



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 7, 2010,
Our Lady of the Holy Rosary

Dear Friends,

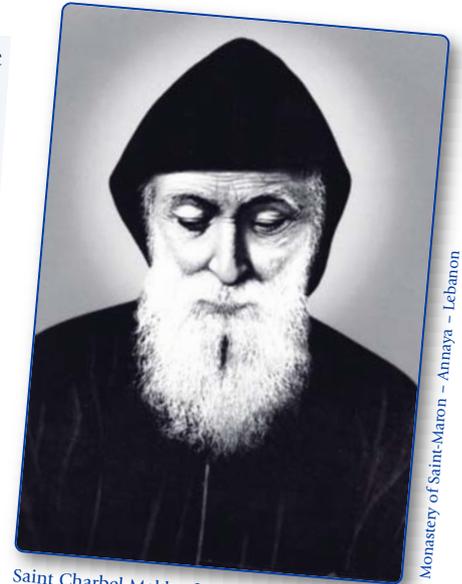
“WHAT is real?” asked Pope Benedict XVI on May 13, 2007. “Are only material goods, social, economic and political problems ‘reality’? This was precisely the great error of the dominant tendencies of the last century, a most destructive error, as we can see from the results of both Marxist and capitalist systems. They falsify the notion of reality by detaching it from the foundational and decisive reality which is God. Anyone who excludes God from his horizons falsifies the notion of ‘reality’ and, in consequence, can only end up in blind alleys or with recipes for destruction. The first basic point to affirm, then, is the following: only those who recognize God know reality and are able to respond to it adequately and in a truly human manner.”

Consecrated life witnesses to the importance of God. The solitary life of hermits, in particular, “is an invitation to their contemporaries and to the ecclesial community itself never to lose sight of the supreme vocation, which is to be always with the Lord” (John Paul II, Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, March 25, 1996, no. 7). To illustrate this truth, the Church offers us the example of Saint Charbel Maklouf.

Biqā Kafra, the highest village in Lebanon at an altitude of 1,600 meters, is 140 kilometers north of Beirut. The famous “Cedars of God” are nearby. The inhabitants of this area are good, hospitable, and hard working, and restless by nature. Like all Maronites (members of the Eastern Catholic Church founded by Saint Maron in the 4th and 5th centuries), they are proud of their faith and practice their religion without fear of other people’s judgment. They have a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin MARY, and a great love for the Rosary. It was in this village that on May 8, 1828, the eighth child of Antoine Maklouf and Brigitta Choudiac was born. A week after his birth, he received the name Youssef (Joseph) at Holy Baptism. Motivated by an almost monastic piety, Brigitta insisted that the family pray together. Enthusiastic attendance at Mass and saying the Rosary every day were at the heart of her devotion. Two of her brothers were monks in the Lebanese Maronite Order and lived in a hermitage five kilometers from Biqā Kafra.

Months of waiting

One evening, a squad of soldiers came to conscript Antoine Maklouf to transport army equipment—he could not say no. After his mission was over, he fell gravely ill and died. It was only after months of disconsolate waiting that Brigitta realized that she was a widow. Two years later, in October 1833, fearing that she would be unable to meet her family’s needs, she married again, to a very pious man from the village.



Saint Charbel Maklouf

Monastery of Saint-Maroun - Annaya - Lebanon

Shortly thereafter, with Brigitta’s consent and in accordance with the practice particular to Eastern churches, he was ordained a priest. Youssef served at his Masses and assisted him in all ceremonies. After church, the child went to school, where he learned to read, write, and pray in Syriac. He also started to work in the fields and take his cow and sheep to graze on the hillsides. He marveled at the beauty of nature, and everything—the trees, the flowers, the birds, the springs—spoke to him about God.

Youssef was almost fourteen and his friends teased him about his piety, calling him “the saint”. He had developed the habit of withdrawing to a cave to meditate and pray. He would sometimes take a little incense from the sacristy and burn it before a little image of the Blessed Virgin MARY that he had placed in his cave. Youssef often went to his hermit uncles to pray and talk with them. He crossed the Qadisha, the Sacred Valley, where many hermits have lived since the 4th century. One day while he was looking for a goat that had wandered off, Youssef entered into a small cedar forest and stopped to pray before an oratory carved out of a tree. All of a sudden, he heard an insistent voice say to him: “Leave everything, come! Follow me!” Without haste, but with resolution, he decided to embrace religious life. One morning in 1851, he quietly left the family home. Fearing his uncle and tutor Tanios, who didn’t want to hear another word about monastic life, and who counted on his nephew’s work, he did not let anyone know in advance that he was leaving. He had deep affection for his mother and family,

but he preferred to leave in secret, without any emotional outpourings. He went to the monastery of Our Lady of Mayfouk, one of the most beautiful monasteries of the Lebanese Maronite Order, where he was received as a postulant. His postulancy lasted no more than a few days and soon, Youssef took the novice's habit. He chose the name Charbel, a name made famous in 107 by a martyr of the Church of Antioch.

"The Lord wants you"

However, in Biqa Kafra they were looking everywhere for Youssef. Finally, a hermit uncle gave away that he had left for the monastery. Tanios was outraged and ran to the monastery with some family members, including Brigitta. The meeting with the young monk, in the presence of the Father Superior, was stormy. Tanios and Brigitta gave numerous reasons for him not to leave home, but Brother Charbel, while expressing his sorrow at having made his family suffer because of his disappearance, remained steadfast in his plan, confident that the Lord was calling him to this way of life. Then Brigitta, overcoming her motherly sorrow, took her son's hands in hers, and told him: "If you were not going to be a good monk, I would tell you: 'Come home!' But I know now that the Lord wants you in His service! And in my suffering at being separated from you, I am telling Him to bless you and to make you a saint."

Brother Charbel spent the first year of his novitiate in the monastery of Our Lady of Mayfouk. His days were filled with all sorts of spiritual and manual activities—singing the Office seven times a day, making bread, doing the laundry, weaving, shoe-repairing, woodwork, etc. He especially needed to learn all of the monks' choral liturgy, because he only knew the ceremonies of the Mass in his village. Silent and obstinate like those who lived in his mountains, he strove to do his best in all things out of obedience. One year later, the novice was directed to Saint Maron Annaya monastery, a house much more remote than the one he had just left. The buildings, made out of poorly cut stones, gave the appearance of a fortress. In the vicinity could be seen a few scattered farmers' houses, huts, steep rocks, old oaks, vines, and brambles. He spent his second year of novitiate in this austere environment. In 1853, Brother Charbel was allowed to take his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and to receive the habit of the professed monk. He was twenty-five years old.

Several days later, the Father Superior told Brother Charbel: "Now that your novitiate has ended, the Most Reverend Father General deems it wise for you to devote yourself to studies toward the priesthood. Tomorrow morning, you will leave for the monastery of Saint Cyprian in Kfifan." The theological college, reserved exclusively for the formation of members of the Order, was located in this monastery. The young monk passionately devoted himself to studying dogmatic and moral theology, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, the

lectures of the ancient monks and of the Fathers of the desert. His teachers, convinced that all knowledge is a gift of the Holy Spirit and that living according to the Spirit of Christ is to possess eternal Wisdom, demanded from their students more spiritual life than book-learning. The school in Kfifan was run by a monk who possessed a remarkable knowledge of Semitic languages and, consequently, could enable his students to appreciate the riches contained in the writings of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, especially those of Saint Ephrem. This champion of the Virgin MARY and Doctor of the Church is dear to the Maronites—they owe to him the majority of their liturgical texts. During his six years of studies, Brother Charbel gained a deep love for Holy Scripture. He had before him the example of Father Hardini, the "saint of Kfifan", whose spirituality could be summed up as an ardent love for JESUS in the Most Blessed Sacrament, and a filial devotion to the Virgin MARY honored in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception. On December 14, 1858, Brother Charbel was present at the death of this venerated monk, whose famous saying, "The wise man is the one who saves his soul!" he would always remember.

Brother Charbel confided to his teacher how honored he was to be able to enter the priesthood. "To be a priest," his teacher answered, "is to be another Christ. To become one, there is only one way—the way of Calvary! Commit to it unfailingly." On July 23, 1859, the brother received priestly ordination. He then returned to Saint Maron Annaya monastery, where a surprise was awaiting him—everyone from his village had come, in the company of his elderly mother, who had been unable to attend his ordination. The young priest blessed them, but he refused to return to the village to celebrate a Mass there.

Witness to a presence

More than ever, the single goal of his life was to seek God and be united with Him by living in accordance with the Rule. "The only reason a monk escapes the world is to live in the presence of God," he had been taught, "and just as love is the life and essence of God, the monk must, by his life and his complete fidelity to the Rule, be a witness to this presence of God in the world." This fidelity is realized by the observance of vows. Father Charbel's obedience was the obedience of a little child toward his parents. He saw in his superiors the person of Christ, and carried out their orders with joy and abandonment, but he also obeyed his brothers, and every person to whom he could render obedience. He practiced absolute poverty, in his clothing as well as in his food and his cell. He never accepted any money. He applied himself vigilantly to keeping the vow of chastity and keeping guard over his senses, which he did, though not without a struggle.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: "Self-mastery is a long and exacting work. One can never consider it acquired once and for all. It presupposes

renewed effort at all stages of life" (CCC, 2342). In addition to purity of intention and purity of sight, the struggle for purity requires recourse to prayer. Speaking to God, Saint Augustine wrote, "I thought that continence arose from one's own powers, which I did not recognize in myself. I was foolish enough not to know... that no one can be continent unless You grant it. For You would surely have granted it if my inner groaning had reached Your ears and I with firm faith had cast my cares on You" (*Confessions*; cf. CCC 2520).

Father Charbel's chastity was the source of his attitude of charity and respect for others. He was able to take jokes made at his expense good-naturedly, and when the opportunity presented itself, he gave back as much teasing as he took.

Father Charbel's prayer became continuous. He spent a great portion of the night in mental prayer. He was very attentive as he said the Mass, imploring divine mercy for all men. Tradition and the Rule of the Lebanese Maronite Order reserved a place of honor for the Most Blessed Virgin MARY. She is the Queen, Patroness, and Protectress of the Maronite people, who do not hesitate to call Her the "Cedar of Lebanon" in its Litanies. Father Charbel liked to say the Rosary every day.

"Better than your wonderful mother"

Although the Maronite monks usually live in the monastery, they carry out an apostolate in the parishes of neighboring villages. Father Charbel did his part to help this mission. One of his confreres wrote of him: "Father Charbel brought joy to those who made their confessions to him. I myself turned to him frequently and gladly." One day, an elderly woman came in a hurry to get Father Charbel: "Father, my son is dying..." The monk went to her home and approached the dying man, who did not want to receive him. But the priest was already at his bedside. "Where are you in pain? If I can make you feel better, I'll gladly do it."—"There's a fire in my chest! I'm dying of thirst!"—"Courage, my child, your sufferings are purifying you. If God wishes to call you to Himself, why are you afraid? The good Lord is infinitely good, better even than your wonderful mother whom you have nevertheless made suffer!... Do you believe that if your mother were God and she were judging you, you would be lost? Aren't you the beloved son of the Immaculate Mother?" The priest then gave the sick man a drink of water that he had blessed—immediately thereafter, the man made his confession and received absolution in the best possible disposition.

Since the time of its founding by Saint Maron, the Lebanese Maronite Order has taken on an immense civilizing task in the spiritual, social, and cultural domains. The monks have learned arts and trades which they have later promoted—one finds among them printers, painters, masons, blacksmiths, joiners, weavers, tailors, cobblers, wine growers, etc. Besides his missionary and

contemplative activities, Father Charbel reserved an important place for manual labor. Year-round, he engaged in domestic and agricultural work.

As the years went by, Father Charbel felt called to the hermit life. At the time, all monasteries in Lebanon had hermitages and hermits. For six years, Father Charbel placed himself under the tutelage of a hermit in his eighties who lived in the hermitage at Annaya. Man can in fact live in solitude to devote himself exclusively to the divine realities, but, as Saint Thomas of Aquinas says, this is beyond the human (*Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 188, a. 8, ad 5). Therefore the Church is very cautious in giving anyone permission to embrace the hermit life, which can be practiced only by those men and women who have already been tested in virtue and in whom one prudently foresees perseverance.

The water that burned

On February 13, 1875, the hermit from whom Father Charbel was receiving formation in the solitary life died. Since the hermitage was vacant, the priest asked to enter it, but his Superior was hesitant. He took a large file off his desk and gave it to Father Charbel, saying, "Would you give me a report on this work? It's quite urgent. I authorize you to stay up late, if necessary." The Father withdrew with the file and passed through the kitchen to have his empty lamp refilled with oil. To play a practical joke on him, one of the servants refilled the lamp with water and brought it back to him. Father Charbel calmly lit his lamp and set to work. The servant was surprised at what happened—the lamp burned as if it had been filled with oil! He ran to the Father Superior, confessed his practical joke to him, and described the unexpected outcome. The Superior went to Father Charbel and reproached him for staying up so late, in spite of the permission he had been given, then took away his lamp. Without justifying himself, Father Charbel asked forgiveness for the love of Christ. The Superior returned to his cell and observed that the lamp indeed contained nothing but water. This miraculous event was a sign for him of the authenticity of Father Charbel's spiritual life, and he gave him permission to enter the hermitage. He would spend twenty-three years there, leaving only for some occasional missions in the area that he was entrusted with for the good of souls.

The hermit is a witness to the absolute primacy of God. In a world led astray by idols, pleasure, money, and concupiscence, he shows that God is the sole end of man, the One Who alone suffices. The hermit is not abandoned to his own devices—he follows a very precise Rule, a detailed discipline, and remains under the constant and careful supervision of a superior. The asceticism that Father Charbel practiced was simple—there was nothing theatrical or spectacular about it. There was no inflexibility in the Father's soul, but a listening to the Holy Spirit, a deep adoration, and an astonishing simplicity of heart in a filial abandonment to Christ.

"Who knows God?" asks Pope Benedict XVI. "How can we know Him? ... For a Christian, the nucleus of the reply is simple: only God knows God, only His Son Who is God from God, true God, knows Him. And He *Who is nearest to the Father's heart has made Him known* (Jn. 1:18). Hence the unique and irreplaceable importance of Christ for us, for humanity. If we do not know God in and with Christ, all of reality is transformed into an indecipherable enigma; there is no way, and without a way, there is neither life nor truth. God is the foundational reality, not a God Who is merely imagined or hypothetical, but God with a human face; He is God-with-us, the God Who loves even to the Cross. When the disciple arrives at an understanding of this love of Christ 'to the end', he cannot fail to respond to this love with a similar love: *I will follow you wherever you go* (Lk. 9:57)" (May 13, 2007).

Father Charbel interceded for all those who were recommended to him or who were brought to him. A man had lost his mind and had become dangerous to himself and to others. He was brought to the hermitage. Father Charbel ordered him to follow him to the chapel, and then read the Gospel over his head. The man was immediately cured!

Protected by the sprinkling of holy water

In the Near East, locusts are a veritable scourge on harvests. They come from the south and devour the grass, the leaves, and even the bark off the trees. "In 1885," a priest recounted, "a swarm of locusts, literally blocking out the sun, swooped down on Annaya and the neighboring villages. Seeing the terrible danger, the Superior ordered the hermit Charbel to bless some water and to go out to sprinkle the fields. All the fields that he was able to reach were protected. The inhabitants of the area sprinkled the crops with the water he had blessed. They were also protected. In gratitude, a hundred or so people

The hermit lifestyle "is not a charism that everyone can follow", recalled Pope Paul VI during the canonization of Saint Charbel. But through their passionate search for the absolute, hermits witness to the fact that God is worth the effort of being adored and loved simply because He is God. They remind us all of the primacy of God, Who destines each man and woman for participation in His Beatitude. May Saint Charbel draw us on this path of love of God and happiness!

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.