

## Maronite Monks of Adoration

FAITHFULNESS  
OR  
ASSIMILATION?

"You either belong wholly to the world  
or wholly to God."

-St. John Marie Vianney



It was spring of the year 166 B.C. in the village of Modein, located about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem, when officers of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes entered the town to enforce the new laws upon its inhabitants, to build an altar to Zeus (head god of the Greeks) and to compel the Jewish people to join in sacrificing a pig upon it and in the eating of its flesh. With all the townspeople assembled, the head officer called upon the priest Mattathias to set the example before the people by being the first to offer sacrifice. While disobedience would bring a death sentence, nevertheless the officer enticed Mattathias with many benefits for compliance: *"You are a leader, honored and great in this city, and supported by sons and brothers. Now be the first to come and do what the king commands, as all the Gentiles and the men of Judah and those that are left in Jerusalem have done. Then you and your sons will be numbered among the friends of the king, and you and your sons will be honored with silver and gold and many gifts."*

But Mattathias, being a faithful priest and knowing that obeying would require him to be disobedient to the Mosaic Covenant given by God through Moses, replied: *"Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons (he had 5 sons) and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from us to desert the law and the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king's words by turning aside*

*from our religion to the right hand or to the left."* (emphasis writer's)

However one of their fellow townsmen was weaker; he agreed to join in the desecrating ritual. As he advanced to the altar, Mattathias rushed upon him and killed him, then turned upon the king's officer and killed him as well (no "dialogue" here). The rest of the villagers set upon the rest of the patrol and killed them all. Knowing that retribution would not be long in coming, they fled into the hills.

The above account comes from the *First Book of Maccabees* which tells of the Jewish struggle for religious and political freedom from the Greek empire of the Seleucid kings who had inherited the world from Alexander the Great. The parallels between this historical event and are own time are striking and the example of Mattathias and his 5 sons can serve as an inspiration in our times of both apostasy from and persecution of Christianity.

With the conquests of Alexander the Great, Judea becomes part of a Greek kingdom ruled by Seleucid kings. The heterogeneous Seleucid empire was knit together by the Hellenistic culture of its rulers and its Greek colonists – and by nothing else. With Rome, fresh from its defeat of Carthage, now looking eastward, it was deemed urgent to strengthen the unity of this heterogeneous empire. The method of achieving this unity would be a program of accentuated hellenization – a melting pot to make everyone Greek, Jews included.

To use our modern day language, the Jewish people would be forced to **assimilate** to the mainstream culture of Hellenism.

Antiochus began with Jerusalem. He drove out the high priest, massacred much of the population and plundered the Temple of every object of monetary value. He also found a number of Jewish collaborators who, anxious to be **accepted** by the new dominant culture, cooperated with Antiochus against their own people. Antiochus named one of them, Menelaus, to be high priest even though he was not of the priestly tribe of Levi.

An idol – probably a statue of Zeus Olympus – was erected in the Temple itself; it may have had Antiochus IV's own features. On December 25, 167 B.C., the Temple was dedicated to the pagan god with the sacrifice of a pig, in deliberate mockery of the Law of Moses. The Temple courts began to be used for ritual sexual prostitution (notice how sexual indulgence always becomes part and parcel of disobedience and mockery of God).

This deliberate maximum profanation was accompanied by a thorough and carefully planned religious persecution. In this persecution of Antiochus IV against Judaism, we have for the first time in history, an official state sponsored persecution designed to thoroughly eradicate religious belief from the face of the earth. This would be repeated in such events as the French Revolution, Mexico in the 1920's and the Spanish Civil War, just to name a few.

Idols were set up in the streets and squares of Jerusalem and in even the smallest towns and villages, with pigs frequently sacrificed on their altars. The local residents were required to join in the sacrifices and eat the sacrificed meat, usually pork (forbidden by the Law of Moses). Circumcision of new-born boys, observance of the Sabbath, and possession of the Sacred Books of the Law were all punishable by death, and the death penalty was frequently imposed for these "offenses." Those who kept the faith and lived had to flee to the countryside, into caves or into the desert.

Active resistance to this would appear futile. After all the Jews had no army and how could a bunch of farmers

hope to defeat a professional army, the descendants of those who conquered the Persian Empire for Alexander the Great. How? By faith. While big and imposing, the Seleucid empire of Antiochus IV was rotten with moral and material corruption. The degenerate Seleucids and their henchmen would not know how to deal with men ultimately resolved either to die for their faith or to live and fight for it, as God should give them the opportunity. Mattathias and his sons were made of sterner stuff. This example would be repeated by the Vendéans in France during the French revolution, the Christeros in Mexico during the 1920's and the Carlists in Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

The Maccabees and their men carried on guerilla warfare, destroyed the pagan altars in the Jewish villages, circumcising the baby boys found there and ambushing Seleucid patrols. The forces at their command, and their support in the countryside, steadily grew. Antiochus had more than he could handle. Already elderly and with death approaching, Mattathias called his sons together to give them his last counsel: a counsel that would well serve us today.

*"Arrogance and reproach have now become strong; it is a time of ruin and furious anger. Now, my children, show zeal for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of our fathers...Observe, from generation to generation, that none who put their trust in Him [God] will lack strength. Do not fear the words of a sinner, for his splendor will turn into dung and worms. Today he will be exalted, but tomorrow he will not be found, because he has returned to the dust, and his plans will perish."*

With his death his son Judas took command, the above words of Mattathias soon became reality. On December 25, 164 B.C. – three years to the day after the first pagan sacrifice had profaned the Temple – the Temple of Jerusalem – repaired, restored and re-consecrated – was rededicated and the sacrifices commanded by the Law of Moses were resumed. The day was designated as a great annual festival, the feast of Hanukkah. The elderly Mattathias and his sons from Modein had attained, against all odds, the primary goal for which they had taken up arms, in just three years. ✘