

Eastern Remnants, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

In the patriarchal archives, there is a letter from the non-Christian Emir of the Chouf region in Lebanon, dating back to the eighteenth century, addressed to the bishop of the diocese, in response to his request for permission to build a church in one of the villages of those beautiful mountains. The letter states: "We have no objection to building a church for the aforementioned village, provided that its patron saint carries a sword to defend us and yourselves in times of war."

This letter, despite its wit, carries a realistic explanation for the attachment of people in the countries of the Middle East to the soldier saints, or "warrior saints," such as Saint Elias, Saint George and Saint Demetrius. Saint Mercurius is considered the favorite of the Copts of Egypt, who greatly honor him, and are known, popularly, as "*Abu Saifain*." They depict him in icons riding a horse and "*carrying two crossed swords*."

The history of Eastern Christians is a history of permanent witnessing and martyrdom. The East, in which they live, has never known long-term stability, but rather frequent disturbances for which they have often paid the price, oppressively and unjustly. Since power left their hands in the seventh century, they have been regarded as a weak target in the face of the Arab-West and Arab-Asian wars (the Crusaders, the Mongols, the Tatars, the Mamluks and the Ottomans), which made them pay double the price. On the one hand, their faith caused doubt and skepticism among their Muslim citizens, regarding the possibility of religious sympathy with the invaders, especially if these were Christians, which exposed them to revenge repeatedly over time. And on the other hand, because of their patriotism and their solidarity with their fellow citizens and rulers, they paid the price as citizens of the occupied country, just like their Muslim citizens. The Crusaders were crueler to Eastern Christians than to the Muslims, because they saw them as heretics who had broken away; they slaughtered them, looted their churches, and exiled their bishops.

Historians believe that Christians remained the majority of the inhabitants of the East until the early fourteenth century, when the Crusaders left. They attribute the sharp decline in their numbers to the revenge to which they were subjected after the Crusaders left, as well as to their demoralization and misery to which they were subjected at the hands of Western Christians. The result was that many of them abandoned their Christianity and entered Islam.

But the most bitter thing is that these survivors are still in this critical situation. Today, they are Easterners in the eyes of the West, and Christians in the eyes of Muslims. In reality, they are Easterners who are proud of their Eastern identity and bear allegiance to it. Yet, they do not constitute a number that secures the interest of the West. At the same time, they are proud of their Christian faith, realize its authenticity, and bear responsibility for preserving and transmitting it, even to the point of martyrdom.

What is striking about the dealings of Eastern Christians and the aforementioned saints is that their history has never known any behavior that holds these saints responsible for killing enemies, but rather for protecting believers.

This leads us to conclude that the Christian believes that he is under the protection of his Lord first and foremost. From Him, he derives courage, strength, steadfastness, and the ability to bear witness and be martyred.

Eastern Remnants, Part Two

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The advantage of Eastern Christianity lies in the fact that -- as much as it is sensitive to the integrity of faith and meticulous in formulating and preserving its teachings -- it does not codify Christian life, but rather, for its implementation on a personal level, opens up a wide scope of general education emanating from the doctrine. It calls for the application of the divine commandments, in accordance with what leads to the salvation of the believer, under the guidance of his spiritual father, according to his situation, ability, circumstance, and the spiritual level he has reached.

On the political level, the Eastern Church, and the Orthodox Church in particular, does not determine the political orientation, in the precise and direct sense, for its children. It is satisfied only with providing them with Christian education, and enriching them with authentic spirituality, which finds a Christian embodiment in a manner that suits each society, people, and circumstance, even in the face of war.

What does this mean in practice? Let us take some examples. Eastern Christianity does not permit violence and killing under any circumstances. In other words, it does not justify killing in special cases and does not excuse the sin. At the same time, it does not prevent its children from following their spiritual conscience when it calls them to resist evil in all its forms. If a believer is forced to kill, he must seek healing from the violence to which he was forced to resort. This is so that he does not become accustomed to using violence to solve any problem he encounters. This is what is known in Christianity as repentance, and in contemporary psychology as healing.

Christianity does not open the doors for you to exercise power while you have a clear conscience, but rather attributes the exercise of power to the state of fallenness in which you live, which may force you, in certain situations, to choose between the lesser of two evils.

Eastern Christianity, in particular, rather addresses the interior of man. It believes that the great battle is spiritual and its arena is the inner man. When the believer

knows good from evil on his inner, subjective level, he can choose how to fight against evil on the external level.

In the case of abortion, for example, the Eastern Church does not permit the killing of the fetus, nor does it issue a ruling on it, justifying the act based on medical pretexts or the best interest. It does not say, in absolute principle, that the mother is better than the child, even when medical practice finds that the death of one of the parties, mother or child, could be inevitable. Rather, it leaves the determination to the parents to consult with their spiritual father, and then make the necessary decision. Then, they enter the stage of spiritual healing.

Their healing and repentance aim, among other things, to ensure that a person does not, under any circumstances, permit killing with a clear conscience.

I know a young priest from Damascus whose doctors confirmed that the fetus his wife was carrying would be deformed, and the doctors advised the pair to abort it. It was their first child. But after prayer and spiritual counsel, they refused to abort it and decided to keep the fetus and care for it, even if it led to very severe suffering which they would use to sanctify their lives. And so, they had a beautiful baby girl born to them, healthy in spirit, mind and body.

The Eastern Church deals with the problems of the faithful personally, not with a general religious generalization written in a legalistic and canonistic spirit. Guided by its spirituality, which understands the place of man in the divine plan, and which aspires to the salvation of man and the world, it feels, with mercy, the evangelical wisdom that says: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

If you must resort to the use of force to stop evil, or free others from it, then you, as a believer, realize that you have resorted to it under duress. Then, you accept it as a sacrifice of yourself for the sake of others, and you are compelled, if you live after the evil disappears, to enter the stage of spiritual healing. Then you will be a witness to your faith and a martyr to love.