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THE PRIEST AS SYMBOL OF GOD'S MERCY IN THE CHURCH:
THE MARONITE TRADITION

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~ Dedicated to each priest
in the Maronite Church.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

<u>ATR</u>	Anglican Theological Review
<u>Bib</u>	Biblica
<u>Con</u>	Concilium (N.Y.: Seabury Press)
<u>CBQ</u>	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
<u>CSCO</u>	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<u>ECR</u>	Eastern Churches Review
<u>EL</u>	Ephemerides Liturgicae
<u>Enc Jud</u>	Encyclopaedia Judaica
<u>HJ</u>	Heythrop Journal
<u>Iren</u>	Irenikon
<u>ITQ</u>	The Irish Theological Quarterly
<u>JSOR</u>	Journal of the Society of Oriental Research
<u>JTS</u>	Journal of Theological Studies
<u>OC</u>	Oriens Christianus
<u>OCA</u>	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
<u>OCP</u>	Orientalia Christiana Periodica
<u>Or Syr</u>	L'Orient Syrien
<u>PG</u>	Patrologia Graeca
<u>Par O</u>	Parole de l'Orient
<u>ROC</u>	Revue de l'Orient Chrétien
<u>SLNPNF</u>	Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
<u>SL</u>	Studia Liturgica
<u>Sob</u>	Sobornost
<u>St.Ans.</u>	Studia Anselmiana
<u>St.Patr</u>	Studia Patristica
<u>TS</u>	Theological Studies
<u>TU</u>	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der aeterchristlichen literatur
<u>WS</u>	Woodbrook Studies
<u>Wor</u>	Worship

SCRIPTURAL SOURCES

The New American Bible. Camden, N.J.: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1971.

The Psalms. The Grail, England, 1963.

PREFACE

With the recent "new Spring" of Liturgical studies by Syriac and Maronite scholars we hope to restore many of the ancient traditions to the beauty of their original simplicity. We must do this with an eye to that which is most ancient in the Syriac Tradition, trying to discover ancient themes, symbols, customs and emphases which belong to the Syriac Church. This will help us to rediscover the meanings of our liturgical texts, and to determine that which is Maronite and that which is not. Likewise, in the process of editing and/or abbreviating with an eye towards accomodation, we hope to be true to the core of our Tradition.

The Maronite Patriarchal Commission for the liturgy has made proposals for a reform and restoration of the Maronite Liturgy. It is only a matter of time before their proposals will become normative for all Maronites. It also seems to be only a matter of time before work on the Maronite Pontifical will lead to a common Maronite Pontifical for all bishops. It is in the hope of aiding this important process of retrieval that I offer this work. And it is in the hope of retrieving our inner-vision towards ministry and priesthood in the Church that I offer my reflections. May the Lord make me the priest that my Tradition calls me to be.

INTRODUCTION

A. MARONITE IDENTITY

The Maronite Tradition traces its roots back to a group of early Christians called the "Syriac Church".¹ When speaking of the Christian Traditions one basic premise is to refer to them in terms of West and "East". The West is that of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and the Protestant churches. The "East" is that of the Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox Churches. But there is still another "East", east of the "East", and that is the Syriac Church.

Its home was the fertile crescent, known from our geography books as Mesopotamia, which is located inland from the Hellenistic cultural cities on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Its language was Syriac, a dialect of the Aramaic spoken in Palestine during the time of Christ. Its boundaries were mainly within the Persian Empire of that time.² History was to witness to the early separation of this empire from the ties it held with "western" neighbors. This led to its eventual fall under the Islamic conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries (at least six centuries before the fall of the Byzantine Empire). This political division from the west, and eventual fall to the Moslems, was to insure the seclusion of the Syriac Christians already begun by the disputes within Christianity itself.

Because of the sins of history, the Syriac Church suffered a great loss in her relations with the remainder of Christianity in the Roman

¹W. Macomber, "A Theory on the Origins of the Syrian, Maronite, and Chaldean Rites" OCP v.39 (1973), pp.235-42.

²R. Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1977), see Introduction.

and Byzantine world. She was to find herself with the formulations (not so much with the "formulas") of theology, as well as the methods of operation, coming about at the hands of the Byzantine imperial councils. As a result she became either Jacobite(monophysite), or Nestorian(those associated with a dislike for the appellation "theotókos" ascribed to Mary), or "Syrian"Chalcedonian.

Almost the entire Chalcedonian component of the Syriac Church was to become eventually part of the Byzantine liturgical crystalization by the eighth and ninth centuries. However, the community of the Maronite monastery and those who came within its orbit were excluded from this process. Though neither Nestorian nor Jacobite, yet Syriac, and at the same time maintaining a Chalcedonian loyalty, the Maronite Church retained its roots in the Syriac Tradition which all three Traditions shared.³ This tied them more closely to the Nestorian and Jacobite Traditions than to the Byzantine.

What this means to students of history is that we have access to the early Syriac Church by way of three living ecclesial Traditions, the Maronite, Jacobite, and Nestorian; and the Armenian Tradition is worthy of a separate treatment.⁴ The Jacobites and Nestorians have Catholic counterparts: the Syriac Catholics and the Chaldeans respectively. The Maronite Tradition in its entirety is Catholic.

³ For a good history on the Maronite and Syriac-speaking Christians in the time of the Byzantine liturgical crystalization see S. Brock's series of articles: "An Early Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor", *Analecta Bollandiana*, V.XCI(1973)pp.299-346; "A Syriac Fragment on the Sixth Council" *Ov*.57 pp.63-70; "A Short Melkite Baptismal Service in Syriac" *Par O* v.3 n.1 (1972)pp.119-30; "Syriac Sources for Seventh-Century History" *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* v.2 (1976)pp.17-37.

⁴ Recent studies on the Armenian Church have discovered many antiquities of Syriac origin. The earliest stratum of the practice of pre-baptismal anointing in the Syriac Church is said to be most primitively preserved in the Armenian Tradition. See G. Winkler, "The Syriac Pre-Baptismal Anointing in the Light of Armenian Sources" *OCA* v.205 (1976) pp.317-24; and

While the Jacobite Tradition belongs to the West Syrian liturgical family and the Nestorian to the East Syrian, the Maronites are a curious mixture of both, though structurally West Syrian. The Maronites, in their anaphorae, which number over seventy, follow the structure of the West Syriac Anaphora of St. James. The only exception is the Anaphora of Sharrar. This anaphora was given the place of prominence in the first Maronite missal printed in Rome, but it has since fallen into disuse.⁵ It is different in structure from the other anaphorae of the West Syrian Tradition, and share a common heritage with what has been considered the oldest anaphora of the Church, that of Addai and Mari of the East Syrian Tradition. In many respects Sharrar preserves aspects even more ancient than Addai and Mari.⁶

The Maronite Tradition favors the East Syrian Tradition in its funeral hymns;⁷ and W. Macomber warns researchers not to be too "West Syrian" in describing the Maronites --even though they came from the geographical region of West Syria.⁸ In other words, as good monks (and the Maronites are basically a monastic tradition beginning with

"The Original Meaning of the Pre-Baptismal Anointing and its Implications" *Wor* v.52 (1978) pp.24-45; also see K. Bar Samian "A New Solution to the Anointings before Baptism at the time of John Ojun", unpublished article.

⁵ See Missale Chaldaicum juxta ritum Ecclesiae nationis Maronitarum, Romae, 1592/4. The Patriarchal Commission for Liturgy hopes to restore this anaphora. Parts of it are inserted in some of the other Maronite anaphorae and much of it is incorporated in the liturgy of pre-sanctified on Good Friday. The reason for its disuse has a history unto itself and would be worthy of further study.

⁶ See W. Macomber, "The Oldest Known Text of the Anaphora of the Apostles Addai and Mari" *OCP* (1966) pp.335-71; and "The Maronite and Chaldean Versions of the Anaphora of the Apostles", *OCP* v.37 (1971) pp.55-84.

⁷ I have not been able to examine this point myself; see W. Macomber "The Funeral Liturgy of the Chaldean Church" *Con* v.2 (1968) pp.19-22.

⁸ W. Macomber, "A Theory" *op.cit.*

the hermit-priest Maron and the monks who followed him) they were the bearers of tradition and protectors of that which may have been most ancient in the Syriac Church.

The Maronites might have been able to bear witness to many more Syriac antiquities if it had not been for the burning of many of their manuscripts by papal legates of the sixteenth century, and the leaving aside of ancient practices in favor of conformity with Latin customs.⁹ Therefore, we have very few manuscripts of Maronite provenance before the fifteenth century.¹⁰

⁹ See S. Beggiani The Relations of the Holy See and the Maronites from the Papacy of Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) to the Synod of Mt. Lebanon in 1736 doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington D.C. (1963).

¹⁰ For a survey of the sources see P. Gemeyal, Avant-Messe Maronite (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalim Studiorum, 1965). At the beginning of this work Gemeyal lists all the liturgical sources available of Maronite (and of Jacobite) provenance which pertain to the Maronite Church.

B. MARONITE SOURCES

The Maronite sources used in this work are the following:

- the Kitab al Huda,¹¹ the Maronite source for law between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries;
- The Divine Office as published by P. Gemeyal¹² (with the exception of quotes from the Divine Office, published in Rome, 1623-25)¹³
- The Divine Office for Holy Week¹⁴
- The Lectionary, Fenqitho, and Anaphorae which have been published by the Diocese of St. Maron U.S.A.¹⁵
- The Ritual of 1942 as published under the direction of Msgr. Raggi.¹⁶
- the Ordination Ritual according to the manuscript of the Bishop of Beirut, which is the manuscript used in America by Archbishop Francis M. Zayek.¹⁷

¹¹ This "Book of Direction", as it is called in Arabic, dates perhaps to the middle of the eleventh century. It is composed of two sections. The first thirteen chapters concern doctrine, morality and liturgy; the latter forty-four chapters reproduce previous juridical sources. It is the most primitive source of Maronite law and was in use from 1059(?) up to the Synod of Mt. Lebanon in 1736. P. Fahd has made a scientific edition from the Vatican manuscript Syr 133, using the variants of other known manuscripts. See Kitâb al Huda ou Livre de la direction-Code Maronite du haut Moyen Age (Aleppo, 1935).

¹² P. Gemeyal, Prière du Croyant Selon l'année liturgique Maronite 3 vols. (Beyrouth, 1968).

¹³ M. Breydy, whom we shall discuss in the following chapter, uses the following Maronite Offices: Hacheh, Passional ou Offices de la Passion, ed. Jounieh, Lebanon (1902); Ferial Office, ed. in Rome (1623-25; and the Breviary (Petit) ed. in Jounieh (1935-36).

¹⁴ Hacheh, Passion Week Office, ed. Jounieh, Lebanon (1902) (in Syriac).

¹⁵ Lectionary, Syriac-Maronite Church, the Seasons (Detroit: Diocese of St. Maron, U.S.A., 1976); Anaphora Book of the Syriac Maronite Church of Antioch (Youngstown: Diocese of St. Maron U.S.A., 1978) which is based on the work of A. Raes et al. Anaphorae Syriacae (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1939); and Fenqitho, A Treasury of Feasts According to the Syriac-Maronite Church of Antioch (Diocese of St. Maron: U.S.A., 1980).

¹⁶ Published in Bkerke, 1942. This is the Ritual in use in the Maronite Church.

¹⁷ This text is the private possession of Archbishop Francis M. Zayek, it was translated and edited by the Diocesan Liturgical Committee and will be hereafter referred to as Beirut Manuscript of Pontifical. See also H. Denzinger, "Ordinationes Maronitarum" in Ritus Orientalium v.2 (Wirceburgi, 1865) pp.108-226.

The Maronite Church does not have a Pontifical universally used by all her bishops. Each bishop uses a version of the Pontifical in manuscript form. All versions exhibit certain latinizations and other redactional changes. Any serious study of the Maronite Pontifical is thus aggravated. However, a doctoral dissertation was done on the Maronite Pontifical by J. Merhej,¹⁸ which incorporates much of the work done earlier by M. Rajji.¹⁹ H. Doueihi, the Director of Liturgy for the Diocese of St. Maron U.S.A., is presently working on the ordination rituals to be later published in an English edition with a scholarly introduction.

In this work the quotes used from the Maronite Pontifical were chosen because of their similarities to the other West Syrian Tradition, the Jacobite, which may give testimony to their antiquity and/or authenticity. This is easily verifiable in Denzinger's compilation of the eastern ordination rituals,²⁰ and in Voste's edition of the Pontifical of the West Syrian Church.²¹

¹⁸ J. Merhej, Jalons pour l'histoire du Pontifical Maronite (Institut Catholique de Paris, 1975); and also an unedited work by M. Rajji Du Pontifical Maronite: Etude Historique et Critique Reconstitution du Texte Primitif (Bkerke, 1944 & 45).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ H. Denzinger, op.cit.

²¹ J.M. Voste, Pontificale Juxta ritum Ecclesiae Syrorum Occidentali-um id est Antiochiae (Rome, 1941).

C. SCOPE OF THIS WORK

Any systematic work on the Syriac Church is an attempt at breaking new ground. Thus far, other than scholarly articles, there are only two theological works in English which attempt to place in some order the wealth of the symbolic theology of the early Syriac Church. Robert Murray published his Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Theology in 1973²² and Seely Beggiani will soon publish his work Early Syriac Theology: With a Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition. This present work is indebted to them.

Mention must be made here of the pioneering work of Michael Breydy, Le Concept du Sacerdoce: Essai de theologie Syro-Maronite.²³ This work is a thematic treatment of Maronite priesthood, centering on the word "priesthood" and the import it had in the Fathers and especially in the liturgy. To glean the finely tuned insights of his work one must be versed in the vast background of European theology during the 1960's as Breydy himself was. His scholarly work is, nonetheless, indispensable to any serious study of Maronite priesthood. He discusses such themes as the "priesthood of Adam",²⁴ which is not specifically treated in our work, as well as themes which pertain to the etymology of the word for priest in Syriac.

²² Published in Cambridge at the Cambridge U. Press, 1975. On pp.1-3 of his Introduction Murray speaks about the difficulty in systemizing the symbolic theology of such writers as Ephrem and Aphrahat. He also speaks of his hope to remain true to the spirit of these theological poets. It is the danger of any systematic approach to theology to obscure or hide by emphases certain realities. Nonetheless, we proceed with the same risk that Murray and others have taken.

²³ Published in Beyrouth, 1964.

²⁴ Breydy discusses a seventeenth century scuffle between the Vatican examination commission and the promoter of the Maronite Office, Nasrallah Scialac. The scuffle concerned the censures of passages in the Office which referred to the priesthood of Adam. In reply to the censures,

His work is complementary to ours, focusing specifically on the concept of priesthood. It begins with the Syriac concept of Christ and Church and then treats of priesthood. Breydy's work allows one to enter into the rich world of Hebrew and Semitic Christian imagery of priesthood. Thus, our work is indebted also to him.

The objective of the present work is to explore the role of the priest in the Maronite Tradition focusing on the theme of forgiveness. Although many other themes could have been discussed, the theme of forgiveness warrants our attention because of its prominence in the Maronite ordination ritual. By discussing priesthood under the theme of forgiveness we hope to shed light on the other aspects of priestly ministry and hence give further clarity to the priest's role in God's Church. The ministry of bishop, deacon, deaconess, and all other orders will not be discussed in this work. However, an understanding of their roles would certainly aid this study.²⁵

We have taken for our sources Aphrahat (+345), St. Ephrem (+373), Marutha (+420), Balai (+628), the Liber Graduum (before 450), and the

Scialac, in an urgent plea to keep the office intact, proclaimed: "Deus O. . . , septem diebus fecit mundum et non uno verbo, ut suaviter dispone-
ret omnia. Patres vero Jesuitae, uno verbo 'deleatur totum' destruent
Maronitarum Breviarum a tot sanctis Patribus, multis saeculis, summo
cum labore compositum" Breydy, Le Concept, op.cit., p.63.

²⁵ On the role of the bishop see Ortiz de Urbina, "L'evêque et son rôle d'après Saint Ephrem" Par O v.4 (1973), pp.137-46; on the role of the deacon see M. Hayek, "Le ministre diaconal dans l'Eglise maronite" On Syr v.9 n.3 (1964), pp.291-322; on the role of the deaconess in the early Syriac Church according to the Didascalia Apostolorum see R. Gryson, The Ministry of Women in the Early Church (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1976), pp.35-43; also see the ordination ritual for all the different orders in Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium, and Voste, Pontificale.

Didascalia Apostolorum (before Aphrahat), which were all utilized by both Murray and Beggiani.²⁶ We also have included Narsai (+503) who was used by Beggiani but excluded from Murray's study, and in addition we have drawn on the canons of Bishop Rabbula (+435) who was not included by Beggiani and Murray but has bearing on this topic.

The authors were chosen because they help to tell the story of the Syriac Church up to the seventh and eight centuries. During this time our inheritance of prayers in the written form was becoming increasingly the norm, appearing with the recurrent theme of forgiveness. We will also utilize in this work the Syriac liturgical tradition and sacramental practices, concentrating on the Maronite Tradition, trying to show how the above mentioned authors and the liturgical texts both give expression to the priest's role in the forgiveness of sins.

One cannot venture further back than Aphrahat, to examine the origins of the Syriac Church.²⁷ Much more historical work needs to be done, as well as documents found, before any certainty can be established as to the origins of this Church (although a thorough study of the Didascalia Apostolorum may be a good starting point).²⁸ The limits of this work can be delineated as follows: a wide range of writers is employed from the West Syrian Tradition (Balai), and from the East (Narsai). They

²⁶ Murray in Symbols, stays within the realm of the fourth and early fifth centuries. See Introduction, p.3 Beggiani includes all the authors and sources which he has determined as having some connection with the origins of the Maronite liturgical tradition, see Foreword of Early Syria Theology.

²⁷ See Murray, Symbols, Introduction.

²⁸ P.A. de Lagarde, Didascalia Apostolorum Syriacae in Syriac (Osnabruck, 1854). English translation, H. Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929).

include different ecclesial figures such as bishops,²⁹ chor-bishops,³⁰ priests, deacons,³¹ monks,³² and ascetics. Different theological schools are also surveyed, from Nestorianism (Narsai) to Monophysitism (Balai), and also Aphrahat and Ephrem. We also scan an area which had little ecclesiastical organization --Aphrahat and his environs, and one with a well ordered ecclesiastical life --Marutha and Narsai. Two empires are also important in this composite picture, the Persian (Aphrahat and the East Syrian Tradition) and the Roman-Byzantine (the later Ephrem and the West Syrian Tradition). Evident are the weaknesses of any such study of the early Syrian ecclesiastical terrain. But the one unifying factor, other than the language of Syriac, is the semitic symbolic theology. It is therefore possible to trace common symbols and themes.

The guiding intelligence behind this work is the theme of forgiveness in the concept of priesthood. This theme unfolds in a consistent pattern in all the above mentioned sources, in pristine form in the writings of Aphraht and Ephrem, in full form in Narsai, and later finds liturgical expression in both the East and West Syrian Traditions.

²⁹ Marutha and Rabboula.

³⁰ Balai.

³¹ Ephrem.

³² Narsai was a monk and abbot. Ephrem and Aphrahat were also monks and ascetics.

CHAPTER I :

OVERVIEW OF THE SYRIAC CHURCH

A. HER ROLE IN HISTORY

Although it may be more proper to refer to the Syriac Church after Chalcedon as the "Syriac churches", as Murray does, there is still a basic unity in all the churches of the Syriac tongue. This unity lies in their semitic way of living and adoring the Mystery of God in Christ.¹

So semitic are the common roots of these traditions that their first real theologian saw his "fathers" as being the patriarchs of old, his "people" as being the people of Israel, and his "religion" as being the religion of the Hebrew people;² but for him all was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

This theologian, Aphrahat, follows the lead of the author of Hebrews who refers to the Old Testament Patriarchs as "our fathers" (Heb. 1:1). Murray writes that Aphrahat, as well as other Syriac writers, could not be tempted in the direction of Marcion's rejection of Christianity's Hebraic past. Rather, for Aphrahat, the Church is the authentic fulfillment of the "former nation" and its heroes are simply "our fathers".³ Murray continues:

"Few of the Greek or Latin fathers show much intimate affection as Aphrahat in his delightful midrash on the story of Daniel, or Ephrem in his devotion to Noah as the father of those who live in chastity.

¹ See R. Murray, "Recent Studies in Early Symbolic Theology" H.J. v.6 (1965), p.421.

² R. Murray, Symbols, pp.49ff.

³ Ibid.

When Aphrahat tells an Old Testament story such as that of Esther, Mordecai and Haman, he completely identifies himself with God's people."⁴

This intimacy between the Old and New Covenants is what has colored so brilliantly the Syriac Church's understanding of herself and her Lord. The Syriac Church saw herself simply as the next stage in the process of history which began in symbols and types in the Hebrew "nation". Its realities and fulfilment are found in the Church "of the Nations", and it awaits its Lord for the fullness.

Murray quotes the following stanza from Hymn 5 of Ephrem's "Hymns on Unleavened Bread":

"The type was in Egypt, the reality in the Church
the sealing of the reward (will be) in the Kingdom."⁵

This perfectly sums up Ephrem's view of the Church's position in history, says Murray; and he writes:

"God's choice of Israel, therefore, is not complete in itself but is a movement in history, pointing towards fulfillment; and this is true of all its institutions -- circumcision and the Covenant, the Passover, the priesthood and its sacrifices, the kingship and the assembly or 'synagogue'."⁶

All that was part of the Hebrew nation was to be fulfilled in the Church, nothing lost, and nothing abandoned or left in "type" form without "anti-type" fulfillment in the New Covenant.

The Syriac Church saw herself as the "Church of the Nations", to which the Hebrew Scriptures made reference. Aphrahat quotes Dt. 32:21

⁴ Murray, Symbols, pp.49ff.

⁵ Ibid., p.53

⁶ Ibid., p.50

"They have provoked me with their idols and have angered me with their worship. and I too will anger them with a 'nation not a nation' and with a foolish 'nation' I will provoke them." ⁷

With this text Aphrahat summarizes the way the Church sees herself in continuity with God's plan. Foolish as she is (I Cor. 1:18-25), she is responsible for gathering all the nations -- the Hebrew included -- into God's house. He says to his Jewish interlocutor:

"Now I ask you, you learned controversialist of the Nation (Israel) who do not penetrate the words of the Law: show me, when was this fulfilled, that God provoked the Nation with a nation that was no nation, and angered them with a foolish nation? But if you are provoked by the Nation from the Nations (the Church of the Gentiles), you are yourself fulfilling the word of the Scripture which Moses long ago expressed for you in the Book." ⁸

What this means is that all that was foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures comes to fruition only in the Church. This point is well attested to in all the theology of the Syriac Fathers, as well as in the liturgical traditions which find their inspiration therein. The Maronite Divine Office for Holy Week describes how the shadowy symbols of the Jewish Nation find completion only in the Church:

"O Jews, your house is left without priesthood
kingship and prophecy." ⁹

These are harsh words dealt to the Jewish people, but they basically express the belief of the Syriac Church, that without Christ it is impossible to see the fullest meaning of all that went before Him.

⁷ Quote from Murray, Symbols, p.56.

⁸ Ibid., p.56; from Demonstration (hereafter Dem.) XII, PS 509.27-512.9.

⁹ Refrain taken from the "Booths" of the Office for Holy Week, Hacheh (Jounieh, Lebanon, 1902).

Another liturgical hymn, taken from the ordination ritual of a priest in the Maronite Tradition, points out the belief that all history was preparing for the coming of Christ and His Church:

"Alleluia!

Moses went up Mount Sinai, saw through divine majesty and clothed himself in it. He brought back with him models and types he envisioned for the Church of the First-Born."¹⁰

These bear witness to the fact that the early Syriac Church saw herself as the legitimate, foretold heir to all that the Hebrew Nation possessed --and would possess if only they would see(John 9:40-41).

In fact, the Didascalia Apostolorum and Aphrahat following suite, saw such a great unity between Old and New Covenants that the "laws" which cause Jews to reject Christ were seen as inconsistent with the Divine Law -- the Law which was given to Moses. The "laws" called by the Didascalia the "Second Legislation" were to serve Israel only to keep her from idol worship. They were given to Moses after the Ten Commandments. These "laws" were mainly concerned with ceremonial washings and other rites which separated Israel from all that is unclean, that is, from all non-Israelites. In the advent of Christ the "Life-Giver",¹¹ the real Law, that is the Law of God, is re-established in its entirety, not one letter has passed away. That is to say that all that was true in the Old Testament Law remains in the advent of Christ. This

¹⁰ Hymn sung in simple chant during the three processions of the priest with the incense, the book of the gospels, and the Eucharist. It can be found in Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium, p.160.

¹¹ The name for Jesus, "Life-Giver" is used often by Aphrahat and the early Syriac Christians. It may be a deliberate contrasting of Jesus with Moses the "Law-Giver". The law brings death but Jesus brings life. This is my own hypothesis; see Murray in Symbols, p.55.

B. THE ORDER OF PRIESTHOOD OF WHICH THE CHURCH IS THE STEWARD

For the Syriac Church, the order (tâkkâsa) of priesthood¹³ was kept intact by Christ's acceptance of baptism at the hands of the priest John the Baptist. In his Hymns for the Feast of Epiphany, St. Ephrem tells the story of the handing on of priesthood by presenting a dialogue between Jesus and John at the Jordan.

Jesus: "It is meet that you should baptize Me, that none may err and say concerning Me, --'Had He not been alien from the Father's house, why feared the Levite to baptize Him?'

John: The prayer, then, when Thou art baptized, how shall I complete over the Jordan? When the Father and the Spirit are seen over Thee, whom shall I call on, as priest?

Jesus: The prayer in silence is to be completed: 'Come, thy hand alone lay thou on Me. And the Father shall utter in the priest's stead, that which is meet concerning His Son.'¹⁴

This integral passing on of the order of priesthood also finds expression in Aphrahat¹⁵ before the time of Ephrem, and in the Syrian liturgical tradition after Ephrem.¹⁶ It is most peculiar and unique to the Syriac Church. The priesthood which Christ took up into Himself was then given out to the Church, as Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the Syrian liturgical texts testify. The types and prefigurements of the Old Testament priesthood were to be fulfilled in the priests of the New Covenant.

¹⁴ J.B. Morris, Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers hereafter SINPNF) v.13 (Oxford, 1898), Hymn no. 14, vv.40-42.

¹⁵ At the hands of John: Cf. PS 964-65; also see J. Lecuyer, "Le Sens des rites d'ordination d'après les Pères" Or Syr v.5 (1960), pp.466-7.

¹⁶ Cf. Breydy, Le Concept, p.67. B. gives a number of references. The Ordination Ritual has a "Qolo" which refers to this; see P. Aschgar, Mémoires liturgiques syro-maronites (Jounieh, Lebanon, 1939), p.175. Also see Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium, p.155, and Voste, Pontificale, p.146.

As we have said above, for the "Persian Sage" Aphrahat, and for the "Harp of the Spirit" Ephrem, Christ was constituted priest at the hands of the priest John the Baptist. Murray says that "this interpretation of Christ's anointing(at the Jordan)is foreign to the New Testament and would surely have been strenuously rejected by Paul as well as the author of Hebrews."¹⁷ Perhaps this may have been true, but without this wonderful poetical play on types and antitypes we would not understand what is at work here: the linking of traditional and charismatic elements in Christ's priesthood.

Christ wills not to disturb the "order" of what came before Him. However, in His very person He is beyond all Jewish symbolic and ritualistic attempts to comprehend Him. Hence, the traditional elements of Christ's priesthood¹⁸ are found in the passing on of the order of priesthood at the hands of the priest John. The charismatic elements are found in the fact that many other ways of passing on this order of priesthood are given by poets such as St. Ephrem.

¹⁷ Murray, Symbols, p.179.

¹⁸ For a treatment on priesthood in both covenants see the following: A. Gelin, "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistles to the Hebrews" The Sacrament of Order, B. Botte, ed.,(N.Y., 1962); A. Cody, Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy in the Epistle to the Hebrews (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Grail Publications, 1960); B. Ahern, course taught at Instituto di Spiritualità, Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana (Rome, 1982-83), Letter to the Hebrews; B.S. Eaton, "Jewish and Early Christian Ordination" ATR v.5, v.6 (1922, 23-24), pp.308-19 and pp.285-95; R. Brown, Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1970); and especially A. Vanhoye, Prêtres anciens prêtres nouveaux selon le Nouveau Testament (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980) Parole de Dieu n. 20; also see the review by A. Cody in Bib v.63 (1982), pp.587-89 of Vanhoye's work.

Murray points out that for St. Ephrem, Simeon also communicated the priesthood to Christ.¹⁹ Christ's priesthood was also inherited from the order of Melchizedek; and, as we have seen, John the Baptist passed on the priesthood to Christ. These different modes in which the priesthood was conferred on Christ are not to be considered as inconsistent. They consistently say one thing: Christ's priesthood was a new mode of priesthood. Yet at the same time all that was true of priesthood in the Old Testament was also true of Christ.

In the continuity between the priesthood of the Old and New Covenants, nothing is lost. The echoes of old have become clear sounds in Christ. Nothing from the "Nation" (as the Old Testament people are called) is left unfulfilled in the "Church of the Nations" (as the Church of Christ is called). Here is expressed also the freedom that the Syriac Fathers took to consistently see circumcision as the forerunner of Christian baptism,²⁰ Passover as the prefigurement of Eucharist,²¹ and other Old

¹⁹ Murray, Symbols, p. 179. Simeon, was also regarded as a priest.

²⁰ Ibid., pp.50-52; Aphrahat PS 50l.6-10; also see Isaac of Antioch. (an early Syriac Father in the same line as Ephrem and Aphrahat) in a homily attributed to him called "Homily against the Jews", S. Kazan, ed. OC v.45 (1961), pp.30-53. The Maronite liturgy for the Circumcision of Our Lord (Jan. 1) types circumcision with baptism, see Fenqito (Diocese of St. Maron USA) "From Abraham, circumcision had been the sign of your people. Now in its place, You have established holy baptism. You made faith the sign and seal of Your Covenant with us."

²¹ See Murray, Symbols, p.53. Aphrahat types Passover and Eucharist in this way: All has been fulfilled, and every detail of the Passover has pointed to the 'reality'. The Passover was to be eaten in only one house (Ex. 12:46); the "one house is the Church of God" (PS 525.8). All is fulfilled in the "offering(qurbono) which ascends in the Church of God" (PS 525.18). These typings occur in Ephrem as well, see especially his "Hymns on Unleavened Bread" nn. 3 and 5.

Testament symbols as types of New Covenant realities.²² All that previously belonged to the "Nation", i.e. the priesthood, the sanctuary, and the offering of sacrifice to God, now belongs to the "Church of the Nations" who completes them through, with and in Christ.

The Syriac Father often emphasized Colossians 1:15-20 which speaks of all things being made through and with Christ (also see Jn. 1:1). They also saw Hebrews 1:1 as evidence that all things in nature and in Scripture were leading up to, and indeed, existed in order to reveal the Beloved Son of the Father. It was thus that they could say that the Old Testament priests served to prefigure Christ and to reflect something of His priesthood. The Syriac liturgical texts refer to Christ not only as being pre-figured in the offerings of the Old Testament, but as accepting and establishing them as well.

A Maronite prayer of incense (Sedro) has been published by M. Breydy, who believes that it may be of the fifth or sixth century. This prayer expresses the central role of Christ.

"It is You Lord (Jesus) that our weakness call on in this moment: because it is You alone who are our Lord, any other we do not recognize. It is to You that Abel constructed an altar, and raised up the offerings (victims). It is to Your Name that he offered the first fruits of the muttons and their lambs, the largest ones. The offering of Noah the Just, it is by You that it had been accepted, and You had been hidden in Your Hidden Father when You accepted it. In a great likeness Melchizedek had vested himself when he offered his oblation; for therein was the image of Your Pontificate which in spirit he realized by his sacrifice.

²² In order to come to terms with the process of the Syriac Church wherein she separated from and identified with the Hebrew Nation, a close look at the following would be helpful: the use of the words "Hoosoyo", "Qurbono", "Fenqitho" in the liturgy; the appellations of "Temple", "Holy of Holies", and "Bema" for liturgical appointments in the church building; and the introduction of the use of incense.

It is to You that Abraham had constructed an altar upon the mountain and it is by you that young Isaac had been delivered from the knife. It is by Your hands that sanctity had been accorded to the sons of Levi; and it is for You that they offer their tithes. It is to You that Jacob made a vow when he fled, and to You he offered all the tithes when You made him rich. To You and to Your Father every offering has been offered; for it is You who with Your Father accept the tithes. The cherubim bless you and tremble and they carry Your yoke around their necks. To You and to Your Father are raised the victims and the oblations, and it is to You that every offering is made from the beginning of the world. You infused holiness to the offerings and to those who made the offerings and it is by You that the priests receive the Spirit for their sacred duties. You hover over the victims with Your Father, for Your essence is hidden to creatures and it is not disclosed. It is Your Spirit which the High Priest invokes in every moment, descending towards them always without hesitation. . . . By Your Spirit the word of the priests becomes a key which opens the door and which calls Your Spirit, which descends to this call without hesitating. By this Spirit You mingle in the simple bread and it becomes (Your) Body and by this descent the mixture in the chalice becomes (Your) Blood. That Your Holy Spirit may come, Lord, and sanctify for us this bread and this wine and deliver us from our sins and also that the pontiffs may be as the seraphim in their sacred action and that they may cry out with them: Holy, holy, holy are You Lord! And now, Lord, may this sacrifice be accepted by You, presented as it is by us sinners to Your Divinity." ²³

Since it is in and for Christ that the priesthood is entrusted, Christ may do with it as He sees fit. He thus took it back to Himself and re-entrusted it to those more diligent in its care. Concerning priesthood Old and New the Maronite Office prays:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ is the source of divinity of those who are divinized and it is He that divinizes and sanctifies those who are priests of the perfection.

²³ This is my own English adaptation of the French translation of Breydy in Le Concept, pp.59-60 and Appendix. It was taken from an ancient manuscript on the Maronite Liturgy conserved at the National Library of Munich (Syriac 5); this manuscript is listed in the "Sources" in Gemeyal's Avant Messe.

It is He who adorns the priests and who completes the pontiffs. It is He who chose for Himself, from among mortals, priests to whom He confided the administration of the treasure of His kingdom and placed in their hands the keys to this treasure so that they may distribute His treasure to those in need."²⁴

And again:

"By You, O Lord, has the priesthood of the sons of Levi been terminated, because You, O Lord, are the source of priesthood."²⁵

The Syriac Tradition, and especially the Maronite liturgical tradition saw the "priesthood" as something belonging by nature to mankind, and hence worthy of being handed on in an unbroken lineage. Hence, Adam and his sons were seen as the first priests,²⁶ and the Hebrew Tradition perpetuated this order. This theme cannot be taken lightly as Breydy says. It shows a real understanding of the importance of the mediation in the earthly and tangible realms of the mercy of God in the heavenly realms. The priesthood is so important that a Maronite prayer calls upon St. Paul to rise up to protect its integrity:

"Rise up O Paul, foundation of the Church, because men are about to corrupt your doctrine. . . the priesthood, upon which you so much insisted, behold it is now trampled under foot."²⁷

Therefore, Christian priesthood, according to the Syriac Fathers is to be placed in this context of the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and also in the context of the person of Christ as the clear symbol of all that went before Him.

²⁴ Breydy, Le Concept, p.61; taken from the Sedro of the Third Station of Friday from the Ferial Office.

²⁵ Hacheh. Second Station of Thursday, the hymn according to the meter of St. Ephrem (Ephremcyto); Cf. Breydy, op.cit., p.61

²⁶ Ibid., pp.62ff.

²⁷ Ibid., p.69; taken from Tonus Princeps, "Com Phaulos"; I was unable to find where this hymn is found in the liturgical sources.

C. SYRIAC CHRISTOLOGY

But who is this Christ who gives priesthood and sanctity? This is the key to understanding all of Syriac theology; thus, we discuss it here. One answer is strikingly unanimous among the Syriac Fathers. It cuts across all lines of denominations, geography, time, and theological school. It is that Christ is the Humble One. Humility was the supreme virtue of the Son. It was the way of love, the highest of all ways. Isaac of Nineveh writes:

"I desire to open my mouth, my brethren, to speak on the elevated place of humility; but I am filled with fear, as a man who is conscious of the fact that he will speak concerning God in a tale of his own speech. For humility is the garment of divinity; for the word which became man, put it on and spoke in it with us, through our body. And everyone who puts it on in truth, by humility takes the likeness of Him that has descended from His height and concealed the splendor of his majesty and hidden His glory lest the creation should perish in sight of Him."²⁸

And again:

"Humility is a mysterious power, which the perfect saints receive when they have reached accomplishment of behaviour. And this power is not granted except to those who, by the power of grace, have personally accomplished the whole of excellence, in so far as nature in its domain is able to do this. For humility is all-comprehending excellence."²⁹

The Syriac Fathers saw in the humility of the Son the true nature of the Father. Not that humility is the nature of the Father; "compassion" is. But compassion is far beyond our reach as humans. We can only hope to acquire the gift of humility in imitation of the Son.

²⁸ Isaac of Nineveh, Mystic Treatises, A.J. Wensinck, trans. (Weisbaden: Sandig, 1969) p.384.

²⁹ Ibid., p.387.

The "kenosis", self-emptying of God, as described in the Philippian hymn (2:5-10) was taken literally, metaphysically, ontologically, and in every other way of truth as the revealing of the inner nature of God the Hidden One. For Christ was the exact representation of His nature, as the letter to the Hebrews says (1:3). This is probably why paradox was the best possible means to express the awe which the Syriac Fathers experienced when reflecting on the God of the universe Who chose to love the world in such a way that He would accept even the most base treatment dealt to Him by His people, death on a cross.³⁰

This use of paradox to describe the awe hidden in the humble God is well expressed in the following Maronite hymn addressing Mary:

"Hail Mary who in your virginity became the Mother of the Creator. . . Blessed are you, Mary, in whose womb dwelled in holiness the Only Begotten Son, Who is One in Nature and in Splendor with the Father. Blessed are you Mary, who nursed with the milk of your breasts the Provider, Who nourishes all creatures. Blessed are you, O Mary, who carried in your arms the Son of the Most High, whom the heavenly powers bear aloft."³¹

This is the "wisdom of God" which St. Paul spoke about in such lofty terms (I Cor. 1:18-25). This is the insight which took hold of the hearts of the Syriac Fathers and obsessed them until it brought them to adore and "worship in humility" (see the Maronite opening prayer).³²

³⁰ See S. Brock, Harp of the Spirit, Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1975, Intro., p.14: "only the paradox that can describe the indescribable, and St. Ephrem could very aptly be called 'the poet of the Christian paradox'."

³¹ Taken from the Maronite Lectionary, in the appendix of the Season of Epiphany: "Yoqoboyo for the Blessed Mother."

³² "May we be worthy to know at Your door with confidence, to enter Your house with diligence, and to worship You with humility": the opening prayer of the Maronite Liturgy; cf. Lectionary, Season of Ordinary Time.

The thought pattern is a combination of the self-emptying theme in the Philippian hymn, and the doxological verses of Colossians 1:15-20 proclaiming that all was made through Christ. In these two texts lies the heart of Syriac Christology, which finds its most subtle expression in the theme of 'glorification-crucifixion' in St. John's Gospel.

The indicative leads to the imperative, that is, the way of Christ leads to our way; that which is true of His life is imperative for ours if we are to follow Him. Therefore, humility is the way for the Christian as well. This is biblical truth, known before it was shown to us in Christ. Isaiah speaks of humility as the presupposed disposition of one in whom God chooses to dwell:

"Thus says the Lord: The heavens are my throne, the earth is my footstool. What kind of house can you build for me? What is to be my resting place? My hand made all these things when all of them came to be, says the Lord. This is the one whom I approve: the lowly and afflicted man who trembles at my word.(66:1-2)

St. Paul tells us just before the Philippian hymn that our minds must be like that of Christ. For the Syriac Fathers the way of the Christian par excellence was the way of humility in imitation of the Master.

Humility for Isaac of Nineveh meant a thorough knowing of oneself, and thus a heart-felt realization of one's brokenness and alienation from God.³³ This is mended by continual conversion towards Him. Humility allows one to receive the full graces of God, His offer of forgiveness and the ensuing peace in one's relationship with Him.

³³ See D. Lichter, "Tears and Contemplation in Isaac of Nineveh" Diakonia v.11 (1976) pp.239-58.

The emphasis in the Syriac Tradition on the humility of Jesus led to the emphasis on humility in the life of the Christian as well. This guides the nature and mission of the Church. In turn, the nature and mission of the Church determines the role and place of priesthood.

D. SYMBOLS IN SYRIAC THEOLOGY

It is fitting here to discuss briefly the function of 'symbols' in Syriac theology because the relationship between Christ and His Church is often described in 'symbolic' terms.

A symbol reveals and conceals, it speaks and is silent, it participates and makes present. It is and is not what it represents, not being an end in itself, but pointing to something else. It elicits an interior response, and its absence would elicit no response. A symbol is of utmost importance, and of no importance at the same time.

No symbol, however, merely signifies its corresponding reality; that would be more the function of a 'sign'. A symbol activates and engages. It requires a certain 'activity' as well as 'passivity'. It must 'do' certain things in order to activate and make present that which it reflects.

All of creation is symbolic according to the Syriac Fathers. In this context the Mysteries and the ministerial orders in the Church are symbols of God's working in His Church. They all become symbols of that which Christ Himself is doing in His Church.

¹⁵ The "symbolic" theology of the Syriac Church is one of the lasting treasures this Church has bequeathed us. See S. Brock, "World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syriac Fathers" Sob v.6.10 (1974) pp.685-96. Also, G.F. Noujaim has written a doctoral dissertation on the symbology of St. Ephrem, concentrating on his words for "hidden" and "revealed": Anthropologie et Economie de Salut chez Saint Ephrem, auteur des notions de "Ghalyata", "Kasyata" et "Kaysa" (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1980).

E. ECCLESIAL MANIFESTATIONS OF FORGIVENESS IN THE SYRIAC CHURCH

There are many ways in which this reality finds expression in the Church. The most noteworthy are as follows:

- Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday liturgical themes
- The Use of Incense
- The Prayers of Incense common to the Syriac Church called "Hoosoyo"
- The Emphasis on "Penthos" and Tears in Compunction and Conversion
- The Early Prayers of Forgiveness (Absolution)
- A Special Maronite Rite of Forgiveness at the Wedding Ceremony
- The Sacraments for the Forgiveness of Sins: Eucharist and Baptism

These are discussed briefly below. The Eucharist, because of its direct and integral connection with the priesthood, will be discussed in a separate chapter.

I. HOLY SATURDAY AND EASTER SUNDAY THEMES

A. Mouhanna has studied the Maronite service of Holy Saturday, called the "Service of Forgiveness".³⁴ He has found that it is common to all the Traditions which take their inspiration from the early Syriac Church.³⁵ In this rite, reconciliation is made among Christians, between Christians and the Church, and between Christians and God. At the end of this service, the Easter proclamation is made "Christ is risen, He is truly risen!"

In anticipation of the day of His rising Christ is proclaimed risen by the peace which is established on earth because of His forgiveness of

³⁴ A. Mouhanna, "Le Rite du pardon dans l'Eglise Maronite" Par O nos.6-7 (1975-76) pp.309-24.

³⁵ On the Chaldean (E. Syrian) corresponding rite see J. Isaac, Taksa d-Husayya ou Le Rite Chaldéen d'Absolution, unedited doctoral thesis, presented at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome 1970.

sins. Easter Sunday crystalizes this theme by centering on the theme of "peace". In fact, the ceremony itself is called the "Ceremony of Peace".

The Hoosoyo of that day prays:

"You have saved the world from the scourge of sin
and reconciled our weak natures to Your Father and
Holy Spirit. May Your Peace now reign among us
and dwell within us."³⁶

Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday are the most important feasts of the year, and their emphasis on reconciliation and peace reflect the importance of this theme of forgiveness in the Syriac Church.

II. THE USE OF INCENSE

The use of incense by the Syriac Church was associated perhaps from the beginning with the forgiveness of sins. St. Ephrem writes of Bishop Abraham of Nisibis:

"Thy fasts are a defense to our land
Thy prayer a shield to our city;
Thy burning of incense is our propitiation;
Praised be God, Who has hallowed thine offering."³⁷

It was a Hebrew practice to burn incense for propitiation (Cf. Numbers 16:46-47). Most likely the Syriac Christians adopted this practice with their own Christological interpretations.³⁸ The use of incense became part of the evening and morning offices of the Church as these offices became increasingly penitential in nature.³⁹ The first hint for the use

³⁶ Maronite Lectionary, Sedro of Easter Sunday.

³⁷ Carmina Nisibena 17:37, quoted by P. Bradshaw, Daily Prayer in the Early Church (London: Alcuin Club by S.P.C.K., 1981) p.76. Hereafter, all references to Carmina Nisibena (C Nis) will refer to the edition by Beck in I CSCO 218-19, Syr. 92-3 (1961); and II CSCO 240-1, Syr. 102-3 (1963).

³⁸ Christ, our forgiveness, is "the pleasing aroma" we make to the Father. This is a common theme in the prayers of incense.

³⁹ See Bradshaw, Daily Prayer, p.76. Also G. Winkler, "Aspect Pénitential dans les offices du soir" Liturgie et Rémission des péchés, Conférences St. Serge (1973) (Roma:Edizioni Liturgiche, 1975) Biblioteca, El Subsidia n.3.

of incense in the offices in this manner is found in Syria from Theodoret of Cyr (453) who seems to mention its use both in the celebration of the Eucharist and elsewhere.⁴⁰

A review of the prayers which accompany the use of incense in the Syriac Churches clarify their orientation towards the forgiveness of sins.⁴¹ One such prayer of incense in the Maronite Liturgy prays:

"As Your priest Aaron offered You incense and You removed corruption from Your People, we offer You this incense, O Lord, for the forgiveness of our sins and faults and as a remembrance of those who have asked us to pray for them."⁴²

It came about then, that every time the Christian community gathered for the Office, incense as petition for forgiveness was offered.

III. PRAYERS OF FORGIVENESS

The development of the poetical prayer of forgiveness which is prayed before the Scripture readings in the Office, the Eucharist, and the Mysteries, is particularly Syriac. Neither the Greek nor the Latin Traditions of the Church have a corresponding rite.⁴³ This prayer is called in Syriac, "hûssâyâ" which means "forgiveness". It is one of many Syriac words which are pregnant with meaning. Ephrem uses it to mean forgiveness or divine mercy.⁴⁴ It is used to translate the Hebrew word

⁴⁰ See Bradshaw, Daily Prayer, p.77.

⁴¹ J. Theklparampil, "Prayers after Incense" Par O nos.6-7 (1975-76) pp.325-40.

⁴² Lectionary, Sedro in Ordinary Time.

⁴³ See G. Khouri-Sarkis, "Le Sedro dans l'Eglise Syrienne d'Antioche" Or Syr v.1 (1956) pp.88-96.

⁴⁴ See R. Murray, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ" Sob v.1 (1979)p.45.

for the "mercy seat" of the Holy of Holies in the Temple.⁴⁵ It is also the word used to describe the purification of objects, and the justification of penitents as well.⁴⁶ Its most common use in the Syriac Church is to designate the prayer of incense before the Scripture readings.

The heart of the theology of the Syriac Church is found in these catechetical and poetical prayers. They express a full theology and anthropology, and they are situated in the context of almost every liturgy in the Syriac Tradition. They remind the praying assembly of the important inner attitude towards prayer: conversion towards the Holy God. A careful study of these prayers would allow one into the secret chambers of liturgical composition.⁴⁷ For our purposes, however, let us be content to stress their consistent penitential nature, and their constant attempts at paradox and typology to express the abundant mercy of God towards His people.

IV. PENTHOS AND THE GIFT OF TEARS

Fr. Hausherr, in his book entitled Penthos, surveys the disposition of compunction in the early Fathers of the Church.⁴⁸ He stresses repeatedly the importance of this inner attitude in the Fathers of the Syriac Church. He is constantly quoting St. Ephrem in this regard. Isaac of

⁴⁵ See the Introduction to the Maronite Lectionary, written by the translator and editor J. Amar.

⁴⁶ J. Mateos, "Prières syriennes d'absolution du VII-IX siècles" OCP v.36 (1968) p.255.

⁴⁷ Mateo's work on the Syriac Office and on the above mentioned prayers of absolution would be a good solid ground to begin. A familiarity with the different liturgical books employed by the Church would be essential. For this one may have access to Gemayel's work Avant Messe, or M. Hayek, Liturgie Maronite (Paris: Mame, 1963) or to the notes of J. Amar, translator of the Fenqitho and Lectionary.

⁴⁸ I. Hausherr, Penthos, The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East, A. Hufstader, trans. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1982).

Nineveh, another Syrian ascetic of the seventh century, is also a major source for the doctrine of tears in compunction.⁴⁹ Archbishop Francis M. Zayek has written in his work on Blessed Rafka the Lebanese mystic, that the disposition of compunction, visibly manifested by the gift of tears, is one of the four pillars of the spirituality of the Syro-Maronite Church. He writes:

"The Maronite Office compares the socket of the eye to a baptismal font. The Liturgy remembers the spiritual fathers who shed many tears for their salvation and the salvation of the world. . . . One must pray continually to receive this gift which alone is proof that man has reached a new level of understanding himself in relation to God, and to the rest of the world around him."⁵⁰

Isaac of Nineveh says:

"So long as you have not reached the realm of tears, that which is hidden within you, you still serve the world, that is, you still lead a worldly life and do the work of God only with your outer man, while the inner man is barren, for his fruit begins with tears."⁵¹

As baptism forgives our sins completely and re-establishes us in relationship with God, so does the gift of tears according to Ephrem.⁵²

⁴⁹ Isaac the Syrian, "Directions on Spiritual Training" in Early Fathers from the Philokalia, E. Kadloubovsky and G. Palmer, trans., (London: Faber and Faber, 1954); and Isaac of Nineveh, Mystic Treatises, A.J. Wensinck, trans. (Weisbaden: Sandig, 1969).

⁵⁰ F. M. Zayek, Rafka, The Blind Mystic of Lebanon (Still River: St. Bede's Publications, 1980) p.6.

⁵¹ Found in Dobrotolubie, the Slavonic translation of the Philokalia, Bishop Theophane the Recluse, ed., T. II (Moscow, 1884; ed. 2) n.219, pp.775-76. Quoted in G. Maloney, Inward Stillness (Denville: Dimension Books, 1976) p.112.

⁵² Hausherr, Penthos, p.130; he mentions also Jacob of Sarugh.

The Syriac Fathers spoke of the heart in terms of the inner church, the inner altar, in which the Lord dwells and is offered.⁵³ The purification of this inner church comes through cleansing with the tears of repentance.

V. PRAYERS OF FORGIVENESS (ABSOLUTION)

J. Mateos, in his work on the Syriac Divine Offices has edited and published many prayers of forgiveness. Some have their part in the communal prayer of the Church,⁵⁴ others seem to be the first prayers of absolution in the Syriac Church.⁵⁵ They are called "prayers of forgiveness", as we have seen, hūssāyâ. These prayers are to be found in what Mateos calls the vade-mecum of the priest, the Fenqitho, which in Syriac means "treasure chest."

These prayers published by Mateos, which range from the sixth to the eleventh century, illustrate beautifully the priest's role as a fellow sinner interceding for the penitent through his prayers. The following is an example of a prayer to be prayed over one who has grievously offended God.

⁵³ Murray, in Symbols, treats of this rather thoroughly in the hymns of Balai and in the Liber Graduum, see p.264. This doctrine of the "inner church" of the heart also comes up in Spiritual writers, see S. Brock "The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition" Sob v.4 n.2 (1982) pp.131-42.

⁵⁴ J. Mateos, "Les matines chaldéennes, maronites et syriennes" OCP v.26 (1960) pp.51-73; "Les strophes de la nuit dans l'invitatoire du nocturne Syrien, in: Mémorial Msgr. G. Khouri-Sarkis (Louvain, 1969) pp.71-81; "L'invitatoire du nocturne chez les Syriens et les maronites" Or Syr v.11 (1964) pp.353-366; "Prières initiales fixés des offices syrien, maronite et byzantin" Or Syr v.11 (1966) pp.488-98; "'Sedre' et prières connexes dans quelques anciennes collections" OCP v.28 (1962) pp.239-87; "Une collection syrienne de 'prères entre les marmyata'" OCPv.31 (1965) pp.53-75 and 305-35.

⁵⁵ J. Mateos, "Prières syriennes d'absolution du VII-IX siècles" OCP v.36 (1968) pp.252-80.

"Lord God Omnipotent, Light of our minds, Absolver of our sins, Knower of our smallest faults,(a) a Remitter of our debts and Sanctifier of our impurities. . . by Your mercy listen to our prayers and accept our supplication as You are accustomed to do in Your great kindness. . . .

Do not withdraw Yourself from our midst when we enter into judgement(b) because all of us have sinned . . . This poor one n., O Lord, has slipped into the slip of death(c) and fallen voluntarily or involuntarily; accordingly he is with a bitter soul, and he has held in contempt and transgressed(d) concerning the word(e) of God which had been enjoined upon him by the mouth of the priest.(f) Proper to You alone, O Lord, are mercy and forgiveness towards him; so that if he trusts(g) he may be rescued(h) from his transgression by my weak prayer.(i)

Therefore, mercifully accept, O Lord, our supplication for him and make to hover upon him Your Living Holy Spirit, which according to the power you have given us, is bestowed each time we petition. And so we will give thanks and we shall glorify Your Holy Name, our Lord God forever. Amen." 56

In the composition of these prayers of absolution, the theme of intercession of Christ is central. The priest prays that God will not enter into judgement with His servant (cf. Ps. 143:2), but that the mercy of Christ will temper His justice. It is always the intercession of Christ that is central, the priest prays in faith and in trust. This is

⁵⁶ Mateos, "Prières, syrienne d'absolution du VII-IX siècle" OCP p.262, translated by M. Mattathil from the Syriac.

- (a) The sense is "even the smallest marks of sin".
- (b) Jesus, because He is God and man, will stand with us during the judgement to temper justice with mercy.
- (c) Sin is a "slipping" off the tract, a missing the mark.
- (d) Went beyond his proper limits.
- (e) Decree, command or law.
- (f) The meaning here is dubious. It is a past action, the priest has pronounced in some way the "word" of God and the sinner has transgressed.
- (g) The sinner must trust that his sins will be forgiven him. The promise of Christ is the imperative for the Christian.
- (h) This goes back to the concept of "slipping".
- (i) Both priest and penitent are on the same side both petitioning the Lord for mercy. The priest dares to make the prayer based not so much on his worthiness but on his faith.

the merit of his prayer, and it is faith which merits the forgiveness of the offender. The promise of God to remit sins on earth, based on the text of John 20:23 and Matthew 18:18, is often referred to in the priest's prayer.

A complete and careful study of these prayers, and of their milieu up to the time of the Crusade,⁵⁷ would be a logical sequence to any work on the role of the priest. For it would speak clearly of the specific role of the individual priest in the forgiveness of sins during the formative stage of the lived tradition of the Syriac Church. Early in the history of the Syriac Church, during the fifth and sixth centuries, the priest was increasingly seen as that person to whom sinners would entreat God for forgiveness. The priest's role was that of fellow sinner yet faithfully trusting the promises of God to show this mercy.

VI. MARRIAGE RITE FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS OF THE BRIDE

Denzinger has preserved for us a remarkable little ritual which has fallen into disuse.⁵⁸ This ritual brings out the emphasis placed by the Maronite Fathers on the opportuneness of requesting the forgiveness of

⁵⁷ We say, "before the Crusades" meaning, before Latin influence. There was an ancient West Syrian tradition of some sort of penance, confession and absolution (though not all part of one sequence as we have in the Latin Tradition) which existed in the early formative tradition, fifth to eighth century. This practice ceased until its revival in the twelfth century by Bar Salibi; see B. Gogan, "Penance Rites of the West Syrian Liturgy: Some Liturgical and Theological Implications" ITQ v.42 (1975) pp.182-96. Also see J. M. Voste, "La Confession chez les Nestoriens" Angelicum v.7 (1930) pp.17-20; W. de Vries, Sakramententheologie bei den Syrischen Monophysiten (Roma, 1940) pp.181-87; also see A. Vööbis, The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition, 2 vols. (CSCO, 1975) esp. the codes for priestly ministry.

⁵⁸ H. Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium in Administrandis Sacramentis 2 in 8 (Wirceburgi, 1865).

sins in every prayer context.⁵⁹ This ritual takes place in the ceremony of Marriage. In imitation of the sinful woman who anointed the feet of Jesus and by her love was forgiven her sins, the bride to be also anoints the feet of Jesus in the person of the groom, that she might receive the forgiveness of her sins.

These examples of the emphasis placed on forgiveness in the Syriac Church, especially our last example, express a basic orientation of the Syriac Christian towards life, towards that communion with God which begins with the forgiveness of sins.

VII. BAPTISM

Baptism is the mystery ordered specifically to forgive sins. In this mystery the entire message of Christ is summarized: "I came that they might have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10) But how may they have this full life? How may they be completely restored to relationship with God? What has impeded this full restoration? Sin. It was sin that disfigured the divine image within us; it was sin that encumbered us and we were unable to rid ourselves of it. Neither in the priesthood alone, as the author of Hebrews tells us, nor only by the works of the law, as St. Paul tells us (Rom.4). It is only in Christ that this communion is given, that we are justified, made right with the Father.

Baptism is the entrance into this communion with God. When St. Peter filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke to those gathered in Jerusalem for the

⁵⁹ See R. Murray, "A Special Sense of 'slôtâ' as Absolution or Readmission" OCP v.32 (1966) pp.523-27. Murray points out that when one is invited to "prayer" a right relationship with God is assumed. It may be a basic assumption regarding prayer that true prayer can only take place when one is reconciled or in the process of reconciliation with God.

Jewish feast of Pentecost, he links baptism to forgiveness of sins.

"When they heard this, they were deeply shaken. They asked Peter and the other apostles, 'What are we to do, brothers?' Peter answered: 'You must reform and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven.' (Acts 2:37-38)

Baptism places in order one's relationship with the God of Jesus Christ in the gratuitous and unmerited offer of divine forgiveness.

Aphrahat, types baptism with the circumcision of Abraham's covenant, as the sign of belonging to God's chosen group. He sees the forgiveness of sins as that which warrants this new relationship with God and hence all grace. He writes: "For our God is faithful and his covenants are exceedingly trustworthy, and every covenant in its time was sure and found true; and those who were circumcised in their hearts have life and are circumcised a second time by the true Jordan, the baptism or remission of sins."⁶⁰

Baptism was the "seal"⁶¹ of the Christians, the "seal" of the blood on the doors of the Hebrew households marked them as a redeemed people. One of the three prayers of peace in the Maronite Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles prays:

"King of kings and Lord of lords, extend Your blessings upon Your sheep purchased by Your blood, make Your seal to glow on their foreheads so that all may know that we are redeemed and hope in You for salvation."⁶²

⁶⁰ Murray, Symbols, p.51; P.S. 501. 6-10.

⁶¹ Actually the anointing before baptism was the "sealing" of the Christian, but these two mysteries are as united as the "choosing" and the "forgiving" aspects of Christian initiation are in the Syriac world. The choosing is the anointing before baptism, which according to G. Winkler made up the central part of baptism, see "The Original Meaning of the Pre-Baptismal Anointing and its Implications" *Wor* v.52 (1978) p.37. This "sealing" was the giving of the Holy Spirit, proof of divine choice: cf. the anointing of David and the giving of the Holy Spirit in I Samuel 16.

⁶² A. Raes et al. *Anaphorae Syriacae* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1939), S. Beggiani, trans.

The Syriac Fathers spoke of the "robe of glory" given once again to the children of Adam and Eve, through Baptism. Jewish legend had it that Adam and Eve had been clothed (in their "nakedness") in paradise with this "robe of glory", but had lost it at the Fall. Isaiah 61:3 refers to it as a "mantle of praise." Ephrem describes man before the Fall as having this "glory" which was lost, yet regained in Baptism. Jacob of Serugh puts it most concisely:

"The robe of glory that was stolen away among the trees of Paradise have I put on in the waters of Baptism."⁶³

The connection between the waters of Baptism and the forgiveness of sins becomes clearer with an understanding of the biblical sense of sin. For this we refer to the Encyclopaedia Judaica:

"The biblical concept of forgiveness presumes, in its oldest strata, that sin is a malefic force that adheres to the sinner and that forgiveness is the divine means of removing it. This is demonstrated by the vocabulary of forgiveness, which, in the main, stems from the cultic terminology of cleansing, e.g. tiher (purify, Jer.33:8); mahah (wipe, Is.43:25); kibbes, rahaz (wash, Is.1:16, Ps.51:4, 9); kipper (purge, Ez.16:63, Ps.78:38). Even the most common verb for forgiveness, salah, probably derives from the Mesopotamian cult where it denotes sprinkling in purification rites. More significantly, the most prominent epithet of God in His role as forgiver is nose', 'avon, het, pesha' (literally, he who lifts off sin; e.g. Ex.34:7, Num.14:18, Hos.14:13, Micah 7:18, Ps.32:5"⁶⁴

The forgiveness of sins in the waters of Baptism prepares one to "put on" the "robe of glory". For no one puts on new clothing without first cleansing. Baptism is the Mystery which enters one into relationship with God, it does this by the complete forgiveness of sins.

⁶⁴ Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972), article on "Forgiveness".

Children who were baptized from early in the Church's history,⁶⁵ also partake of this great mercy of forgiveness. They do this not so much by the washing away of their sins,⁶⁶ as by their sharing in the initiative of the Father to forgive all sins. The practice of infant Baptism places all we have seen in this chapter into proper perspective. It is more the divine initiative of forgiveness rather than our sinfulness which is celebrated in these ecclesial rites. In this perspective we proceed to discuss Qurbono.

⁶⁵ See S. Beggiani, "Theology of Giving the Eucharist to Children in the Antiochene Tradition", unpublished article.

⁶⁶ Too often we center on "original sin" when determining what is "forgiven" in Baptism. This leads to a certain emphasis on sin, where the emphasis is rather on divine initiative.

CHAPTER II :

"QURBONO" AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS

What we have said so far concerning forgiveness can be summed up in the following hymn of St. Ephrem:

"You are the good Treasurer / of your merciful Father
in your hand is the key / to the treasury of his mercy
You open to bring in / the offerings of all men;
you open to bring forth / forgiveness to all men.
Blessed is he who brings / his offering through you
and in exchange receives mercy.

Through you in the Holy of Holies / the Godhead is worshipped.
You offer the sacrifice, / you pour the oblation.
Reject not our sacrifice / for all its blemishes
our sacrifice is our prayer, / tears are our libation.
Blessed is he who offers / his sacrifice through you,
so that through you it is found fragrant!

O purifying Sprinkling / sin-purging Hyssop,
which purged all sin / by baptism in water!
Never could the sprinkling / of all the levites
purge one people's sins; / their hyssop was powerless.
Blessed are the Gentiles / for whom Grace has become a hyssop
and purified them by mercy!

O acceptable Offering / that was made for us!
O Sacrifice self-offered / with power to make holy!
O Libation, superseding / blood of calves and sheep,
O Lamb, which itself became / the Priest who offered!
Blessed is he whose prayer / becomes his incense
to offer through you to the Father!¹

This hymn not only sums up what we have said thus far, but also it serves to introduce this chapter on "Qurbono", the Eucharist.

¹ R. Murray, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ" Sob v.1 (1979) pp.40-41; this hymn is part of a collection of Ephrem's hymns under the title "Hymns on Virginity".

A. EUCHARIST AS OFFERING

"Qurbono"² is the Syriac word translated above as "offering(s)". It comes from the Syriac verb "qrb" which means to offer or "draw near". Literally "qurbono" means that which is offered. Murray writes that "this word is familiar to us in the Palestinian Aramaic form used by Jesus in Mk.7:11; and in the Syriac churches (it is) the common word for the eucharistic sacrifice."³ Qurbono is another of the Syriac words pregnant with meaning. We have seen previously the varied meanings of the word ḥūssāyā,⁴ which is also found above and translated as "forgiveness."⁵ Qurbono can mean "offering" and it can also specifically refer to the Eucharisti offering.

The hymn of Ephrem cited above speaks in general terms of all that we "offer". We "offer" to God and we receive his "forgiveness". What is this "offering"? Although Ephrem does not specifically refer to the offering of the Eucharist his intention may have been that. The first commentator of the West Syrian liturgy (seventh century) refers to the Eucharist simply by the word "Qurbono".⁶ Ephrem does have a conception

² We will use the West Syrian pronunciation of this word which renders "qurbana" as "qurbono".

³ Murray, "A Hymn", pp.44-45.

⁴ Again, when referring to this word in West Syrian pronunciation we often render it as "hoosoyo".

⁵ Murray, ibid., p.45.

⁶ George, Bishop of the Arabs, wrote a commentary which was published by R. H. Connolly and H.W. Codrington, On the Jacobite Liturgy (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913) p.15.

of the Eucharist as an offering made for the forgiveness of sins. He writes clearly on this:

"By His coming He has expelled from you (the Church) the impure victims of the (former) sacrifices, and has placed in you His body as life and the chalice of His blood as pledge so that by Him their offences may be pardoned them."⁷

The Eucharist is the offering of the Church and through this offering forgiveness of sins is given. This, in fact, is the promise of Christ. Matthew's gospel gives us the following account of the Last Supper:

"During the meal Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. 'Take this and eat it,' he said, 'this is my body.' Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them. 'All of you must drink from it,' he said, 'for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Mt.26:26-27)

By Christ's command his followers repeated this sacred gesture and remembered Him unto the forgiveness of their sins.

The first eucharistic prayers give testimony to the connection between Eucharist and forgiveness of sins. The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus has the following instruction for Communion: "Then let them raise their

"Then let them raise their hands to give glory, Let the people draw near for the salvation of their souls. Let them communicate that their sins may be forgiven them."⁸

Other early anaphorae have references to the offering of the Eucharist

⁷ Quoted in D.A. Tanghe, "L'Eucharistie pour la rémission des péchés" *Iren v.34* (1961) p.172; taken from Th. J. Lamy *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones* t.II (Malines, 1889) p.968.

⁸ See L. Deiss, *Early Sources of the Liturgy*, B. Weatherhead, trans. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967) p.45. The authenticity of this communion prayer may be placed in doubt because it only exists in the Ethiopian text of Hippolytus, but there are corresponding texts in Apostolic Constitutions, see Dom B. Botte "Hippolyte de Rome, la Tradition apostolique" in *Sources chrétiennes* v.11 (Paris, 1946) p.35, n.1.

for the forgiveness of sins.⁹ Among the most ancient of these are the two Syriac anaphorae, "Addai and Mari" of the East Syriac Tradition, and "Sharrar" of the Maronite Tradition. Addai and Mari prays that the Holy Spirit may come upon the oblation to bless and sanctify it so that it may be for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁰ The Maronite Sharrar prays:

"May Your living and Holy Spirit come, rest and repose on this offering of Your servants. May it be to those who receive it the pardon of faults, the remission of sins, the blessed resurrection from among the dead and new life in the kingdom of heaven forever."¹¹

In the language of these two anaphorae the Eucharist is the remembrance of the offering of Christ and likewise our offering for the forgiveness of sins. Sharrar and Addai and Mari are well balanced in these aspects. Following their Jewish ancestors these semitic eucharistic prayers speak of remembrance in terms of that action which relives and makes present again that which is remembered. This allowed them to avoid contemporary questions of "then" versus "now", and of "one sacrifice on Golgotha" versus "many sacrifices on the altar." This semitic outlook also gave them the freedom to see every offering of the Eucharist as God's pledge of the forgiveness of sins.

The Eucharist is seen as the mode by which the Christian community communicates to itself (preaches to itself) the kerygma of Jesus Christ. In the preaching of the Word of God there is conversion and forgiveness

⁹ See L. Deiss, Early Sources, especially the Epiclesis prayers.

¹⁰ See B. Botte, "L'Anaphore chaldéenne des Apôtres" OCP v.15 (1949) p. 263.

¹¹ Trans. by S. Beggiani in his pamphlet entitled, "A Brief History and Commentary of the Divine Liturgy of the Maronite Antiochene Church" (Diocese of St. Maron, U.S.A., 1973); text taken from J.M. Suget, "Anaphora S. Petri Apostoli Tertia" Anaphorae Syriacae (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1973) v.2, pp.270-329.

to those who believe, and the same is true of the Eucharistic offering. Eucharist and forgiveness are linked in the same manner as the preaching of Jesus Christ and forgiveness. The offering of the Eucharist is the 'intra-ecclesial' preaching of Christ's promise of forgiveness.

The Syriac Tradition has seen Eucharist consistently in terms of forgiveness of sins. All of the West Syrian Anaphorae refer to the offering of Qurbono for the forgiveness of sins. The Maronite Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles prays in the prayer of the Epiclesis:

"May these Holy Life-Giving Mysteries be for the pardon of our faults, the forgiveness of our sins, the cure of our whole beings, and the strengthening of our consciences."

The prayer after communion in this same anaphora prays:

"May this divine communion be for the forgiveness of sins and for the glory of Your Name."¹²

Beginning as early as Philoxenus Mabbough (c.450-523), the words which accompanied the reception of communion spoke of forgiveness:

"The body of God given for the forgiveness of sins
The Blood of the Son of God given for the purification of faults."¹³

"Eternal life" is mentioned in these words of the West Syriac Tradition.¹⁴ Yet forgiveness for the West Syriac Tradition is the dominant reason why we offer Eucharist. One may even venture to say that of all the liturgical traditions of the Church, the West Syrian emphasis on forgiveness in Eucharist is most noticeable. In an explication on the liturgy which

¹² Raes, Anaphorae; "Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles" in Anaphora Book.

¹³ A. Tanghe, "Memre de Philoxène de Mabbough sur l'inhabitation du Sant Esprit" Le Museon v.73 (1960) p. 61.

¹⁴ Raes, ibid.

Assemani attributes to St. John Maron we find the following:

"It is for two reasons that He affirmed to give us His body, above all for the remission of sins, and secondly to give life eternal in the heavens, as he said 'he who eats my flesh will live forever.'" ¹⁵

A homily on the Sinful Woman attributed to a Bishop John of the early Syriac milieu offers a poetic word on this topic:

"Behold, it is written of the sinner that she kissed alone the feet of Christ, but it is written that she received His body. And if the kisses of the sinner, given with faith, shook and overthrew the fortress of her debts, how much more we ourselves who embrace Him with love and receive Him with faith, shall be purified of our faults and sins, and He will answer our requests." ¹⁶

Ephrem describes the process of offering and forgiveness in the poetical words of the hymn quoted above:

"You open to bring in the offerings (qurbono) of all men. You open to bring forth forgiveness to all men."

These words belong in the context of the entirety of Ephrem's theology. All is based on faith for him. "Offering" and "forgiveness" presume faith. Without a faith which believes that the "offering" of Christ brings "forgiveness" as He promised, a Christian lives only on the level of immediacy. No other reality can be mediated to him. Faith opens a whole new wonderful world, and hence an "offering" to God brings with it his promise of forgiveness.

¹⁵ Quoted in Tanghe, "L'Eucharistie" p.172; taken from J.A. Assemani Codex Liturgicus v.5, p.354.

¹⁶ Quoted by S. Beggiani, Early Syriac Theology: With Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition (copyright 1982, unpublished), p.151; taken from J.M. Sauget, "Un Homélie Syriaque sur la pécheresse attribuée a un évêque Jean" Par O nos.6-7 (1975-76) p.175.

When we say that we "offer" to God this Eucharist, what do we mean? What is the Christian sense of "offering"? Almost every ancient people had some sort of ritual which consisted in some presentation to the Almighty of the "first-fruits" or of those things which were considered pleasing to Him. This was done in the hope of enjoying some kind of communion or peace with Him. This was true of the Hebrew people. They offered sacrifice to receive communion with God, which came through the forgiveness of their sins. Christian "offering", with its own nuance, comes from this Hebrew practice.

The Jewish tradition of making "sin offerings" is reflected in the earliest source of Maronite Church Law, the Kitab al Huda. This eleventh century collection of canons describes the Christian offering this way:

"If any one sins by error or omission, it is necessary for him to offer a "qurbono" (that is, offering). The priest will offer it for him and ask for pardon for him at the altar."¹⁷

But is Christian offering any different from Jewish offering? Both the Jew and the Christian offer some "oblation" to God. What is the difference? It is Christ's self offering that changed the key for all Christian offering.

What was thought to be pleasing to God in the Old Testament was the blood of animals, for the life in blood is sacred to God. Blood was offered in hope of receiving a divine hearing and forgiveness of sins. The shedding of the blood of Jesus was much like the other sacrifices which shed blood. Early Christians saw it as a completion of all the former sacrifices made for the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁷ See Gemayel, Avant Messe Maronite (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1965) p.271.

Christ's offering was once and for all (Heb.7:27). It was the final oblation to be offered for the forgiveness of sins, and it was complete in itself. What Christians do is to remember in an "unbloody" way the offering of Christ. The "Anamnesis" prayer (the prayer of remembering) of the Anaphora of St. John Maron prays:

"O Lord, when we celebrate this Mystery, we do not sacrifice sheep, nor do we sprinkle ashes for the purification of Your gathering. . .

The key phrase is found here:

In the presence of the Father, we offer You,
O Divine Son, for You are acceptable with Him and
the Holy Spirit."¹⁸

When Christians stand in the presence of the Father, the "offering" most acceptable is Christ Jesus Himself.¹⁹ This emphasis on the intercession of Christ also sheds light on the prayer of Anamnesis in the Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles:

"We, Your Church, beg of You and through You
beseech Your Father."²⁰

In Christ, God has come close to us, for Christ is the "exact representation of the Father's being (Heb.1:3). And through Christ we draw close to the Father. The Epistle to Hebrews says:

"So let us confidently approach the throne of
grace to receive mercy and favor and to find
help in time of need."(4:16)

¹⁸ Raes, Anaphorae Syriacae, trans. Anaphora Book.

¹⁹ This may help to shed light on the reoccurring theme of "putting on Christ", a favorite one among Syriac Christians. Among other meanings it could also mean that by "wearing" Christ (in the seal of Baptism) we will be recognized by the Father as being part of his saved gathering, His holy people. The emphasis is on the "intercession of Christ."

²⁰ Anaphora Book.

The text quoted above in Hebrews, is said to be one of the earliest references to Christian eucharistic practice. The Christian God was graciously approachable through Christ.²¹ We bear in mind that the verbal form for the word "Qurbono" literally means "to draw near."²² By the Qurbono we "draw near to the throne of glory to receive mercy." We draw near by remembering. What we do again and again at the altar of the Lord is to "remember" His offering, and to remember is to relive.

B. EUCHARIST AS REMEMBRANCE

It is the human ability to remember which gives rise to all liturgy and culture. The liturgical year from Christmas to Epiphany to Easter to Pentecost is an attempt to enter, at the deepest level of the person, the memory of God's saving work in Christ. R. Taft says that "liturgy for St. Paul is to assimilate Christ, to know what it means to die with, rise with, reign with, suffer with, endure with, indeed to 'put on' Christ."²³ The employment of music, gestures, incense, symbols, images, and all other forms of ritual are likewise meant to help us assimilate into our minds and hearts this same work of God in Christ so that it may become a permanent part of our human structure.

²¹ See Murray's review of E. Pederson's The Angels in the Liturgy, in HJ v.5 (Oct.1965), p.427. Pederson bases this interpretation on the work of liturgical and biblical scholars. Further evidence in favor of this interpretation might be found in the development of the concepts of the bishop's "throne" and its situation at the "bema". The "bema" is a raised platform in the center of the church from which the word of God is proclaimed, and in the Syriac Tradition it has been called the "judgement seat". The bishop's throne, situated at this "bema", may symbolize the "throne of glory" which one approaches to receive mercy.

²² q.r.b. - "to draw near"; see R.P. Smith Thesaurus Syriacus (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1879, 1901).

²³ R. Taft, "The Liturgical Year" Wor v.55 (1981), p.16.

The repeated partaking of the Eucharist can be described in the words of Ephrem:

"In a new way his body has been fused with our bodies,
and his pure blood has been poured into our veins."²⁴

This is to insure that we may say with Paul: "It is no longer I who lives but Christ Jesus living in me." (Gal.2:20) This assimilation into Christ is done by making Him present time and time again in a way that "draws Him close" and us close to His Father through Him. This principle is fundamental to the Qurbono. For Qurbono is liturgy, in fact, the central piece of a liturgical mosaic made up of the Divine Office, the Mysteries and Qurbono.

Qurbono, however, is different from all other liturgy. It is offered at the explicit command of Jesus. But why did He ask us to do this in His memory? Was it for the sake of His memory alone? Or was there something that He was not finished giving us?

The Syriac Fathers saw the Church as the heir of all that Christ was/is. That which made Christ different from all others who came before Him, was that He taught with authority (Lk.4:32) In fact, He claimed to have authority to forgive sins (Lk.5:24), which was a mercy only God could bestow. When Christ forgave the sins of the paralytic He was accused of blasphemy (Mk.2:5-7). Since Christ's unique gift to us was the mercy of the Father through the forgiveness of our sins,²⁵ the Church was consequently called to imitate Him and to reconcile accordingly. Two favorite appellations for the Church by the Syriac Fathers are "Fortifi-

²⁴ "Hymns on Virginity" 37:2-3 (CSC0223, Syr.94, p.133); trans. by Murray in Symbols, p.77.

²⁵ The prophets could never procure this mercy of God with the authority and assurance of the forgiveness of sins. This was a divine dispensation realized only in God's own time and in His own way.

cation of Forgiveness",²⁶ and "House of Absolution".²⁷ A consistent descriptive for the altar is the "reconciling altar".²⁸ And finally, the sanctuary is referred to as a "Treasury of Blessings",²⁹ for from it flow the blessings of restoration to God, to Life through the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins was not so much "won" by the merits of Christ as it was by the divine initiative of the Father (see parable of the Merciful Father, Luke 15). The initiative of the Father continues in the Church. The Lord, through His Church, is still reconciling the world to Himself. This is the ministry which St. Paul refers to in the second letter to the Corinthians (5:11-21), and it bespeaks a concept found in the early Syriac writers.³⁰

It is a mystery how and by what means this forgiveness is made present again to believers by the offering of the Qurbano.³¹ It is only

²⁶ See the Hoosoyo for the Sunday of the Consecration of the Church in Lectionary, Syriac Maronite Church, The Seasons (Detroit:Diocese of St. Maron, USA, 1978).

²⁷ The term is from Ephrem's Sermon on Our Lord, quoted by Murray in Symbols, p.183; found in CSCO 270, Syr.116, p.51.

²⁸ Maronite liturgical sources are many for this term, any time the altar is referred to. For Ephrem's use see E. Beck, "Dei Eucharistie bei Ephräm" OC v.38 (1954), pp.44-45.

²⁹ "bet gāzā" is the word most commonly used to refer to the sanctuary.

³⁰ Murray in Symbols treats of two titles for Christ (used for ministers as well) which speak of this theme of "ambassadors of reconciliation". The first is, of course, "ambassador", see pp.171ff. The second is "steward" or "rabbaytā" which literally means "head of the house". This second appellation for bishops or priests carries an even greater sense when placed in conjunction with terminology in the Jewish and Syriac Christian Traditions for the Temple/Church. The Christian minister is responsible for the "House of God", and that house is the "House of Absolution". The title "key bearer" also brings to play this emphasis on the one responsible for the mercies of God. On "steward" see p.193; on "key bearer" see p.182.

³¹ Eucharistic offering is a combination of Christ's intercession, our offering, prayer for acceptance of the offering, our remembering of Christ's saving deeds. These must always be balanced in the mystery of offering. In

a "scrutinizing"³² mind that would dare ask whether the Qurbono must be made to secure the forgiveness of Jesus. Likewise, only a "scrutinizing" mind would ask if the Qurbono has the "efficacious" power to forgive sins. The Syriac Fathers leave these questions to God.

However, the Fathers are harsh on those "scrutinizers" who claim to know more than what the Tradition of the Church has taught. Ephrem blames them for muddling up the clear waters of Nature and Sacred Scriptures, leaving mankind confused and unforgiven.³³ Because the Syriac mentality saw symbolism as a viable vehicle for truth (as well as logical deduction),³⁴ it could accept that one of the graces of Christ's coming among us was the forgiveness of sins. Our remembrance in the Qurbono, our drawing near to Him, also has the grace of the forgiveness of sins.

fact, when we understand Qurbono too literally in its noun form (offering) we lose sight of what it really means in its verb form (to draw near). Some valuable insights on Eucharistic offering are given by K. Stevenson, "Anaphoral Offering: Some Observations on Eastern Eucharistic Prayers" EL v.94 (1980) pp.209-28. He states that Sharrar has a balanced blending of all the mysteries present in the Qurbono, p.228.

³² We use the word "scrutinize" to refer to those whom Ephrem chastized for "prying" into that which is to be left to the mystery of God knowable only to the heart. See R. Murray, "St. Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love" Sob v.2.2 (1980) pp.26-40. Murray maintains that those whom Ephrem referred to as "prying" were the Arains--whose sin and folly was not so much their incorrect doctrine but their presumption to know more than the human mind can know; see "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ on the Incarnation, Holy Spirit, and Sacraments" ECR v.3(1970) p.149.

³³ See J.B. Morris, Select Works of Ephrem the Syrian (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847) "Rythm the 35th".

³⁴ R. Murray, "Recent Studies in Early Symbolic Theology" HJ (October 1965), pp.432-33.

The role of remembrance is given its proper place in the Eucharistic offering. Remembrance is given the power to secure the promises of God. There is much confidence placed in this human power. However, we must understand what is meant by this "remembering". Remembrance simply for the sake of remembering is not specifically Christian. Only remembrance that leads one to conversion, and hence forgiveness of sins, is true remembrance. This is 'sacramental' remembrance.

Dionysius Bar Salibi, a West Syriac writer of the twelfth century, addressed this question of remembrance. He says that remembrance simply for the sake of its beauty is not the aim of what we do in the Church. He addressed the monk Rabban Isho, who had heralded the glory of the magnificent church ceremonies and hymns which he found in the Empire. He told him that these are of no avail, "for through them. . . you may forget or completely lose the power of penitence."³⁵ The Church 'remembers' Christ, this leads to conversion, and conversion leads to forgiveness. Remembrance, especially in the Qurbono, keeps us on the pilgrim's way of conversion so that we may be turned completely towards God.

C. CONCLUDING

In the previous chapter we discussed the diverse manifestation of divine mercy and forgiveness in the Church. In this chapter we have situated Qurbono within such a context.³⁶ We have seen also, through

³⁵ A. Mingana, "A Treatise of Bar Salibi against the Melchites" WS v.1 (1927) ch.2. In fact, all prayer and hymnody according to Bar Salibi is created to call one to conversion.

³⁶ In the early Church different charismatic personalities were called upon to offer Qurbono. Its role, however, was eventually given over, in all Catholic and Orthodox Traditions, to those who came to be called 'priests'. This intimate connection between priesthood and Eucha-

the insight of our twelfth century commentator, that all 'remembering' --that is, all liturgy-- is ordered to bring us to repentance and conversion.³⁷ The ordinary minister of these ecclesial expressions of mercy and forgiveness constitutes the subject matter of the next chapter.

rist finds expression in the Maronite ordination ritual. The new priest bears aloft on his head the Eucharist in procession through the Church. Moreover, all ordinations take place after the communion of the bishop and priests, in the presence of the Eucharist. The ordaining bishop places one hand on the head of the candidate and one hand on the Eucharist. This is the ritual for all the orders which receive the laying on of hands in the Jacobite and Maronite Traditions.

³⁷ This stands to reason if we are truly to serve Him as Creator, and not create Him as to serve our own little plans and pre-dispositions.

CHAPTER III :

PRIESTHOOD AND FORGIVENESS

All ministry in the Church is an ordered attempt to give expression to the realities of the Church itself. The reality of divine mercy and forgiveness is an ecclesial reality as it is also an individual one. It takes its ultimate expression in the Mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist, both constituted by the command of Christ himself (Mt.26:26, 28:19) and being expressions of the Father's initiative to forgive our sins in His abundant mercy.

In order to give expression to these realities, the Church orders herself accordingly. Thus we have ordered ministries which the appropriate person is chosen to fulfill. This concept of ministers as "ordered" from among the ranks of the community dates to the beginning of Christianity itself. The Apostles were commissioned to serve the Church in a certain way (I Cor.4:9), deacons were ordained (Acts 6), and St. Paul speaks of specific ministers and their roles (I Cor.12:27). Widows, elders, virgins, teachers all had their own roles. This setting apart of certain members for certain ministries also demanded a corresponding disposition of "holiness". Deacons were to be "deeply spiritual and prudent" (Acts 6:3), and "serious, straight-forward and truthful" (I Tim. 3:8). Presbyters ought to be "married only once, the father of children who are believers, and irreproachable." (Titus 1:6). Bishops were to be "of even temper, self-controlled, modest and hospitable. . . gentle, a man of peace. . . a good manager of his own household." (I Tim.3:2ff). The priest, according to his specific ministry in the Church also had a corresponding "holiness" to which he was called.

In the previous chapter we have seen the importance placed on the continuation of the Old Testament priesthood in the Church. We have seen too the reality of Divine Mercy as an important component in the daily life of the Syriac Church. We now examine the co-naturality of these two realities: Divine Mercy and priesthood.

A. IN EARLY SYRIAC THEOLOGY

"From the king's office laws, and from the priest's office propitiations. That both should be mild is hateful; that both should be strong is grievous. Let one be strong and the other tender; in prudence and in discretion, let fear with mercy be mingled. Let our priesthood be tender, likewise our king strong."¹

Although written in a Mesopotamian ambience of the fourth century, these words of Ephrem purport ageless wisdom. He refers to a great mystery of the role of the Church and her priests in God's plan.

Ephrem was awed at the abundant treasury given to believers by Christ. This treasury was unlimited and unwarranted by anything we had done. It was pure gift. This humble awareness of God's goodness towards us was to be the watershed of Ephrem's great outpouring of liturgical poetry and hymnody. This literary iconography has permanently adorned the Syriac Christian Churches up to this present day. For Ephrem, Christ was the "Treasurer" of this great "storehouse" of blessings. He was given the "key" by His Father. In opening the "doors of mercy" He gave to us

¹ Morris, *SLNPNF* XII (Oxford, 1898); "Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany" n.XIV 40-42.

abundantly (Jn.10:6, 10). He in turn passed this "key" on to Peter and the Apostles, giving them "stewardship" over all the blessings of God, the most sacred of which was the blessings of forgiveness of sins.²

Of course, all these words bear a particular meaning for St. Ephrem, as well as for those who came before and after him in the Syriac Tradition. These words are not simply abstract symbols. They express a concrete experience of Christ and of His Church as lived in the prayers, ritual, and church order of the early Syriac Church.

For example the sanctuary of the church was called the "Bet gazā"³ the house of treasures. It was here that Christ dwelled and was constantly ready to give of His mercy to those who called upon Him.⁴ Balai, in his homily for the consecration of a church says:

"Make no mistake, the king is here; let us enter the sanctuary and see Him. Here where sickness finds access the Physician is standing waiting for it."⁴

As we have seen, the appellations for the Church are often in terms of mercy and forgiveness, e.g. "House of Absolution", and "Fortification of Forgiveness". The priest is chosen as the "steward" of this house, and is responsible for the blessings that Christ promised His believers. Ephrem's poem, quoted at length in our chapter on Qurbano speaks of the treasury of mercy:

² See R. Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom, A Study in Early Syriac Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1977), p.194.

³ As to how ancient this custom is, I am unsure.

⁴ See Balai's "Hymn for the Consecration of a Church", trans. by Murray in Symbols, p.272; the entire hymn is found in J.J. Overbeck, S. Ephraemi Syri. . . aliorumque Opera Selecta (Oxford, 1865) pp.251-69.

"You are the good treasurer of the merciful Father; in Your hand is the key of the treasury of his mercy. You open to bring in the offerings of all men; You open to bring forth forgiveness to all men."⁵

The "treasurer" above refers to Christ. But it is one of the titles which Aphrahat and Ephrem also use to designate the ministers of the Church (the bishops).⁶ The concept of Church and priesthood of the early Syriac Church may be therefore summarized in two simple sentences: Through Christ we have received the abundant mercy of the Father through the forgiveness of our sins; and in the ministry of His Church, this mercy is always available. The latter is the "how" of this communication of the great mercy of Christ. Here we concern ourselves with this "how", for there is situated the ministry of the priests as an integral component of this communication of mercy.

The association between the forgiveness of sins and the Christian priesthood begins in the Old Testament practice of making sacrifices of atonement. The priest was an advocate of the penitent and he petitioned the Lord on behalf of the contrite. In other words:

"... the required ritual is carried out by the priest, its desired end, forgiveness is granted solely by God, e.g. 'the priest shall make atonement for him and for his sin and he shall be forgiven', e.g. by God (Lev.4:26)."⁷

The forgiveness of sins was reserved to God alone, and only those set apart unto His service were entrusted with such a role that would approx-

⁵ See Murray, Symbols, pp.193-95.

⁶ R. Murray, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ" Sob v.1 (1979)pp..40-41.

⁷ Enc. Jud., article on "Forgiveness".

imate His working among men. The Levitical order of priesthood met all the requirements for such a role.

However, priestly sacrifice and ministry are not limited simply to the Levitical order of priesthood nor to the specific role of atonement. Priesthood and priestly acts in their most encompassing O.T. context referred to the offering of the goods of the earth and of human labors to God, and petitioning Him for His blessings. The Old Testament, as well as the early Syriac Church did not limit its understanding of priesthood to the Levitical priesthood.⁸ The priesthood also includes those who had priestly functions, though not being of the Levitical order.⁹ Thus Cain and Abel, Jacob, Noah and most notably Melchizedek can be cited as examples. There are also Old Testament references to the heads of household performing some priestly functions.¹⁰

Likewise, neither the Old Testament nor the early Syriac Church saw priesthood only in terms of forgiveness of sins. For the Old Testament

⁸ Though we have seen in the passing on of the "order" of priesthood that it was the Levitical "order" that was passed on.

⁹ See M. Breydy, Le Concept du Sacerdoce: Essai de théologie Syro-Maronite (Beyrouth, 1964) pp.62ff. Also see a homily on priesthood found among the Spuria of St. John Chrysostom, and attributed to St. Ephrem. We have many references to "priests" who would not be within the Levitical lineage, PG 48, 1067-1070. The Syriac 'wide-angled vision' of priesthood reflects the Hebrew understanding of priesthood. The Levitical (Aaronic) heritage was certainly respected but priesthood was not confined to it until a later development.

¹⁰ Exodus 20:24 allows, it seems, for every man to offer sacrifices. In the Enc. Jud. distinction is made between "closed-in temples" and "altars" where sacrifices are made. In the closed-in temples the priests of the lineage of Aaron (Levi) were responsible for sacrifice. At the "altars", or perhaps even "bemas" set up in the country side, another kind of offering was made, see "Temple" in Enc. Jud. For a study on bema in the Old Testament see P. Vaughan, The Meaning of "Bāmā" in the Old Testament Society for O.T. Study Monograph Series n.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1974).

Jew, the priest (especially of the Levitical order) was also responsible for regulating worship, for advising the people, for mediating God's Word, and for maintaining the legal tradition.¹¹ Moreover, for the Syriac Christian, priesthood in the Old Covenant was something inherent in nature, almost 'built-into' the divine-human relations. This is readily seen in the association made between Adam, even in his sinless state, and priesthood.¹²

Even though neither the Hebrew nor the Syriac Christian Tradition saw priesthood solely in terms of forgiveness of sins, this aspect received the most attention from Christians. As early as the Epistle to the Hebrews we read:

"Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins."(5:1)

One might wonder if the Old Testament priest had any function other than atonement after reading the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is in terms of atonement that the author of Hebrews describes O.T. priesthood, and it is in these terms that he makes his fervent critique of this priesthood.

He insists that without Christ the priesthood of the Old Covenant would be unable to render efficacious the complete mercy of God and forgiveness of men. Only One could do this. Only One could offer the perfect sacrifice, through a life of obedience, and be found acceptable before

¹¹ See "Priesthood" in Enc. Jud.

¹² See Breydy, Le Concept, pp.62ff; also see Murray, Symbols, p.261 which quotes the following from the Book of the Cave of Treasures (Budge, ed., pp.62-63) which is an early Syriac document: "Adam was priest, king and prophet, God brought him into paradise that he might minister in Eden the holy Church."

the Father. This is Christ Jesus who offered Himself up once for all.

"Every other priest stands ministering day by day,
and offering those same sacrifices which can never
take away sins. But Jesus offered once sacrifice
for sins and took his seat forever. . ."(10:11)

"Once these have been forgiven, there is no further
offering for sin." (10:18)

What seems to be the denial of the value of O.T. priesthood in these passages of Hebrews is actually a clarification of the priesthood of Christ. It does this by placing Christ's priesthood in contrast with the priesthood of the former covenant. Our biblical author does not intend solely to prove that the Old Covenant priesthood has come to an end. He also intends to prepare the ground for a Christian conception of priesthood.¹³

The concept of a Christian minister or apostle as a 'priest' is not mentioned by the author of Hebrews. Its mention might have rendered a greater clarity to the differentiation between the role of Christ and that of His ministers. However, the silence is creative, and the priesthood of Christ is given the total attention. Christ's priesthood is seen in terms of forgiveness. Hence, when the Christian Tradition does begin to speak of her ministers in terms of "priests" she does so in conformity with the priesthood of Christ as described by Hebrews. In other words, because Christians, beginning with the Epistle to the Hebrews, associate Christ's priesthood with forgiveness of sins, the ministerial priesthood bequeathed to the Church would also emphasize this point. This we see consistently in the Syriac Church.

¹³ See A. Cody's review of Vanhoye's book Prêtres anciens, prêtres nouveaux selon le Nouveau Testament in Bib v.63, fasc.4, pp.587-89.

B. EPHREM, NARSAI AND THE SYRIAC LITURGICAL TRADITION

As we have seen above St. Ephrem combines priesthood with forgiveness of sins. He does this almost reflexively. In his letter to Publius he writes a litany of titles for Christ which are filled with creation imagery, then suddenly the following imagery appears referring to Christ:

"the propitiatory Lamb, the purifying sacrifice,
the priest who removes guilt, the purifying
sprinkling."¹⁴

These appellations of Christ are all in cultic terminology. They are also all in terms of propitiation and forgiveness. Ephrem speaks in terms of forgiveness when speaking of Christ receiving the priesthood from the priest John at the Jordan. At His Baptism Jesus received the "keys" of the "House of Absolution".¹⁵

Ephrem continues this combining of priesthood and forgiveness. In his Hymns on Paradise he calls Christ "the priest who removes guilt".¹⁶ If we can attribute to St. Ephrem the Homily on Priesthood found among the Spuria of John Chrysostom, as J. Lecuyer does, we find other conjunctions between priesthood and forgiveness:

"Without the venerable priesthood, the remission of
sins would not be given to mortals."

"Likewise Aaron was worthy of priesthood and was
made ambassador before God for the sins of the people."

"The grape of the vine, the grain of wheat and the
priesthood have a mutual agreement. Grapes and wheat

¹⁴ S. Brock, "Ephrem's Letter to Publius" Le Muséon v.86 (1976) sec. 6.

¹⁵ Quoted in Murray, Symbols, p.183; from Ephrem's Sermon of Our Lord CSCO 270, Syr.116, p.51.

¹⁶ Hymn no.IV 3.5 CSCO 174-5, Syr.78-9.

are slaves, the priesthood is free. And so when these three come together in order to be constituted above all the treasures, each one offers to the king its fruits in a sweet smelling fragrance. The grapes give blood, the wheat gives bread; and the priest, with trust, flies from earth to heaven awaiting to contemplate the invisible itself, and after having adored before the high throne, he stands supplicating the Lord for the servants, making cries and tears for his fellow servants, and offering to God; and likewise he prays (the Lord) to give consolation and contrition (penance) and also he asks for pardon and mercy from the Clement King, so that Spirit Paraclete may come and sanctify on earth the gifts and the proposals."¹⁷

This same combining of priesthood with the forgiveness of sins is found in a Homily on Priesthood attributed to Narsai. Through this homily he reveals a more developed Church than Ephrem knew. Nonetheless, it reflects components of the early Syriac Tradition which have a certain tendency to associate priesthood with divine mercy. This Homily is the first treatment of priesthood by any Syriac writer. Although it shows the influence of the "mystogogical" interpretations of Theodore of Mopsuestia (among others), it is in line with the Syriac Tradition. He writes:

"He perfected the Law by the law of the words of His preaching; and He gave a 'priesthood' instead of 'the priesthood' that He might pardon all. . . .

To this end He gave the priesthood to the new priests, that men might be made priests to forgive iniquity on earth. . . .

The art of forgiving iniquity he (the priest) has learned from the King; that he be not hard in the manner of forgiving his fellow servants. . . .

By the title of priesthood He opened the treasury of His great riches, that every man might receive forgiveness of iniquity through a son of his race. . . .

¹⁷ P.G. 47, 1067-70. J. Lecuyer does not give his reasons but from 'internal evidence' it seems very likely; see "Le sens des rites d'ordination d'après les Pères" Or Syr v.5 (1960), p.466.

O Marvel, so great, towards our race! That He
 should be pleased by sinners to justify sinners.
 O incomprehensible gift of the God of all! which
 by paupers has distributed its riches to paupers."¹⁸

This view of priesthood finds liturgical expression both in the
 East and West Syrian Traditions. In Narsai's Tradition of the East
 Syrian Church, the ritual for the ordination of a priest has the Bishop
 pray that the priest may be worthy to:

"Offer up unto Thee by day and by night the
 sacrifice of reconciliation."¹⁹

The ritual also refers to the priest as "steward" of the "sin-forgiving
 sacraments", referring to Baptism and Eucharist explicitly.²⁰

The West Syriac Tradition gives an even more explicit allusion to
 the priest's role in the forgiveness of sins. From the Maronite Ordina-
 tion ritual of a priest we hear:

"O Lord, in Your mercy, accept now Your servant n.
 whom You have called to be the steward of Your Divine
 Mysteries. May he be a trustworthy priest, ministering
 the power of the keys. May he open for repentent sin-
 ners the door of Your mercies. May he bind hardened
 sinners through Your will. May he absolve contrite
 hearts in Your name. May he be a priest filled,
 adorned and illumined with purity and holiness. May
 he be diligent in administrating the talent of the
 Gospel, and increase it thirty, sixty, and a hundred
 fold. May he find full salvation for his soul and
 complete forgiveness for Your living flock entrusted
 to his care."²¹

¹⁸ R.H. Connolly, The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai (Cambridge: U. Press, 1909), pp.62-74.

¹⁹ G.P. Badger, The Nestorians and their Rituals, 2 vols. (London: Joseph Masters, 1852), p.331.

²⁰ Ibid., pp.331, 332, 333.

²¹ Beirut Manual of (Maronite) Pontifical, "Hoosoyo". This prayer is almost exactly like the prayer edited in H. Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium (Wirceburgi, 1865), p.148;

This prayer, as it appears in the above cited edition, is taken from the "Sedro" which is a prayer unique to the Syriac Tradition. The "Sedro" intends to catechize. It is a summary of the mystery being celebrated.²² Hence the emphasis on forgiveness in this "Sedro" is representative of the emphasis placed on forgiveness in the role of the priest. This prayer agrees with the Jacobite Pontifical as well as with the prayer of the Maronite Pontifical recorded in Denzinger.²³ The Maronites and the Jacobites share a common hymn weaved into Psalm 51 and sung at the beginning of the ordination:

"O God full of mercies, You alone are my forgiveness.
As You accepted that son who squandered his riches,
accept me and have pity on me. . . .
O God who gave power to His disciples in heaven and
on earth, may You dwell in Your servant bowing before
You, that he may be sanctified."²⁴

The role of the priest is to be involved in some way or another in finding complete forgiveness to the flock entrusted to him. In another hymn we have the following admonition:

"Behold O priests how you minister, the lofty order
of priesthood, which binds and looses, such was
conceded it by the Savior of every creature. The
keys of heaven and hell, behold, are placed in your
hands, Blessed are you when you do the will of the
Lord Your God, so that you may enter with Him in
paradise."²⁵

²² S. Beggiani, Early Syriac Theology, With Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition (copyright 1982, unpublished). He sees the "Sedro" as an important source of theology and catechesis.

²³ See footnote no. 21.

²⁴ Beirut Manuscript of Pontifical; for corresponding Jacobite hymn see Voste, Pontificale, p.145.

²⁵ Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium, p.112; for corresponding Jacobite hymn see Voste, Pontificale Pars II, Additamenta p.133.

The adjoining of the concept of forgiveness with that of priesthood for the Early Syriac Church and her future children may come from her 'synagogue' neighbors. These Jews of Mesopotamia, even before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, were far removed from its cult and its sacrificial system as well. Before the destruction of the Temple they had established themselves in a cult of prayer and reading of the Torah. This may explain why, for St. Ephrem, the Jewish nation lost much of its luster. It was far removed from the priesthood and sacrifice, which could only be found in its full brilliance in the Church. A Judaism without the fullness of these institutions was found to be lacking and inconsistent with the workings of the God who brings to fruition.

This may also explain how the concepts of 'priesthood' and 'sacrifice' developed in the Syriac Church, having so little impact on the New Testament texts themselves. Jesus said, "I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them." (Mt.5:17) Priesthood was given an entirely new order in Christ. The concept of Divine Mercy, and the assurance of the forgiveness of sins were to experience a radical deepening by the coming of Christ. Therefore, a simple equivocation of Old and New Testament priests is not possible. They are related only in the person of Christ.

Christian priesthood, therefore, was not linked to forgiveness of sins simply because it fulfilled the Old Testament priestly sacrifices of atonement. There was much more. Christian priesthood was not based as much on the Old Testament institution as it was on the "charismatic" and yet "traditional" person of Christ. Many Old Testament institutions were abandoned because they were seen as inconsistent with Jesus, and His

teaching. The institution of priesthood, however, was maintained and handed on. In the wisdom of the early Church Fathers, Christian priesthood reflects a mystery of Christ and preaches the Word of his mercy.

If priesthood in any way obscures the Christ it is meant to proclaim, then it is inconsistent with the original inspiration which saw it as a gift in the Church. But this may also be said of all the "Mysteries" of the Church. When any symbol obscures that which it refers to, then it no longer serves its function. The risk of any 'sacramental' order in the Church is that the 'symbol' may obscure that which it symbolizes. The oldest Traditions of the Church, however, all value sacramental mediatorship.

To name the Christian ministers "priests" is to associate them with Christ's priesthood of the forgiveness of sins. It is incomplete however, to think this to be the only connection which Syriac Christians make between priest and Divine Mercy. The linking of priesthood and mercy must be considered in its full import, in the continuation of the person and mission of Christ.

One eminent title shared by both Christ and the Christian priest, which is not in cultic nor traditional terms, is 'physician'. A discussion of this title helps to round out our picture of the priest's role in the forgiveness of sins.

C. CHRIST AND THE CHRISTIAN MINISTER AS PHYSICIAN

The title 'physician' was ascribed to Christ and His ministers early in Syriac Christianity. A third century 'church order' called the Didascalia Apostolorum frequently refers to Christ and His ministers with this name. It is also used by Aphrahat, Ephrem, Balai and Narsai. The presence and/or need of a physician assumes the presence of some sort of sickness. Likewise, it presumes that someone has the ability to treat this sickness. The 'sickness' is sin, and the physician has the ability to heal.

Aphrahat referred to the bishop in terms of "shepherd" and "physician". He deliberately alluded to the passage in Ezechiel where the shepherd is responsible for healing the wounds of his sheep. Christ is called the "wise Physician"²⁶ and those who exercise pastoral care in His name share the title. Aphrahat has one passage which may refer to the charism of actual physical healing continuing in the Church: "He gave also to His Twelve power and authority over all pain and sickness, and to us through their hands."²⁷ In the application of the name physician to the Bishop Aphrahat follows the lead of the Didascalia Apostolorum before him which says:

"And thou, also O Bishop, art made physician of the Church: do not, therefore, withhold the cure whereby thou mayest heal them that are sick with sins, but by all means cure and heal, and restore them sound to the Church."²⁸

²⁶ Murray, Symbols, p.200; Dem VII, PS 316.11,15; 317.23; 324.5 etc.

²⁷ Ibid., p.220; Dem II, PS 92.12-14.

²⁸ Ibid., p.202; R.H. Connolly, Didascalia Apostolorum (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), p.64.

In this early Syriac 'Church order', which Murray says may be the only text other than the Bible which Aphrahat had before him, we find the continual linking of the minister --in this case the bishop-- and divine mercy.²⁹ However, mercy is not linked to the "order" of priesthood per se --though both Aphrahat and the Didascalia Apostolorum do speak of the continuation of priesthood in Christ and in the apostles and their successors the bishops.³⁰ Rather, mercy and forgiveness are connected with the title of "physician" for both Christ and his bishop.

Parenthetical mention must be made of the hierarchical roles during the times of the Didascalia, of Aphrahat, and of Ephrem. The Didascalia treats for the most part of the roles of the bishop, and the deacon and deaconesses. However, it has little to say of "presbyters", later to take on the role and name of "priests", who were primarily advisors to the bishop. According to Connolly, the editor of the Didascalia, this Church order reflects a Church where the bishop is the ordinary minister.³¹ This also may be the situation in Aphrahat's time, though he does speak of priests as the ordinary ministers of Baptism, which describes them in a role other than advisory.³² St. Ephrem, a generation after Aphrahat, and perhaps reflecting another geographical situation (we must remember that time and place must be considered) speaks of priests being visited by the

²⁹ See Connolly, Didascalia, chapter VI, pp.40-77, and almost passim in the chapters on bishops. The medical imagery is developed in ch.VIII, pp.104-5; the grave responsibility of bishops is stressed in ch.V, pp.37-40 and in X-XII, pp.106-118.

³⁰ In Aphrahat see Dem XIII PS 964-65 and 960.24-27; In Connolly, Didascalia, pp.55-56.

³¹ See "Intro" in Connolly.

³² See E.J. Duncan, Baptism in the Demonstrations of Aphrahates the Persian Sage (Washington D.C.: Catholic U. Press, 1945).

bishop, a situation which would mean that priests had some ministerial responsibility apart from the bishop.³³

Whatever the roles of priest and bishop were, up to Ephrem's time, by the time of Rabboula³⁴ and Narsai³⁵ --perhaps the early fifth century-- the priest was the ordinary minister. We might be able to assume that this situation pre-dates the fifth century in the Syriac world. However, because of the paucity of historical data and the many variables involved any generalizations must be made cautiously.³⁶ What concerns us here, nonetheless, is not so much the specific delineation of roles concerning the bishop and priest, but rather that the "ordinary minister", whether he be a bishop or a priest, was aligned with mercy, that is, healing and forgiveness of sins. Moreover, this connection between mercy and ministry was present over and beyond the excessive linkings which were naturally made between "priesthood" and the propitiation imagery. For a completion of our survey of the title "physician" let us turn to Ephrem, Narsai and Balai.

Ephrem's favorite title of all for Christ was "Physician", according to Murray.³⁷ The myrrh of the Magi was "to make known the Physician who

³³ See O. de Urbina, "L'Evêque et son rôle d'après saint Ephrem" Par O v.4 n.1 and 2 (1973).

³⁴ See F.C. Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity (London: John Murray, 1904) pp.143ff: "Commands and Admonitions to Priests and Sons of the Covenant living in the Country, by Bishop Rabbûla of Edessa."

³⁵ See Connolly, The Liturgical Homilies, "Homily on the Church and Priesthood", pp.62-74.

³⁶ Other than Breydy's short treatment of Aphrahat in Le Concept, I have not found anything else written on the priesthood in the fourth to fifth century Syriac Church.

³⁷ Symbols, p.200.

was to heal the broken state of Adam."³⁸ The connection between oil (or myrrh) and healing can be appreciated better if we know the close connection which the word for 'oil' and 'Christ' have in Syriac. Oil is the word "meshcha", the name for Christ, the "Anointed One", is "Meshicha". There is also a close connection between oil and healing in the semitic world. This connection is ritualized in the anointing of the sick -- which also became a practice for penitents who were anointed because they were spiritually infirmed.³⁹ The connection between oil, Christ, and healing is inseparable.

In Carmina Nisibena Ephrem regards the patriarchs and prophets as physicians, but because the whole world was sick it could not be healed of its illness. Christ the Physician took pity and healed the world through His own body and blood -- the "Medicine of Life."⁴⁰

Ephrem sees one of the most important ministries of the bishops as that of healer, though the healing is always attributed to Christ. He calls the bishops the "physicians of souls" in his memre On Faith, and says that "for lasting ills, they applied lasting remedies" -- a reference to Eucharist as healing and forgiving, and as well according to Murray, a possible reference to penance.⁴¹ Ephrem suggests to the bishop that when he goes to visit his people, he take with him every sort of medicine

³⁸ Symbols, p.200; from Ephrem's Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant version arménienne, Leloir, CSCO 137, Arm. I 2.24, p.36.

³⁹ See P.V. Pathikulangara "The Sacrament of Reconciliation and the Thomas Christians" EL v.89 (1975), pp.294-301. He refers to this practice in the time of Isho Yahb III (ca. 658).

⁴⁰ Murray, Symbols, p.201; Carmina Nisibena 34:2 in CSCO 218, Syr.92 pp.81-83

⁴¹ Murray, p.201; On Faith 3:147-65 in CSCO 212, Syr.88, p.26.

necessary to heal each individual person.⁴²

In Balai's Homily on the Consecration of a Church in Qennesrin, we see Ephrem's frequent linking between Christ as Physician and the ministry given to his Church:

"There, where sickness finds easy access,
stands also the Physician, waiting for it."⁴³

Narsai, in the East Syrian Tradition, also reflects this custom of referring to the Christian minister as physician. He says:

"For the cure of hidden and manifest disease
the priesthood was (established), to heal
iniquity by a spiritual art. The priest is
a physician for open and hidden (diseases);
and it is easy for his art to give health to
soul and body."

⁴⁴

A look into the world of Christian ministry in the name of Christ the Physician, helps us to anchor the reality of Christian priesthood in the person of Christ himself. In this search we look not only to the priesthood of Jesus, but to His entire person, traditional and charismatic.

⁴² Urbina, "L'Evêque".

⁴³ Murray, Symbols, p.201; see Overbeck, S.Ephraemi Syri. . .aliorumque for Balai's hymn, stanza 10, p.252.14.

⁴⁴ Connolly, The Liturgical Homilies, p.64.

D. CONCLUDING

The Church as a continuation of Christ's presence is a symbol of His priesthood according to tradition, and of His healing according to His person. Priests engaged in His ministry continue Christ's priesthood and healing. In the Mysteries of Anointing, Baptism and Eucharist, the Church initiates the faithful into the dwelling place of that healing and forgiveness. The 'person' of the priest is also a place of God's mercy.

Ephrem writes of the personalities of three Bishops of Nisibis whom he knew:

"The three Priests were treasurers
Who held in their integrity
The Key of the Trinity;
Three doors did they open to us,
Each one of them with his own key
In his time was opening his door."⁴⁵

Ephrem sees an intimate connection between the disposition of the shepherd and that of his flock. The image Ephrem uses is that of the mirror. The flock is the "mirror image" of its bishop.⁴⁶ In all things the flock resembles its pastor. Whether the bishop be endowed with virtues or laden with certain vices these qualities are diffused to the flock.

Ephrem speaks with great psychological insight of the relationship between the leader of the Christian community and the community itself.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Carmina Nisibena n.13, quotes in F. Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity, p.97.

⁴⁶ Carmina Nisibena n.19:14; quoted in O. de Urbina "L'Evêque et son rôle d'après saint Ephrem" Par O p.141.

⁴⁷ The article by Urbina, "L'Evêque" is one of the finest small works on pastoral ministry in St. Ephrem. Another fine work, is L. Leloir, "Saint Ephrem moine et pasteur", Théologie de la vie monastique (Coll. Théologie, 49) (Paris, 1961), pp.85-97. This work concentrates on the monastic element; a study most useful for Maronites.

He refers to the bishop as "head" of the Church. The 'head' elicits the other members to follow Christ as he himself does. Each leader gives to the flock that which it needs at the proper time. He gives from the Mysteries he offers and also from his person. Those in need of healing he heals, those in need of correction he corrects, the contrite he loosens, and the hardened he binds in hope that they will turn from their hardened way. These spiritual gifts which the shepherd gives his flock find their source in his own living of the Gospel message.

Hence, the priest corresponds to the Qurbano both in its noun form "offering", and in its verbal root "to draw near". He himself is an 'offering' to the Church whereby the faithful 'draw near' to the "throne of glory to receive mercy." (Heb.4:16) Here is found the priest's role as a 'co-welcomer' with Christ.

CHAPTER IV :

SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM MARONITE HISTORY ON THE PROCESS OF CHOOSING A PRIEST

The process whereby one chooses to become a priest and then enters the seminary to be trained is considerably different from that of the early Syriac Church. Before the advent of seminaries and structured dioceses in the Lebanon of the eighteenth century, men were chosen to be priests, and their training varied according to the particular need. In this presentation we limit our scope to the 'married priest' and the 'monk priest'.

A. THE MARRIED PRIEST

Married men were among the ones chosen. They were members in good standing in their village and in their extended family. They were good head of households. The canons of Bishop Rabboula concerning "Priests and 'Sons of the Covenant'" give us a vivid picture of the lives of the priests in the fifth century Syriac Church.¹

The priests could be married or celibate. There was great flexibility in their living arrangements. Each one might have been able to hold

¹ See F.C. Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity, St. Margaret Lectures, 1904, on the Syriac Speaking Church (London: John Murray, 1904), pp.143ff. The original Syriac is in Overbeck, S. Ephraemi Syri. . . Aliorumque (Oxford, 1865) pp.215-21. All subsequent canons are taken from Burkitt.

his own occupation.² Their main responsibility however, was to tend to the "House of God".³ They lived either with their family or in a quasi-monastic arrangement.⁴ They cared for the poor, looking after a house set aside from the church where the poor could find shelter.⁵ They maintained the morning and evening hours of prayer.⁶ They served in civil capacities within the village.⁷ They honored public officials but not

² Canons 24-26 might speak of the possibility of some trades for priests: "Let not Priests and Deacons and Sons of the Covenant become keepers of threshing-floors or vineyards or the hired labourers of laymen, or bailiffs, or agents for laymen, or have anything to do with the law, but they are to keep to the service of the Church and not allow the offices of prayer and of psalm-singing to cease day or night."

³ Canon 38: "Let all the Priests take care for the service of the House of God, and let them be doing whatever is necessary for the ordering of the House, and let them not feed beasts in the Church, that the House of God may not be brought into contempt."

⁴ Canon 19: "Let not the Sons of the Covenant or the Daughters of the Covenant allow their Priests to dwell with laymen save with their relatives only, or with one another." The "Son" or "Daughters of the Covenant" were a semi-monastic group of consecrated religious. They made up an important part of the fabric of the early Syriac Church. Aphrahat and Ephrem were most probably Sons of the Covenant. See M. Maude, "Who were the B'nai A'yama?" JTS v.36 (1935), pp.13-21.

⁵ Canon 12: "Let all the Priests of the village have care for the poor that betake themselves to them, and especially those that are Sons of the Covenant." Canon 13: "In every church there is, let a house be known in which the poor may betake themselves thither and rest."

⁶ See footnote no.2 above.

⁷ This can be inferred from Canon 37: Let not any one of the Priests or of the Deacons or of the Sons of the Covenant, except by our command go away to the Imperial Army or to any distant place and leave his church, even if it be a matter of business for his village or his church."

so much as to "become servile and oppress the poor."⁸ Most central to their responsibilities was the offering of Qurbono.⁹

From the time of Rabboula to the present day the married priest in the Maronite Tradition witnesses to the practice of choosing a minister because of his 'appropriateness'. Neither 'state of life' nor ability to 'succeed' in seminary were the major determining factors, but rather the suitability of the one chosen and his compatability with the proposed ministry.

B. MONKS

If there was no one of the village who could fill the certain requirements of a priest, the bishop would ask the monks of the monastery, or urge some holy man to fill this responsibility. A striking example of the latter is found in Ehden Lebanon in the year 1620. A hermit-priest by the name of Fr. Elia, served the village parish while maintaining his hermitical life.¹⁰

As G. Mahfoud tells us, the monasteries always had a pastoral orientation. Unlike the Benedictine and Basilian monastic Traditions, the Syriac monastic Tradition could not fall into the temptation of being cut

⁸ Canon 33: "All the lords of the villages hold in the honor that is due to them, but not so that ye become servile and oppress the poor." Again in Canon 11: "Let all the Sons of the Church persevere in fasting and be instant in prayer: let them have care for the poor and require justice for the oppressed without respect for persons.

⁹ Canon 30: "Let not the Priests permit those who are found in adultery to offer the Sacrament, save by our express permission." And again in Canon 51: "Let not the Priests give the Oblation to those who are troubled with demons, that no disgrace may befall the Sacrament in the Communion of devils.

¹⁰ See G. Mahfoud, L'Organisation Monastique dans l'Eglise Maronite (Beyrouth: Université Saint-Esprit: Kaslik, Jounieh, Lebanon, 1967), p.333.

off from the world, nor could it be tempted to see itself as self-contained and autonomous.¹¹ Hermitical life was consistently seen as the preferred monastic way.¹² This diminished the emphasis on communal life just enough to allow monks, hermits and holy men the freedom to engage in those pastoral activities for which they were well suited. The interdependence between monastic life (coenobitic and hermitical) and the parish service has been consistent in the Syriac and especially Maronite Tradition, extending even to our day.¹³

In choosing a monk to be priest his holiness and suitability were highly regarded.¹⁴ Like the married man the monk also had to fulfill certain requirements. They were somewhat similar to the requirements of the Benedictine and Basilian Traditions.¹⁵ These Traditions emphasized 'humility' as the one foremost spiritual virtue sought in a man called to be priest. Hence, the monastic humility of the Maronite Tradition applies to a Maronite spirituality of priesthood.

¹¹ Mahfoud, p.333.

¹² Ibid., p.61.

¹³ The canons of Rabboula speak of the Sons of the Covenant and the Priests enjoying a certain pastoral cooperation.

¹⁴ See A. de Vogüé, "Le prêtre et la communauté monastique dans l'antiquité" La Maison Dieu v.115 (1973), pp.61-69.

¹⁵ Ibid.; also see the Rule of St. Benedict 60:4 and Epistle 51:1 of St. Jerome in PG, both quoted by Vogüé, p.64. For a contemporary discussion of the question of monastic priesthood see I. Havener, "Monastic Priesthood: Some Thoughts on its Future in America" Wor v.56 (1982), pp. 431-441. On Syrian Monasticism, see A. Hendriks, "La vie quotidienne du moine syrien primitif" Or Syr v.5 (1960), pp. 293-330 and pp.401-431.

CHAPTER V :

IMPLICATIONS FOR A MARONITE SPIRITUALITY OF PRIESTHOOD

What we have discussed thus far has been the 'indicative'. This has entailed an investigation of the theme of forgiveness in the Church and in the role of the priest. We have seen that a priest is chosen as someone with particular qualities which correspond to a specific ministry. In this final chapter we examine how these 'indicatives' become 'imperatives'.

An important role of the priest according to the ordination ritual is to "secure complete forgiveness to the flock entrusted to him." A priestly holiness corresponds to this role. In order to secure this complete forgiveness a priest needs to know something of the forgiveness of sins. He needs to experience the forgiveness of his own sins. This he comes to know through humility which does not debase but rather affords an accurate assesment of his self before God.

A priest needs to be humble and contrite. In the fullest sense of the word 'contrite', he needs to be 'worn down' by his own attempts to overcome sin. If he is, he will be willing to rely on the forgiveness and mercy of God. Thus, he will be bound by his hardened sins, to receive the mercies opened to penitents. The litany for a Maronite priest at his funeral blesses those who:

"loved charity,
were holy in their actions,
crucified their bodies,
loved repentance."¹

¹ See the appendix to the Petit Breviary (ed. in Jounieh, Lebanon, 1902) which has the full funeral service for priests.

If he "loves repentance" the priest will not grow weary of seeking the mercy of God for himself and for others.

A consistent criticism levelled against priests by the Syriac Fathers comes in terms of a callousness towards the great mercy entrusted to their keeping. Aphrahat writes:

"Our Lord has opened before us his great treasury which is filled with all good things; in it are love, peace, kindness, healing, purity and whatever of every kind is good, lovely and excellent. And he has given his stewards authority over all his treasury; further he puts chains, prisons and prisoners into the hands of the stewards, and has given them authority to bind and to loose. And the stewards have abandoned love, peace, kindness and the whole treasury and have preferred to take up the chains and bonds; they have become prison-governors, gaolers and torturers instead of stewards of the treasury of all good things."²

Along these same lines, the Maronite ordination ritual has this hymn:

"Blessed Paul wrote to Timothy, his disciple saying: Beware, brother, of what you do in the Churches of Christ. Beware that the mystery of the priesthood not be given to the conceited, covetous, lustful, nor to the prodigal, but to the humble, gentle, and to the one who rules well his own household."³

What is this "mystery of the priesthood" that Paul warns Timothy to guard? This terminology is used frequently by Syriac Fathers. Likewise,

² Dem XIV PS 705.11-25; quoted from R. Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1977), p. 195. Ephrem's homily in PG 47, 1067-70 also has an exhortation to priests to remain sensitive to the great treasury given them. Narsai in his homily on priesthood ends with a similar exhortation; R.H. Connolly, The Liturgical Homilies of Narsai (Cambridge: U. Press, 1909), pp.62-74.

³ This prayer follows the "Sedro" which speaks of the lofty power to "bind and loose" entrusted to the priest. See H. Denzinger, Ritus Orientalium (Wirceburgi, 1865) v.2, p.112; and J.M. Voste, Pontificale iuxta ritum Ecclesiae Syrorum Occidentalium id est Antiochiae (Rome, 1941) Pars I, p.150 and Pars II (Additamenta) p.133.

the expression "treasury of priesthood" is used by Ephrem, Narsai, and the East and West Syrian ordination rituals.⁴ This latter expression bears its own particular meaning within the Syriac milieu. It is tied to that most sacred treasury given to Christ Himself. In Ephrem's words addressed to Christ:

"You are the good Treasurer of your merciful Father
in Your hand is the key to the treasury of his
mercy."⁵

Christ in turn entrusted the treasury into the hands of the Apostles.

The authority to "bind and loose" made Christ's apostles no longer slaves but friends (Jn.15:15). This authority would determine to which hearts would remain open the mercy of Christ. Since it is His good news of the Reign of God and forgiveness of sins, the priest is warned not to mismanage this treasury, but to steward it with care. Some of the old Maronite manuscripts of ordination have the following rubric:

The Maronite bishop, after the ordination of a
priest, shakes the dust off his vestments, washes
his hands, and says to the newly ordained:
'The sins you commit against the priesthood of
Jesus Christ are not on my shoulders!'⁶

This warning goes back to the Old Testament story of God placing the burden upon the shoulders of Moses and Aaron as a symbol for the People.⁷

⁴ See Murray, Symbols, pp.178-95; on Narsai see Connolly, The Liturgical Homilies; for the ordination rituals see the "Sedro" for the Maronite and Jacobite Traditions found in Denzinger and Voste, op.cit. For the East Syrian Tradition see Voste, Pontificale iuxta ritum Ecclesiae Syrorum Orientalium id est Chaldaeorum (Rome, 1937), and also G.P. Badgers, The Nestorians and their Rituals 2 vols. (London: Joseph Masters, 1852).

⁵ R. Murray, "A Hymn of St. Ephrem to Christ" Sob v.1 (1979)pp.40-41.

⁶ Archbishop Francis M. Zayek related to me the story of this rite. I have been unable to trace the origin of this ordination prayer.

⁷ Cf. Exodus 28:12, 38; Numbers 11:17; and II Chronicles 35:3.

It reflects the care that must be taken in priestly ministry due to the intimacy it enjoys with the workings of God Himself.

When one sins against the "priesthood", one sins against the "priesthood of Christ". It is Christ who was the priest who offered the acceptable sacrifice, and it is still Christ who is the priest interceding for us with the Father. Christ's priesthood is the priesthood of "primacy", in the Old and New Covenants. All those who came before Christ and all those who come after Him, in an unbroken order, are constituted priests in and because of Him, and are given to speak of Him in a symbolic way.

After reflecting on the many prayers of the Divine Office and the ordination ritual, M. Breydy writes the following:

"The flow of the centuries has no value except in the presence of Christ and the whole of His divine economy; the priests before Him are there to prefigure Him, and they are sanctified by Him and in His name; the priests after Him are instituted by Him and it is by Him that they function."⁸

This brings to mind the words of St. Paul:

"In Him everything in heaven and on earth was created. . . all things were created through Him and for Him. . . It is He who is head of the body the Church; He who is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that the primacy may be His in everything."(Col.1:15-20)

This 'Christocentrism' is true of the Maronite liturgical Tradition, and is found too in the earliest mentions of ministers and their ministries in the Syriac Church. In Syriac symbolic theology, also the intimate union between Christ and His ministers is poetically expressed.

⁸ M. Breydy, Le Concept du Sacerdoce: Essai de théologie Syro-Maronite (Beyrouth, 1964), p.65.

Of the Mystery of Chrismation Ephrem sings thus:

"Christ and chrism are conjoined; the secret with the invisible is mingled: the chrism anoints visible, Christ seals secretly. . . as through His minister, Christ by the hand of His servants, seals and anoints your bodies. It befits Him the Lord of the flock, that in His own person He seals His sheep."⁹

Regarding Baptism Ephrem says:

"Today lo! Your offences are blotted out, -- and your names written down. -- the priest blots out in the water; -- and Christ writes down in heaven."

10

Concerning Eucharist Ephrem again shows the centrality of Christ and the union between earthly actions and Christ's working:

"Blessed is the priest who in the sanctuary, -- offers to the Father the Son of the Father."¹¹

The delicate balance between the ministry of the priest and that of Christ is further witnessed to in other ways. It is protected by the form of celebrating the sacraments: The priest rather than saying "I baptize," or "I confirm," instead says, "The servant of God is baptized, is chrismated."¹² This aspect is also seen in the priestly prayers over the penitent. The priest is the advocate of the contrite; and he is often

⁹ Hymns for the Feast of Epiphany 3:1-2; quoted from J.B. Morris, SLNPNF (Oxford, 1898).

¹⁰ Ibid., 6:13.

¹¹ Hymns on Nativity 18:16; Morris, SLNPNF.

¹² One of the first commentaries on the West Syrian Liturgy is George, Bishop of the Arabs, who writes: "That the priest says 'such a one is baptized' and not 'I baptize', he makes known by his humility that this awesome act is not his, but by grace the gift has been bestowed upon him to administer these mysteries"; see Connolly and Codrington, On the Jacobite Liturgy (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), p.14.

called on to fast, pray for, and even to bear some of the penance of the one petitioning forgiveness.¹³ All that the priest accomplishes, he does so not by his own power. For as St. Paul says,

"It is God who, in his good will toward you,
begets in you any measure of desire or achievement."
(Phil.2:13)

Indeed, all ministry is accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit; and the earliest liturgical Traditions highlight this, as well as Aphrahat, Ephrem, Narsai, Balai and the East and West Syrian liturgical Traditions.¹⁴ The Holy Spirit acting in the Church and in Creation is described in terms of symbol; and Ephrem sings:

"By means of warmth all things ripen,
and by the Spirit all are sanctified,
a transparent symbol!"¹⁵

THE PRIEST AS SYMBOL OF GOD'S MERCY

As the priest is interwoven into the fabric of the Church, he symbolizes God's mercy and forgiveness. By clinging to the altar --itself a symbol of Christ-- he labors for the Word of Christ that it may find a home in his own heart and in the hearts of all those who are found to be

¹³ See Mateos, "Prières syrienne d'absolution"; also B. Gogan, "Penance Rites of the West Syrian Liturgy: Some Liturgical and Theological Implications" *ITQ* v.42 (1975), pp.182-96.

¹⁴ See Beggiani, Early Syriac Theology, With Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition, (copyright 1982, unpublished), chapter on the Holy Spirit: "In the Syriac mind all acts of power and sanctification are the work of the Spirit of God."

¹⁵ Murray, Symbols, p.80; Hymns on Faith n.74, CSCO 154, Syr.73 pp.225-28.

faithful.¹⁶ This is the Word to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," (Mk.2) which Christ desires to speak to us in all liturgy, in all remembrance and especially in every Qurbano. Our response is to believe, for if we believe, this Word forgives, creates and heals the Church. And as the psalmist sings:

"He who trusts in the Lord, loving mercy surrounds him."
(Psalm 31:10)

The priest communicates the Word primarily through his ecclesial responsibilities. These are the Mysteries, the morning and evening offices, reconciliation, works of charity, and care for the House of God. He lives this Word in his own personal following of Christ. He does so in his preaching, mortification, teaching, healing, praying, counseling, fasting and with all his own personal ways of witness. That he does communicate this Word is his specific role in God's Church.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the priest gradually becomes like that which he symbolizes. He is transformed into God's image, Christ Jesus Himself, ever tender in His mercy towards sinners. Then the words of Ephrem make sense to him, "Let our priests be tender." Gradually his life is made holy so that he may "secure complete forgiveness to the flock entrusted him".¹⁸ In this movement he comes to the deep awareness that priesthood had been given him "as a gift"(Numbers 18:7).

"This treasure we possess in earthen vessels, to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us."
"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ."
(II Corinthians 4:7,6)

¹⁶ This idea of clinging to the altar is brought out by the fact that until recently in the Maronite Tradition, a priest was ordained to serve a specific altar in a specific church. This is specifically mentioned in the ordination ritual. The idea of clinging to the altar is also poetically described in the prayer of farewell to the altar in which the priest speaks to the altar as one would a dear friend, a friend which sustains, heals, forgives, and remembers. See Dom Janeras, "Note sur la prière syrienne des adieux à l'autel" Or Syr v.5 (1960), pp.476-78.

¹⁷ Carmina Nisibena 21:22.

¹⁸ "Sedro" of the ordination of a Maronite priest; Beirut Manuscript of Pontifical.

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