to ignore their roots and forget their history.

At the end we must remind ourselves of the quotation of Late Pope Jean Paul II speaking of Levnon and I quote:

“Levnon is more than a country; it is a message of freedom and an ideal of plurality for east and west”.

The Levnon as a message is in danger, as liberties are threatened and plurality is not admitted. Demography has changed to the advantage of the Muslims, with most of them armed and presenting radicalism. The Christian word is no longer heard and political power is slowly taken away from them. Danger of dilution and marginalization facing the Christians is growing bigger with emigration, security hazards and repression; the west emerges again as our only hope.<

I stand here representing the syriac culture comitee and I hereby pledge our commitment to remain firm in our land and to continue cultural resistance in defense of our heritage and in affirmation of our identity as did the great Mor Ephrem the Syrian.

As we go on with our mission, we ask for his mediation.