

# Monastic Life in the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch

## *by His Holiness Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas*



We call the monastic life a philosophy of Christian law and character. It is a way of abandoning worldly life. It is filled with yearning to attain the life hereafter. In the monastic life, acts countenanced and proscribed in the world are to be avoided, the desires of the flesh are to be disciplined; all wanton impulses are to be checked, everything that cannot be brought into harmony with the true Christian faith is to be avoided.

### **The Eremitic Life**

Monastic life began with individuals seeking reclusion for the purpose of praying to God. It was individual self denial. Each ascetic sought a life separated from society. Where possible he took his abode far from human settlements where he could come closer to God through prayer and fasting in his quest for eternal life.

### **Coenobitism**

The eremitic setting developed into a spiritual community life as groups of ascetics came together under the leadership of a spiritually experienced leader or father in order to be initiated into the practice of the true ascetic life. At a later date monasteries were built to house the monastic community. They were headed by a father or abbot with a great deal of experience in monastic and ascetic living. This type of monastic life was called coenobitism.

Rules were set and internal orders for the monasteries were elaborated to regulate the spiritual life of the community among monks and their relationship with the abbot of the monastery. These rules also governed relations between his representatives and assistants, the wise and venerable scholars who initiated the novices to monastic living, instructing and watching over them.

Despite the existence of these monasteries, the anchoritic way of life persisted. Ascetics and hermits took their abode in caves and in hermitages. Many of them spent the weekdays in reclusion. On Sunday mornings they gathered in monasteries to celebrate the Mass with their brothers and the abbot, to participate with them in the agape meal, then return to their habitations.

### **Monasticism in the Old Religions**

In the pre-chritian religions, there was no lack of practices resembling Christian asceticism and monastic life, such as fasting, prayer, and exhausting of the body through hard physical labor to discipline bodily desires and to check wanton impulses in an effort to attain enlightenment of the spirit.

However, these practices are far removed from the spirit of penance in which the Christian monk strives to live a perfect life in accordance with the Gospel. For if the monk subjects his body to

such hardships, he does so not for the sake of torment but in order to master his body, to give the spirit room to develop, to practice a virtuous life and to acquire good character. It is therefore erroneous to see the origins of Christian monastic in pre-Christian religions such as that of ancient Egypt, in Buddhism or even in Judaism.

### **Asceticism in the Old Testament**

However, it cannot be denied that the prophet Elijah mentioned in the Old Testament was a model for the anchorites who withdrew from the world with all its temptations.

We read how God commanded him: "Leave this place and turn eastward; and go into hiding in the river of Kerith east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the river, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." He did as the Lord had told him; he went and stayed on bank of the river of Kerith east of Jordan, and the ravens brought him bread and meat morning and evening, and he drank from the stream." (1 Kings 17,2-6)

John the Baptist, too, lived the life of an ascetic. He grew up in the desert: "John was dressed in a rough coat of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he fed on locusts and wild honey." (Mark 1,6)

### **The Origins of Christian Monastic Life**

The fundamental tenets of Christian monasticism are based on the imitation of the life of Christ on Earth and on obedience to his sublime teachings. Our Lord Jesus withdrew into the solitude of the desert and fasted there for forty days and forty nights. We are told: "He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." (Acts 10,38). And he chose to live in poverty. The Apostle Paul writes: "For you know how generous our Lord Jesus Christ has been; he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8,9). And he had no abode.

On one occasion a scribe came to Jesus and said: "'Master, I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have their holes, the birds their roosts; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'" (Matthew 8,19-20). And his disciples gathered alms to satisfy his and their own material needs. When he sent them out to preach the Gospel, he commanded them: "Go and proclaim the message: The Kingdom of Heaven is upon you. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out devils. You received without cost; give without charge. Provide no gold, silver, or copper to fill your purse, no pack for the road, no second coat, no shoes, no stick; the worker earns his keep." (Matthew 10,7-10).

This divine command constitutes the basis for the vow of voluntary poverty which the monk takes. Celibacy, however, has its origin in the teaching of Christ: "... For while some are incapable of marriage because they were born so, or were made so by men, there are others who have themselves renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let those accept it who can." (Matthew 19,12). The Apostles thus recognized the true meaning of chastity and the advantages it has over marriage. On this subject the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "To those who are unmarried and to the widows among you I say It is good if you re-main like me: I want you to be free from anxious care. The unmarried man cares for the Lord's business; his aim is to please the Lord. But the married man cares for worldly things; his aim is to please his wife; and he has a divided mind. The un-married or celibate woman cares for the Lord's business; her aim is to be dedicated to him in body as in spirit; but the married woman cares for worldly things; her aim is to please her husband." (1 Corinthians 7,32-34).

In Christianity, monastic life arose as a necessary consequence of following the teachings of Christ. The goal was to attain Christian perfection through self-denial and self-abnegation. In the imitation of Christ one sought to come closer to God and to keep to this path, devoting one's

entire being to this aim. The Holy Cross was borne, and strict obedience was to be given to the divine command which He gave to the man who came to Jesus and asked what good works he could do to attain eternal life. Jesus answered him, saying: "If you wish to go the whole way, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and then you will have riches in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matthew 19,21). The monastic life was to be guided in all things by the words Jesus Christ spoke to His disciples: "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self. What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self? Or what can he give that will buy that self back? For the Son of Man is to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will give each man the due reward for what he has done." (Matthew 16,24-27). Jesus also said: "I tell you this: there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother, father or children, or land, for my sake and for the Gospel, who will not receive in this age a hundred times as much - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and land - and persecutions besides; and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10,29-30)

### **The Real Motives for Those Who Seek Monastic Life**

In the first chapter of his book "The Book of the Dove", (Jauno) Bar Hebraeus († 1286) stated the reasons for a human being to seek a life in seclusion from the world: "A man withdraws from the world and its temptations for two reasons: the first and principal of these is Divine inspiration that arises in a person's thinking, which arouses him from slumber to confront him day and night with the suffering that awaits sinners in the hereafter and with the eternal life that is promised to the just in the Kingdom of Heaven. This happens but seldom and is granted only to a few at different places and at different times.

The second reason, by contrast, is unreal and worthy of reproach, arising from the desire of human beings for futile glory, a desire that comes upon a man, urging him to attain his goal through the arduous practice of asceticism. Some wealthy people, however, have sought to attain glory by spending large amounts of money. This has occurred everywhere and with great frequency. Although such conduct is to be rejected, it ought not to be dismissed outright, for there are many seeds that fall to the ground by chance and which bring forth good fruit, and others that are sown with great effort and which bear no fruit."

### **Monastic Vows**

True monastic life is obedience to a hidden call from God. The monk gives proof of his devout purpose in his quest for Christian perfection in the endeavor to bring his will into unison with the will of God.

Through penance he attains the state of grace, of righteousness, of sanctification, and of community with God by acting in accordance with the will of God and not according to his own will. He withdraws from the world.

The pious monk seeks to achieve this by observing three vows, which he makes publicly by his own free will.

These vows are the following:

- a) Absolute obedience to his spiritual superior.
- b) Voluntary poverty, signifying that he may take nothing from the world as his personal property.
- c) Chastity, enjoining him never to marry and to remain chaste.

These vows are faithful promises that the monk must keep to the end of his life. Moreover, the

sum of his vows and promises constitutes a covenant between God and the monk which binds him for his entire life, and the breach of which places him in danger of eternal damnation.

Besides these three vows there are Christian duties enjoined on the monk, like prayer, fasting, and the giving of alms. He must give alms from the little money he saves from the sale of wares made to earn his living. The monk must keep long vigil at night, be reserved, and indulge in no idle talk.

As we have mentioned above, a person might devote himself to the monastic life for a mundane and not divine reason, for the sake of transitory glory. The spiritual scholars advise that this ought not to be rejected out of hand, since a person may set out with such an aim and nevertheless attain the love of God. They include those who withdraw into the desert to escape a martyr's death and human tyranny. But they continue their ascetic practices like fasting, prayer, and nocturnal vigils. Some of them thus attain the perfection of a true Christian and are a good example to others.

### **Factors Contributing to the Flowering and Spread of Monasticism**

The decree issued by the Emperor Constantine the Great in Milan in 313 contributed to the flowering of monastic life in the 4th century, which is also referred to as the century of monastic life. Through this decree Christianity for the first time in history was recognized as a religion enjoying the same legal rights as other religions.

Emperor Constantine's next step was to free unmarried people and childless married couples from the heavy poll taxes that had been imposed on them. It was said that many people abandoned their families and fled into the desert to avoid paying this tax. In addition, monks could no longer be conscripted for military service. Such measures encouraged thousands of young men to don the monk's habit, to submit to the duties and rules of the monastic life, and thus to lead a simple life in complete reclusion from the world.

In their cells many of them brought forth rich spiritual fruits thanks to those who instructed them in the spiritual life. They distanced themselves from material, everyday life, achieving greater independence from bodily needs and worldly intellectual influences. Neoplatonic philosophy, which influenced some of the ascetic Church Fathers helped to bring monasticism to fruition.

### **Who is the True Monk?**

The monastic life is a state of constant penance. That a monk acquires the qualities of loving kindness and of resisting evil is the best evidence of his devout resolve to take his place in the blessed life of a monastic order.

He might come to have doubts about the step he has taken and to consider returning to society. But if he resists this temptation and submits to the duties of monasticism by living in obedience to his spiritual mentors he will overcome this challenge. Even if his vocation is not from God, his constant prayer and the fulfillment of his duties will make it a divine one.

The tenacious struggle of the monk against the demon and his snares is a constant and relentless one. But the love of the monk for God is mightier than life and death. For with Christ he has crucified the temptations of the flesh, he has taken upon himself the cross of Christ, which is the sign of departure from this world. He accepts abuse and revilement for Christ's sake in order to live with Christ in the words of Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2,19-20).

Therefore nothing can separate the monk from the love of Jesus: "For I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or

the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths - nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8,38-39).

And the monk heeds the counsel of the wise Solomon, through whom God said: "My son, mark my words, and accept my guidance with a will." (Proverbs 23,26). And on this subject Mor Musche Bar Kipho advises the monk: "My son, if you have devoted yourself entirely to the love and fear of God, hesitate no longer, fight with great courage and be a great warrior who enters the arena to destroy his enemies."

### **The Spiritual Struggle of the Monk**



Mor Aphrem († 373) describes the philosophy of the monastic way in a precious Syriac poem in which he portrays how he trained his soul through privation and the hardships of life and prepared it for the struggle against the temptations of the flesh:

- a) Many times have I suffered hunger and my body has called for nourishment, I have abstained to become worthy of the blessedness that those who fast attain.
- b) My body, made of dust, sought to still its thirst, but I spurned it in wrath that it might become worthy to savour the dew of the Kingdom of God.
- c) And when in my youth and in my old age my body sought to tempt me, I chastened it day after day to the end.
- d) On the morning of each day I thought that I would die in the evening. And like a man who cannot escape death I attended to the labours of the day without trepidation or tedium.
- e) Each evening I imagined that next morning I would no longer be alive. So I arose and prayed to God and worshipped him until the rising of the sun.
- f) When my body pleaded for the sleep I sorely needed, I lured it with the blessedness that God bestows on those who keep vigil.
- g) I have built a church in my soul, and I have offered up to the Lord the travail of my body as incense and fragrance.
- h) My spirit became the altar, my will the priest, and like a lamb without blemish I sacrificed myself.
- i) Lord, I have borne Thy yoke from youth to old age, and I have worshipped Thee constantly to the end of my days, I have spared no pain nor suffered tedium.
- j) I have borne the sufferings of hunger and overcome them, for I have seen Thee taste bitterness between the two bandits for the sake of my redemption.
- k) I have ignored the torments of thirst because I have seen my Lord drink vinegar from the sponge for my sins.
- l) Food was of no significance for me; I disdained wine, for my eyes were upon the banquet of Thy kingdom, O heavenly bridegroom!

In this manner monks vanquished the passions of the flesh so as to be able to bear the hardship of

life, the bitterness of asceticism and the severity of the rules. They kept vigil by night fasting and praying, they performed heavy manual labour in their quest for the pure life. The divine light was cast upon them from on high; some among them who attained perfection in their asceticism even achieved the stage of union with His glory.

Mor Antonios (Saint Anthony) (†356) – the Father of Monks – summed up his philosophy of asceticism in the phrase: "The soul is whole when the sensual pleasures of the flesh are abated." And this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote: "... for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12,10).

Saint Athanasius (†373) wrote of Saint Anthony: "He kept watch long into the night, so that often he spent the whole night in prayer without sleeping. This happened not on only one occasion but frequently, so that the other monks wondered at it. He wore a robe of hair and in his entire ascetic life bathed not once in water.

During the day he ate only once, but often only every second or fourth day. He ate only bread with salt and drank water. He was satisfied with a hard mat to sleep on, but usually slept on the bare ground."

### **The Institution of Coenobitism and its Organization**

Monastic life was known in Christianity from the 2nd century AD, as mentioned by Bar Hebraeus. In the 3rd century AD many ascetics, worshippers, and hermits appeared in many places subject to the see of Antioch.

Saint Anthony (251-356) is regarded as the founder of monastic life. He was called the "father of monastic life" and "star of the desert". And Amba Paula (Saint Paul of Thebes) was considered the first anchorite.

Before he died, Anthony was inspired by God to visit him and he told him the story of his life. Amba Paula also told him that the hour of his death was nigh, and that God had sent him to bury him. Amba Paula lived to the age of about 113 years, 90 of which he spent in the eastern desert of Egypt, which he had chosen to be his abode. His daily meal consisted of half a loaf of bread which was brought to him, like to the great prophet Elijah, by a raven.

With the flowering of monasticism and the spread of monasteries in Egypt, Saint Pachomius wrote the rules for coenobitic life, regulating all the spiritual, bodily, and social needs of the monks.

### **The Syrian Monasteries**

From the beginning of the 4th century, many famous monasteries were founded throughout the lands under the jurisdiction of the Antiochian see, that is to say in Syria, Mesopotamia, on the southern coast of Palestine, in the Syrian desert, in Gozarto (Mount Edessa), at Mount Izala, which surveys Nisibis and Tur-Abdin, and in Qardu and Al-Faf close to Mosul.

They became centres of learning and of the virtuous life; thousands of monks and nuns withdrew into them from the worldly life in their quest for the Kingdom of God.

The fragrance of their virtue wafted gloriously from their monasteries, caves, hermitages, and cells. Sozomen, the Egyptian chronicler (423 AD), reports of 30 ascetics inhabiting the steppes of northern and central Syria, who, he maintains, had surpassed the Egyptian ascetics in ascetic practices. The figure given by Sozomen represents only the chosen few who attained fame through their ascetic life. There were thousands of other monks and nuns living in the monasteries of these regions.

## **Monastic Ordination is not Priestly Ordination**

On this subject Bar Hebraeus writes: "Monastic ordination does not bestow the rank of a priest, since the monk ranks below a deacon". He continues: "The monk is not permitted to approach the altar nor to touch the sacraments. The monk Di-mathilius was strongly rebuked by Dionysios the Great because he had dared to do so".

Although monasticism arose outside the Church it is a force that supports the Church; for monks and nuns live not for the redemption of their own souls alone, which is their mission; the pastoral and spiritual well-being of the population is also their concern.

They have prayed day and night for the Church and the world, so that the light of faith has been shed upon all humanity. They have borne the light of the Gospel to many regions of the Earth. As the bearers of knowledge they have led humanity from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge, thereby doing them a great service.

## **Monasticism in the Service of the Church**

In hard times the anchorites and ascetics abandoned their cells and monasteries and went into the cities to aid the faithful and to confirm them in their religion, to help them bear oppression with patience and in steadfast faith. When heresy arose, they departed to preach to the faithful and to preserve them from the mistaken beliefs of the heretics and to give them a firm hold in the orthodox faith that was entrusted to them by the holy apostles and the Church.

Saint Anthony - the father of monasticism and the star of the desert - acted thus, determined not to abandon his connections with the Church. His cooperation with the Church was a good example for monks to emulate. During the wave of oppression that was instigated by Maximinus (305-318), he left his cell and went to Alexandria in the intention of suffering a martyr's death for the sake of Christ. There he visited confessing prisoners, comforting them and encouraging them to remain firm in their faith unto death. When the followers of Arius killed the Church Fathers and believers in a great wave of persecution, Saint Anthony visited Alexandria a second time in 355 to defend the true faith, to comfort the confessors, to visit the prisoners, and to exhort them to remain firm in their faith. This brought him much suffering.

Mor Aphrem (Saint Ephraem Syrus) for his part founded a church choir composed of young girls from Edessa, which sang works that he had both written and put to music, and which served to strengthen Christian doctrine and refute heresy. The beginnings of orderly liturgical life in the Syrian Church is regarded as being his work.

It should also be mentioned that when famine broke out in Edessa in the winter of 372/373, when many of the inhabitants died of hunger, Mor Aphrem visited wealthy citizens of the city, collected alms from them and distributed them among the poor. Furthermore, he established houses in which he set up 1300 beds. They served as hostels for the old and infirm under his personal care.

When the plague broke out, Mor Aphrem undertook the care and comfort of the patients himself until he, too, fell victim to the plague, dying on 9th June 373.

## **The Worthy Status of Monasticism in the Church**

Although monasticism arose outside the Church, it became a significant force together with the Church and within the Church. It is more than prayer, fasting, the practice of asceticism, and keeping vigil. It is more than knowledge and learning. It is an important element of the Church that combines the spirit of asceticism with Sufism. In the eyes of society, the monk is thus the

bearer of sublime tidings – the teachings of the Gospel – which he lives in truth, practices in perfection, and offers in example to humanity.

For this reason the faithful have had confidence in the monks. And monasticism has accordingly occupied a privileged and special position in the Church. The Church has recognized monastic life and has chosen its bishop and sometimes the patriarchs from among the monks.

It is thus still a tradition in the Syrian Orthodox Church to select bishops from among the ranks of the monks, while patriarchs are chosen from among metropolitans. In exceptional cases, however, a monk may be chosen. After election as spiritual fathers they continue to lead an ascetic and arduous life as if still living in their hermitages. Mor Jacob, Bishop of Nisibis, the teacher of Mor Aphrem is said to have worn a goatskin robe, and to have prayed, fasted, and kept vigil by night.

Thus monastic life has performed an invaluable service for the Church. Moreover, the development of the Church is bound up with the flowering of monasticism, as Saint Athanasius wrote: "If monasticism and the priestly ministry grow weak, the entire Church weakens."

The monasteries have been beacons of religion, learning, and knowledge and a lasting token of culture and civilization. Monks and nuns have offered a good example for all mankind. The daily life of the monastic has been a clear demonstration of the true promise of Christ to all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy, for he will give them relief if they follow him and bend their necks to his yoke and learn from him to be gentle and humble-hearted, for his yoke is good to bear, his load is light (Matthew 11.30). His divine instructions, which are the instructions of perfection in the Christian life have been put into practice by monks and nuns, and they were happy on Earth and have entered the Kingdom of Heaven, for they have worshipped God in spirit and in truth, and they have deepened knowledge of religion and of the world, doing humanity a great service. The monasteries were established in the mountains and on the banks of rivers. They resembled institutions of higher learning, usually possessing a library. There were also a number of schools headed by monks. These schools, like those in Nisibis and Edessa, were attended by monks from monasteries and hermitages. In the 4th century, the school of Nisibis was famed, retaining its importance up to the 7th century. It produced Mor Jacob (†338), who was succeeded by his genial pupil Mor Aphrem (†373). People came to this school in search of knowledge from southern Mesopotamia, then under Persian rule, and when in 363 Nisibis fell to the Persians, Mor Aphrem, accompanied by a number of teachers, also left the school. They went to Edessa, where Mor Aphrem took over the directorship of the school there. It had been founded as long ago as the 2nd century by the kings of the Abgar dynasty. When Mor Aphrem took over the school, its importance grew still further. There were innumerable monasteries at Edessa housing many monks and offering many cells for their abode. Mor Aphrem occupied a cell there, practicing the ascetic life, interpreting Holy Scripture, composing poetry and hymns and teaching in the school, as well as instructing young girls in church music. In 373 he was called to the Lord.

In his book *Berule Bdire* (History of Syriac Learning and Literature) the great scholar Aphrem I Barsaum (†1957) writes: "83 monasteries have been counted that were important centers of higher learning since the advent of Christianity. Only ruins remain of some of them, others are now only a shadow of their former selves. But despite the campaigns of destruction and persecution their inhabitants have suffered, others have remained steadfast."

These monasteries have given the Church and the world outstanding scholars who have produced great works. Their pens have given birth to famous works in the fields of theology, philosophy, languages, and other disciplines and branches of knowledge. Although many of their valuable works have been lost, many renowned libraries are proud of what they possess in the way of Syriac manuscripts.

We will mention some examples of these famous monasteries, taking reference to a number of sources, the most important of which is Berule Bdireh (History of Syriac Learning and Literature) by the scholar and patriarch Aphrem I Barsaum:

1. The Qenneschrin Monastery was dedicated to the Apostle Thomas. It was situated on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, opposite the city of Hierapolis (Garablu). Founded in about 530, it was able to devote itself to scholarly pursuits more than all the other places of learning. Its fame spread across all borders, and until the early 9th century it was the largest school of theology and science. At that time it had more than 300 monks. It produced 7 patriarchs – one of whom was Patriarch Athanasius Al-Gmal (†631) – and 15 bishops. It was inhabited until the early 13th century. One of the famous scholars to study there was Severus Sebocht (†667), a great philosopher, who has bequeathed outstanding works of philosophy and astronomy to us. Through his mediation Indian numerals were transmitted to the Arabs.

2. The Qarqaphto monastery was founded by Mor Schemu'n. It was situated between Rischa'ino and Hassake close to the village of Al Magdal on the banks of the river Chabur. It was famous in the early 8th century for its activities in the field of linguistics. The monks of this monastery gained fame in the field of the vocalisation of Holy Scripture. It produced 6 bishops and was occupied until the early 10th century.

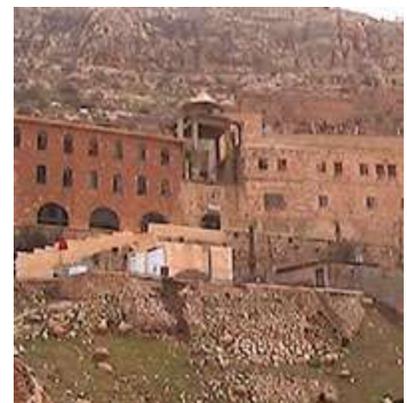
3. The Mor Barsaum Monastery was first mentioned in the 8th century. It was built on the mountain close to Melitene /Turkey. It was the residence of the Patriarch from the 11th to the end of the 13th century. It produced 5 patriarchs and 34 bishops. It was inhabited until the 17th century. Among the famous sons of this monastery were Dionysius Jacob Bar-Salibi (†1171), Metropolitan of Amida (Diyarbakir), Mor Michael the Great (†1199), and Mor Grigorios Abu Al-Faraj (†1286), known as Bar Hebraeus. It possessed a well-stocked library containing numerous manuscripts in the Syriac script Estrangelo.

4. The Mor Zakai Monastery near Qaloniqi (Ar-Raqqah) in Syria. Mor Johanon of Talo (†538) was ordained monk here in 508. It also produced the Patriarch Johanon IV and 20 bishops. It once gave shelter to the caliph Harun ar-Rashid, who liked it very much there and consequently honoured its inhabitants.

5. The Barid Monastery was in the district of Melitene and Hanzit. It was founded in the 10th century by the Patriarch Johanon VII. It produced one patriarch, one maphrian, and 18 bishops and metropolitans. It served as a place of learning until 1243. In that year Turkmen killed 15 of its monks, most of whom were scholars.

### **Monasteries Still Inhabited and Active Today**

1) The Mor Hananjo Monastery (Dayr az-Zafaran) is situated to the East of the city of Mardin in Turkey, and was built in the early 6th century on the foundations of a citadel. It became well-known from the end of the 8th century. From 1293 it was the residence of the patriarch for more than 600 years. It produced 21 patriarchs, nine maphrians, and 110 bishops. It is still inhabited, and houses a religious primary school under the supervision of a number of monks.



2) The Mor Gabriel or Qartomin Monastery lies east of Midiat and is the most famous monastery in Tur-Abdin. The two ascetics Mor Samuel and Mor Schemu'n built it in 397. It became the principal residence of the bishops from 615 to 1049. Mor Gabriel (†667) resided here in the 7th century and the monastery was later named after him. It produced four patriarchs as well as one maphrian and 81 bishops. Among them was the Patriarch Theodosius (887-895) who had a distinguished reputation in the field of medicine and wrote a book bearing his name. The monks

of this monastery were well-known for manufacturing parchment. They also distinguished themselves in the copying of manuscripts and the renaissance of the Estrangelo script under the leadership of Metropolitan Johanon in 988. To this day, the monastery houses monks and nuns and runs an important school.

3) The Monastery of Mark the Evangelist is also referred to as the Monastery of the Mother of God in Jerusalem. According to a Syriac manuscript found in the church in 1940, the institution was founded in the 5th or 6th century. It is the upper room in which the Lord partook of the Last Supper with his disciples. It is now the see of our Metropolitan and since 1472 has been the residence of our monks in Jerusalem. It has produced 9 metropolitans.

4) St. Matthew's Monastery is east of Mosul at the foot of Mount Faf. It is a large monastery, founded in the late 4th century and the residence of a metropolitan since that time. In its first period it housed a large population of monks. It has suffered many vicissitudes. In 1845 it was renovated and restored. It has produced three patriarchs, six maphrians and 24 bishops. It is still inhabited and, as we have mentioned, is the seat of a metropolitan.

5) The Syrian Monastery in Egypt is located in the Egyptian countryside in Asquit. It was probably built in the 5th century. Morutho of Tagrith, a Syrian merchant, bought it in the mid 6th century and left it to the Syrian monks. In 1084 there were 70 monks living in the monastery. It was occupied until the mid-17th century and is now inhabited by Coptic monks.

### **Monasticism in Our Syrian Church Today**

The Syrian Church has experienced various forms of oppression, especially since the beginning of the present millennium. The internal schisms caused by changing currents within tribes and clans have also weakened it. Furthermore, first the Roman Catholic Church and later the Protestant Church have sought to reduce the stronghold of the oriental churches, of which our Syrian Church is one. They isolated sections of the faithful, bringing them under their influence by exploiting the political influence of foreign countries and the ignorance of local rulers. This has led in particular to a weakening of the influence exercised by our clergy. Our Church has nowhere sought the protection of a foreign power, for it believes that God alone is its protector. These compelling factors have weakened monasticism, and, as the Fathers wrote, when monasticism is weakened, the Church will also be weak.

Today the Church is aware that renewal and awakening is imperative, and for this reason it has encouraged its children to dedicate themselves to the Church and to take orders, to join the communities of the remaining monasteries.

The Church has devoted particular care to the Mor Aphrem Seminary, which was founded in Zahle/Lebanon in the thirties of this century by the scholar Mor Aphrem I Barsaum. It was later moved to Mosul in Iraq, then returning to Lebanon. It subsequently closed down for a period until we reopened it in Damascus. It has produced and will continue to produce monks who are aware of their responsibilities and who are willing to make sacrifices in the effort to revive the Church. We endeavor to send some of the graduates to theological colleges abroad to complete their university education.

At present we have ten monks studying at the University of Athens, six in Rome, and others at various higher educational institutions in Europe and the United States.

We have also renewed the monasticism of Jacob Baradaeus for nuns and have sent two of them to Thessaloníki to continue their studies.

Through the grace of God we have had a new building constructed for the Mor Aphrem Seminary in Ma'rat Saidnaja, 25 kilometers away from Damascus. We have given this building

the name St. Aphrem Clerical Monastery. It will also be a center for Syriac studies, a center for the Syrian youth of the world and an ecumenical center. We encourage our spiritual sons of the Syrian clergy to seek cooperation with all Christian churches to attain, God willing, unity among Christians.

We thus endeavor through the grace of God to foster spiritual leadership in the church by strengthening monastic life. We are prepared for the coming of the third millennium in the ambition of following the example of our forefathers, who de-spite persecution and many hardship have borne the light of the Holy Gospel through-out the world.

It should also be mentioned that we have two schools in the Mor Gabriel Monastery and in the Dayr az-Zafaran Monastery as well as a theological school in Mosul/Iraq and a theological faculty in India. And because Syrians love the monastic way, they have, through the efforts of their honored Metropolitan Julius Cicek, founded a Mor Aphrem Monastery in the Netherlands. They have acquired a monastery here in Germany and another in Switzerland. It is our hope that Syrian monastic life will flower everywhere in the world where Syrians live.

In conclusion I would like to thank you for your kind attention and I would especially like to thank the Theological Seminar of the University of Heidelberg for inviting us to give this lecture.

God be with you all.