

The Maronite Church

Introduction

The Maronite Church is an Eastern Church, which is in full communion with the Holy See of Rome. One of the distinctive features of the Maronite Church is that in its origin and development it was closely bound up with those living a monastic life in the region.

For this reason, in introducing the Maronite Church, one should begin by speaking of Saint Maron (known also as Saint Maroun) after whom the Maronite Church is named. St. Maron was a 4th century Syriac Christian hermit whose life and example inspired many followers and a monastic movement. This movement became the nucleus around which the Maronite Church developed, and the Maronite Church has always remained close to its monks, nuns and hermits.

The Maronites are headed today by Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi (elected in 2011), whose Patriarchal See is in Bkerke, a village north of Beirut, Lebanon. The Maronite Church is officially known as the Syriac Maronite Church of Antioch. This title manifests the Maronite Church's liturgical heritage (Syriac) and its connection with the ancient Christian See of Antioch where St. Peter was first Bishop before going to Rome. The Syriac-Aramaic language that was actually spoken by the earliest Christians remains the main liturgical language of the Maronite Church today.

The founding of the Maronite Church is due to three historical events, as Chorbishop Seely Beggiani stated in his book "Aspects of Maronite History": the life and deeds of St. Maron, the establishment of the Monastery of Bet Maroun ("the House of Maron"), and the organization of the Maronite Patriarchate. These events shaped the character of this church for centuries.¹

¹ Chorbishop Seely Beggiani, *Aspects of Maronite History*, pp. 1-7.

St. Maron

St. Maron was born in 350 near Apamea, a city in Syria², a political division of the Byzantine Empire. He lived the life of a simple priest, but later he decided to leave the world and to seek solitude and a life of mortification on top of a mountain called Nabo, near Antioch. St. Maron practiced an extreme form of asceticism by living in the open air, detached from the physical and material world while living an intense spiritual life. Little is known about the life of St. Maron, but he gained a reputation because of his healing and miracles. He attracted followers who carried forward his mission with great devotion after his death. Their labors resulted in the conversion of many in Syria to Christianity. By the 5th century these conversions would extend into neighboring Lebanon where pagan temples were turned into churches and the work of evangelization continued.³

Monastery of Bet Maroun

After St. Maron's death, many of his followers, with the help of Pope St. Leo the Great and Theodoret, Bishop of Cyr (d. 466), founded a monastery called the Monastery of Bet Maroun in the valley of the Orontes River. This monastery developed later into a thriving religious center. In the 5th Century, while the majority of West Syriac Christians rejected the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, the monastery of Bet Maroun took the lead in preaching the true doctrine and defending the teaching of the Council⁴. During the 6th century, St. Maron's monks of Syria suffered from intense violence and persecution unleashed against them by the Monophysites (the heretics against whom the Council of Chalcedon was called)⁵. 350 monks were massacred, and various monasteries were burned because of their defense of the true faith.⁶

² Fr. John H. Nahal, "History of the Maronites," pp.9-10.

³ Fady T. Keyrouz, *Identity from History*, pp. 59-61

⁴ See Nahal, pp. 14-16.

⁵ See Keyrouz, p. 55.

⁶ For more information see Beggiani, pp. 7, 8-9 and Keyrouz, pp. 65-66.

The Maronite Patriarchate

When Islam began to spread throughout the region with the Islamic conquests in the seventh century, Christians lost contact with Constantinople and faced threats and persecution from numerous religious groups in the region. The Maronite community elected John Maron, a bishop associated with the monastery of Bet Maroun, as Patriarch of Antioch and all the East. With the approval of Pope Saint Sergius I, Patriarch John Maron became the first Maronite Patriarch of one of the oldest Sees in Christianity, the See of Antioch. Assigned to Mount Lebanon, Patriarch John Maron's mission was to oppose heresies and support the faithful in conquered areas and keep the Maronites united with Rome. Patriarch John Maron was both an ecclesiastical and civil leader who founded and organized the Maronite church and established a political, national and military body that would be the secret behind the ability of this persecuted church to maintain its rights and independence later on.⁷

Persecuted Church

Maronites have always faced challenges to maintain their identity and preserve their heritage. They suffered many times from attempts and pressure to change their customs and liturgical practices. They were persecuted over the course of history, by the Monophysite majority, by the powerful Byzantine empire, followed by the Islamic conquests of the Middle East and later in history by the Ottoman Empire. They were subjected to hunger and starvation by the Ottomans whose rulers intended to destroy the Christian population of Mount Lebanon. At that time 200,000 starved to death. 1,500 Maronites were killed during the attacks of the Druze (one of the major religious groups in the Levant) in 1860. During the Lebanese civil war (1975-1993), hundreds of thousands Maronites were driven out of their homes and off their lands.

⁷ Keyrouz, pp.72-78. See also: <https://catholicsaints.info/saint-john-maron/>

The Maronites Today

Due to emigration since the 19th century, most Maronites today live outside of the region of Lebanon. According to records from 2011 based on information gathered from Maronite parishes, approximately 2 million Maronite Catholics live and worship as Maronites within the worldwide Lebanese diaspora in Europe, the Americas, Australia and Africa. There are about 1 million Maronites living in Lebanon, 52,000 in Syria, 10,000 in Cyprus, and 15,000 in the Holy Land, Jordan and Egypt. In addition, approximately 5 million Maronites live outside Lebanon and worship in Latin or other Catholic churches.⁸

Relationship with the Latin Church

It should be mentioned that a long period of ties to Rome and the Latin Church resulted in the introduction of a number of Latin practices into the Maronite Church, such as the Rosary and the use of statues and also fostered certain devotions such as a strong devotion to the Immaculate Conception.⁹ Since Vatican II, and particularly under Pope St. John Paul II, liturgical reforms have sought to recover important Maronite traditions that had been obscured by Latinizations. These close ties with the Western Church also help to explain the fact that today many Maronites are not necessarily Middle Eastern. The Maronites are a hospitable and welcoming church showing the love of Christ to all.

⁸ See: <https://www.maronite-heritage.com/Statistics.php>

⁹ For more on this topic please see Biggiani, p. 12.