



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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March 1, 2006
Ash Wednesday

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

BLESSED are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven (Mt. 5 :11-12). This last beatitude, proposed by Our Lord with particular insistence, remains in effect throughout history. Thus Pope Saint Pius X was able to say in 1911 : “ The Church is a persecuted Church. In fact, if the Church were not the victim of persecution, she would cease to be the Church of JESUS CHRIST, and would lose a proof of her authenticity. ” These words addressed to a synod of the Armenian Catholic Church held in Rome would prove prophetic : a few years later, the Armenian Catholic Church suffered a genuine genocide. Among the victims was Archbishop Ignatius Maloyan, present at this synod. As he was being martyred, the bishop said to his persecutors : “ God forbid that I renounce JESUS my Savior. To spill my blood for my faith is the dearest desire of my heart ! ”

Shoukr Allah (or Shoukrallah) Maloyan was born in April 1869, the fourth of eight children, in Mardin, Armenia, a province in southeast Turkey. Armenia, evangelized by the apostles Saint Jude and Saint Bartholomew, became a Christian nation in 305, when Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the first Armenian Patriarch, baptized King Tiridates. In the 11th century, the country fell into the hands of the Turks. Over the nine centuries that followed, however, the people resisted in order to preserve their language and Christian religion. The Armenians are divided among two confessions : the “ Apostolic Church, ” which does not have ties with the Holy See, and the Armenian Catholic Church, to which the Maloyan family belonged. In the 19th century, a renaissance of Armenian culture emerged, particularly in family life, drawing its source from the Christian faith.

At a very early age, Shoukr Allah showed signs of a religious vocation. At the age of 14, his parish priest sent him to a school for the formation of clergy of the Armenian rite, in Bzommar, Lebanon. There, for five years he devoted himself to studying Armenian, Turkish, Arabic, French, and Italian. Despite health problems which forced him to suspend his studies for three years, he was ordained a priest on August 6, 1896, and would from then on be called Father Ignatius.

Sent on mission in 1897 to Alexandria, then to Cairo, he gained a reputation as an exemplary priest. He himself wrote at this time : “ From morning till evening, I visit the sick, the poor, and the needy. I am totally exhausted when I go to bed in the evening. No one else attends to those unfortunate people, for everyone

pursues his own interests and his personal gain. As for me, I am full of joy in the knowledge that I do God’s will. ” Father Ignatius’ fame as a preacher of retreats and conferences meant he was often invited to preach in both Arabic and Turkish. Zealous for the cause of Christian unity, he formed contacts with the Coptic Christians of Egypt, a Church separated from Rome, and made every effort to respond charitably to their questions regarding the Catholic Church. In his free time, he devoted himself to studying Holy Scripture and languages. The Patriarch of the Catholic Armenians, who lived in Constantinople (Istanbul), noticing his exceptional skills, made him his secretary in 1904. But health reasons soon forced him to return to Egypt, where he remained until 1910.

Tormented by difficulties

At that time, the diocese of Mardin was in a difficult situation. The local bishop was quite old, and no longer up to facing the serious problems that were arising—a lack of well-trained priests, and a difficult economic situation. Exhausted, he retired, and the Patriarch entrusted the administration of the diocese to Father Ignatius. Though received enthusiastically in the city of his birth, he was soon tormented by the same difficulties. “ I am heartbroken over this diocese, ” he wrote. “ Living here is torture, and yet, it was for this that we became priests. ” On October 21, 1911, during a synod of Armenian bishops gathered in Rome, Father Ignatius was elected and consecrated archbishop of Mardin. On his return, he opened schools in which Armenian traditions and literature were given due honor, and looked into all the difficulties his faithful were experiencing, in

particular trying to comfort those who were persecuted for their faith in Christ. Since the end of the 19th century, the sultan Abdul-Hamid had in effect sought to suppress the rebirth of an Armenian national consciousness, which he considered a threat to the unity of the Ottoman empire. In 1895, hundreds of Christian churches, monasteries, and convents were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of faithful massacred. Others, no less numerous, left their homeland. When Archbishop Maloyan took up his position in Mardin, the persecution had not completely come to an end.

In spite of failing health, the bishop demonstrated great courage. His first concern was to help priests and train seminarians. This is a concern which must have a place in the hearts of all faithful, each according to his station : “ There is an urgent need, especially nowadays, for a more widespread and deeply felt conviction that all the members of the Church, without exception, have the grace and responsibility to look after vocations. ... A very special responsibility falls upon the Christian family, which by virtue of the sacrament of matrimony shares in its own unique way in the educational mission of the Church, teacher and mother ” (John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, March 25, 1992, no. 41).

“God takes care of those who suffer”

Shortly after his nomination, Archbishop Maloyan wrote, in a report to the Holy See, “ The people are plagued by disasters—if it is not drought, it is locusts ; and the ever-present greed of the heartless government. ” He requested permission from the civil authorities to go to Europe or America to seek funds, but was denied. In the face of this situation, he asked to be released from his duties. “ Poverty everywhere. The government unceasingly, insidiously harasses me and my people. No one takes pity on us, no one tries to do anything about this desperate situation. What can I do alone, abandoned by all ? ” But the Patriarch refused to accept his resignation. However, God did not abandon him. He gave him the grace to remain faithful to his duties, and to experience the truth of these words of the Apostle Saint Paul : *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord JESUS CHRIST, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God* (2 Cor. 1 :3-4). Archbishop Maloyan wrote to the Superior of Bzommar : “ Be strong, my Father. Be confident that God will give you all the graces you need. Do not be afraid ! God takes care of those who suffer. You will find His fatherly comfort to soothe you in all your trials. So pay no attention to the ingratitude and selfishness of others. As you know, I too have drunk from this

bitter cup. This cup can be quite sweet, above all if we mix it with the cup of Christ Himself. ”

The evening of August 3, 1914, the priests participating in a retreat at the Capuchin church in Mardin learned that Turkey had allied with Germany and Austria against Russia, France, and England. Many did not know who was at war against whom, or why. In October, the Turkish governor ordered the Armenian religious leaders to take care of the meals for the soldiers. Archbishop Maloyan and another bishop, Bishop Tappouni, agreed. Under the pretext of looking for Christian deserters, the police began to keep watch on churches, and search homes, monasteries, and convents, mistreating the women and taking the valuables. The persecution of the Armenians had resumed. To hide its true intentions, the Turkish government bestowed the Imperial Order upon Archbishop Maloyan. But the prelate had no illusions. In fact, the governor of Diarbekir revealed his plan to the Muslim militants : “ It is time to deliver Turkey from its enemy within, by which I mean the Christians. We know that the European nations will make no objection and will not impose sanctions against us, because Germany is on our side ; she will support and help us. ” Government envoys spread the order : “ Spare the life of no Christian. ” Through his brother bishops, Archbishop Maloyan learned other disturbing news : the homes of Christians and churches were being pillaged ; the word “ Christian ” had to appear on soldiers’ identity papers ; crimes against Christians were not prosecuted, etc. In January 1915, all Christian police and soldiers were disarmed ; Christians who worked for the State were dismissed ; an armed militia was formed to arrest and kill Christian men ; as for the women, they would be sold into slavery.

“My greatest desire”

On April 24, 1915, the Turkish Minister of the Interior, Talaat Bacha, announced the elimination of the Armenians, on the pretext of treason against Turkey. On April 30, Turkish soldiers surrounded the Armenian church and bishop’s residence in Mardin, accusing the Church of hiding stores of weapons. Finding none, they set themselves to destroying the archives and records. At the beginning of May, Archbishop Maloyan assembled his priests and brought them up to date on the threats being stirred up against the Armenians. “ I strongly encourage you to strengthen your faith, ” he told them. “ Put all your hope in the Holy Cross set on the rock of Saint Peter. Our Lord JESUS CHRIST built up His Church on this rock and on the blood of martyrs. As for us, poor sinners, may our own blood be mixed with that of the pure and holy martyrs... Our desire is that you place your hope in the Holy Spirit... I have always given

total allegiance to the head of God's Church, the holy Roman Pontiff. My greatest desire is that my clergy and my flock will follow my example and always remain obedient to the Holy See... And now, O my beloved sons, I entrust you to God. I ask you to pray that the Lord give me the strength and courage to go through this passing world with His grace and love and, if it is necessary, to shed my blood for Him." With these words, the prelate showed how highly he valued the most precious gift of faith, as well as his desire to witness to it to the end. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides very enlightening instruction on this subject: "Believing in JESUS CHRIST and in the One who sent Him for our salvation is necessary for obtaining that salvation. Since *without faith it is impossible to please [God]* (Heb. 11:6) and to attain to the fellowship of His sons, therefore without faith no one has ever attained justification, nor will anyone obtain eternal life *but he who endures to the end*. Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man. We can lose this priceless gift, as St. Paul indicated to St. Timothy: *Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith* (I Tim. 1:18-19). To live, grow and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; it must be *working through charity*, abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church" (CCC 161-162).

Events came quickly—on May 15, a number of Armenians were arrested and imprisoned. On the 26th, an Armenian family in Diarbekir was massacred. Although he was offered the opportunity to flee, Archbishop Maloyan declared, "We have embraced our vocation as shepherd of the flock, no matter where it is. We are determined to fulfill our duties toward Our Lord and our flock, even to the point of death." On June 3, the Feast of Corpus Christi, Archbishop Maloyan spoke, in his homily, on these words of JESUS: *For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it* (Mt. 16:25). That very evening, he was arrested and taken to prison along with about fifty members of the community. In the days that followed, many hundreds of Christians of various rites, along with fifteen or so priests, were arrested.

"I will never renounce my faith!"

Summoned to appear before the tribunal, Archbishop Maloyan, standing, was badgered with questions regarding the weapons that he had supposedly hidden; he responded that the matter was entirely made up. Accused of plotting against the government, he replied, "Your accusation is a fabrication. I have never been opposed to the government. On the contrary, I have defended its rights in private as well as in public,

and I do my best to safeguard its interests, for I am its citizen, and have received an imperial decoration and a Turkish title." Then, rolling up his sleeves, the police captain beat the bishop with his belt. He responded to the prelate's objections: "Today, the sword replaces the government." Asked to become Muslim, the bishop made an admirable profession of faith: "You will have to beat me, pierce me with knives, swords, and guns, and cut me into little pieces, for I will never renounce my faith. That is final." After being beaten, the confessor of the faith sighed, "I am suffering in my body the pain of blows, but my soul is filled with joy." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "All must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow Him along the way of the Cross, amidst the persecutions which the Church never lacks. Service of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation: *So every one who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven* (Mt. 10:32-33)" (CCC 1816).

That evening the bishop's feet were tied, and he was beaten with a club. He cried out, "May someone who hears me give me final absolution!" A priest, a prisoner like him, pronounced the words of pardon. Then the courageous bishop's toenails were torn out and they spit in his face. Returned to his cell, he spent his time in prayer, his arms and eyes raised to heaven: "My God, You have allowed all this to happen. Everything depends on You. Make Your power known, for we need it. Help us at this very difficult moment, for we are weak and lack courage. Give us the grace to continue to witness to our religion and to persevere in the struggle for its rights."

"I glory in the Cross"

At the start of June, about 1,600 Christians from Mardin were deported. Forced to walk tied together with ropes, their arms bound in chains, the Christians arrived at a Kurdish village, six hours' march from Mardin. Then the imperial decree was read that condemned them to death for treason. However, those who would become Muslim could return to their village, safe and sound. On behalf of everyone, Archbishop Maloyan answered, "We are in your hands, but we will die for JESUS CHRIST." He then encouraged all the Christians to confess to the priests in the group and had the priests distribute Holy Communion. Witnesses reported that during this time, a luminous cloud covered the prisoners. Some of them were then led to the Sheikhan Grotto, others to the Kalaa Zarzawan Grotto. There, they were savagely massacred, and their bodies thrown into wells. We know these facts from Muslim witnesses who, in their uprightness, did not approve of

this massacre. The next day, other Christians, after having been stripped, without having eaten or drunk anything, were forced to walk barefoot on the stones of the streets and the thorns of the fields. On June 11, feast of the Sacred Heart of JESUS, they were killed at four hours walk from Diarbekir. For Archbishop Maloyan another suffering was reserved—after having seen his flock die, he would die alone. The police captain asked him one last time where he had hidden the weapons and if he would agree to declare himself a Muslim. The bishop replied, “I am surprised to hear you repeat the question. I have told you many times already that I live and die for my faith, the true faith, and that I glory only in the Cross of my sweet Savior.” With that, the captain shot the prelate in the neck. Archbishop Maloyan murmured his last words: “My God, have mercy on me. Into Your hands I commend my spirit.”

“Him I seek”

“The Church progresses on her pilgrimage amidst the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God,” wrote Saint Augustine in the *City of God*. If the faith can be put to the test by a world that too often shows itself to be the enemy of God, we have the consolation of knowing that we are walking in our Savior’s footsteps: *If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you* (Jn. 15:18-19). The martyrs who have imitated JESUS to the point of death are there to remind us of this. “Neither the pleasures of the world nor the kingdoms of this age will be of any use to me,” wrote Saint Ignatius of Antioch. “It is better for me to die in order to unite myself to CHRIST JESUS than to reign over the ends of the earth. I seek Him who died for us; I desire Him who rose for us.”

May the witness of Blessed Ignatius, as well as that of all the Armenian martyrs, enlighten today not only those who inherit their ecclesial traditions, but all those who desire to be true witnesses of the Gospel, for the glory of God and the salvation of souls!

Dom Antoine Marie
O.S.B.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.

– Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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