

Disciples of St Maron

IT IS A TYPICAL NEW ENGLAND, winter day: overcast skies and temperatures hovering above freezing. Inside, our well-heated monastery makes for a cozy home, taking most of the effects of winter off our minds as we live another day of contemplative, monastic life near the Blessed Sacrament. Given the comforts of modern living, even within a monastery, it is easy to forget that our Maronite monastic roots began, not only with the inconveniences of living in the deserts of ancient Syria during the fourth and fifth centuries, but the added choice of spending much of that time exposed to the elements.

Our father in faith, St Maron, and a number of his early disciples, both men and women, lived as open-air hermits, a unique form of monasticism even in its day. As our Maronite Calendar takes us through their feasts, beginning with that of St Maron on February 9, and going through several of his immediate disciples in the following weeks (curiously enough, during some of the least pleasant days of the year), we can reflect on their lives and the relevance they have for us today.

Nearly all we know about St Maron comes from scarcely a single page written about him by Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393–466AD). Theodoret was well acquainted with the monks of northern Syria and, after becoming bishop of Cyrrhus (north-east of ancient Antioch), he undertook the task of writing many of their biographies. Of St Maron, whom he knew only by reputation (the saint had died before bishop Theodoret could meet him), he writes: “Embracing the open-air life, he repaired to a hill-top formerly honored by the impious. Consecrating to God



Icon of St Maron

the precinct of demons on it, he lived there, pitching a small tent which he seldom used.” He then goes on to list some of the miraculous healings of both body and soul that Maron performed for those who came to him, adding that, “it was he who planted for God the garden that now flourishes in the region of Cyrrhus.” This spiritual “garden” were the many disciples who followed his example and teaching. Unfortunately, their names are unfamiliar to most modern, Catholic ears, but still worthy of remembrance, especially for Maronites. Saints such as James of Cyrrhus, Thalaleus, Domnina, and Koura and Marana.

The most famous follower of St Maron in Theodoret’s lifetime was, undoubtedly, **St James of Cyrrhus**. “A companion of the great Maron and a recipient of his divine teaching, he has eclipsed his teacher by greater labors. For Maron ... pitched a tent of hairy skins, and

used this to ward off the assaults of rain and snow. But this man, bidding farewell to all these things, tent and hut and enclosure, has the sky for roof and lets in all the contrasting assaults of the air, as he is now inundated by torrential rain, now frozen by frost and snow, at other times burnt and consumed by the rays of the sun, and exercises endurance over everything.”† Theodoret also recounts how he began by living in a small cell, “freeing his soul from the tumults outside and nailing his mind to the thought of God.” As he advanced in virtue and love of God, he made his way to a mountain 4 miles west of Cyrrhus, where he took up the life of an open-air hermit, sometimes being completely covered by snow while prostrate in prayer so that neighbors had to dig him out and revive him. Yet aside from his feats of endurance, St James especially impressed Bishop Theodoret with his obedience and love of God.

St Thalelaeus fought with demons on a hill top where they were once worshipped, not far from the city of Gabala. When the demons saw him arrive, “they tried to frighten him, but were unable to do so, since faith fenced him round and grace fought on his behalf. Therefore, filled with rage and frenzy they proceeded against the trees planted there ... They say that more than five hundred of these were suddenly uprooted; I heard this recounted by the neighboring peasants, who were formerly engulfed by the darkness of impiety but received through his teaching and miracle-working the light of the knowledge of God.” (pages 180–181). After defeating the demons, St Thalelaeus made a cage for himself to live in. “Sitting or rather suspended in this, he has spent ten years up till now. Since he has a very big body, not even sitting can he straighten his neck, but he always sits bent double, with his forehead tightly pressed against his knees.” Asked about this way of life, he replied, “Burdened with many sins and believing in the penalties that are threatened, I have devised this form of life, contriving moderate punishments for the body, in order to reduce the mass of those awaited. For the latter are more grievous not only in quantity but also in quality; for they are involuntary, and what happens against our will is particularly disagreeable, while what is voluntary, even if wearisome, is less painful — for my la-

bor is self-chosen and not compulsory.”

St Dominina, on the other hand, stayed close to home, setting up a small hut made from millet stalks in her parent’s garden. “Passing the whole day there, she wets with incessant tears not only her cheeks but also her garments of hair, for such is the clothing with which she covers her body. ... Though exposed to all who wish to see her, both men and women, she neither sees a face nor shows her face to another, but is literally covered up by her cloak and bent down onto her knees, while she speaks extremely softly and indistinctly, always making her remarks with tears.” These tears, as Theodoret explains, were born from fervent love for God, “firing the mind to divine contemplation, stinging it with pricks and urging it on to migrate from here.”

Nor was she the only female disciple of St Maron. **Saints Koura and Marana** also took to the life of open-air hermits while living enclosed from the world. They “acquired a small place in front of the town, and entering within it, walled up the door with clay and stones.” This house was without a roof, allowing them to live outdoors, even while cloistered. Theodoret also saw the chains that they wore continuously, “which even a well-built man could not carry.” He added that, despite



Map of Syria in the 5th Century.

† *History of the Monks of Syria* by Theodoret of Cyrrhus, p. 134

having lived this life for 42 years, “they love their exertion as if they had only just entered on the contests. For contemplating the beauty of the Bridegroom, they bear the labor of the course with ease and facility, and press on to reach the goal of the contests, where they see the Beloved standing and pointing to the crown of victory. Because of this, in suffering the assaults of rain and snow and sun they feel neither pain nor distress but from apparent afflictions reap joy of heart.”

In reading these accounts of the lives of some of St Maron’s early disciples, lives more to be admired than imitated, we may be tempted to wonder if they have any relevance for us today. Theodoret addresses this in his Epilogue on Divine Love. Looking to the cause behind all the strange and wonderful exertions of these hermits, he fastens on the one, great motivation of every disciple of Christ: Love. “Just as those enamored of bodies fuel

their longing by the sight of the objects of their passion and make that madness more grievous,” he writes, “so those who have received the goad of divine love, by imagining that divine and pure beauty, make sharper the pricks of love, and the more they yearn to enjoy, the more they draw their fill.” He concludes, “Let us too conceive this longing; let us become bewitched by the beauty of the Bridegroom, eager for the promised goods, paying heed to the multitude of benefits, fearing the punishment for ingratitude, and so in our love be maintainers of his laws. For this is the definition of friendship: liking and hating the same things.” And so, may these friends of Christ teach us that there is nothing too difficult, nothing too small or great for love and that this divine love is not only the greatest motivation for our lives in Christ, but also its own greatest reward.

