

## THE LAND OF GIBRAN AND THE BECOMING ABUNDANT OF THE ESSENCE

*“Humility is a Divine garment”*

Mor Isaac of Nineveh (613-700)

We've decided to visit the Lebanon between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of September with my friend Habip Doğan in response to the insistent invitation. On the occasion of this trip, we greeted our Maronite brothers whom I've been longing for to get to know for a long time. We got close and touched each other. We've coalesced with each other. We've taken a stroll together through the corridors of history. We've completed our trip and contacts with the siege of affectionate style created by the cultural richness that has been floated through the ups and downs of historical layers. That style took us to the history of unknown age and left us there almost frozen.

As far as I can see, in the Syriac-Maronite Church many difficult things accomplished when the spiritual intelligence combined with the inner discipline, hard work and personal integrity. In this land, wherein the spiritual and intellectual activities culminate, especially in monasteries, we've observed and experienced the true spirituality that evokes the motives for an unconditional love.

Of course, in parallel with this, here I remembered the expression that says, **“If you cannot rule, you will be ruled.”** while I was experiencing personally the truth of byword that says, **“One for all, all for one”**, which I'd learnt many years ago.

Despite all the facilitations offered by technological innovations, the traditional approaches are being broken apart, human values are being gradually eroded and day-by-day -human- is being fallen into the clutches of spiritual poverty. Therefore, there is so much need for the bridges, instead of walls, that wing the meaning. So, we should build bridges instead of walls in all areas.

Because bridges symbolize the positive flow of the energy of life that flows in the natural cycle of life. Life, on the other hand, means to make sovereign the goodness and development in the energy of life. But the evil is the lack of this energy (love). It is the absence of the goodness. Internal and external walls block the energy of life and restrain the goodness and development.

**Flowing naturally just like a river and being in positive flow in social life means to win. It means to fulfill the law of love. Because humanity is not in cold and dark spaces, but in the light of the paths (bridges) that pass through human. It is in the width of those paths (bridges). It is in cleanliness of those paths (bridges).**

During our visit to the Lebanese Syriac-Maronite Church, we felt that we were taking a trip to the peaks of the soul rather than walking at the top of the mountains. We have seen practices and meanings that confirm the expression of the Lebanese Maronite writer Halil Gibran (1883-1931), that says: **“Sincerity makes all deeds honorable and nice”**, whose works and thoughts -(on the East-West axis)- have a wide impact on the world. We have experienced once again, that how important is the becoming abundant of the essence, the inner freedom, the inner peace. Because this church, in political turmoil of a pluralistic culture, displays a story of success in itself. The basic dynamics and reasons underlying this story of success are exemplary and need to be well understood.

As far as I’ve observed, the love has become wisdom of life and the discipline has become a unique order in the Syriac-Maronite Church with its institutional infrastructure. Since the positive spirit with Christian meanings is constantly infused into the joy of living of people, the becoming abundant of the essence has improved the self-giving in a well-balanced manner. The power of indifference has been destroyed and the effect of unconcern has been undermined. The sweet shadow of callousness has turned into a responsibility and morality. Although there are exceptional cases, the life is not disdained there. On the contrary, both the faces and hearts of people are seen, because people are always looked at from the same distance. The same spirit, although not at the same rate, has surrounded everyone and the meanings of that spirit put the character on the path of transformation. The sincerity of spiritual development which is combined with Christ-consciousness and the services that are done with seriousness has been spread to all areas of life. With the manifestations of this, the church is alive and dynamic in all its dimensions.<sup>1</sup> It is active and effective not only just in spiritual requirements, but also in all social activities. In all socio-cultural-educational fields it serves, the productivity is integrated with decency and propriety. The artistic subtleties are being continued with the spirit fermented by empathetical values. Therefore, finding ourselves within the works and activities that are nourished by the expressive themes has led us to experience the meaningful days during our visit.

When the wisdom of life, which invites us to look to the future with hope, is combined with the becoming abundant of human essence and its productivity, the beauties appear here. Cooling in the shade of spiritual and social development, and the warm hospitality of the Maronite monks who has accompanied us everywhere was restful. In the arms of warm hospitality, enjoying the missing/lost meaning of the SHUMLOYO (complementary) logic was a particular joy for me personally. And thus, I expressed this joy to the Maronite leaders with the words, **“You have discovered the secret.”**

Technological blessings and innovations which are used frequently in daily life mean nothing than just tools that lead to the goal. They are used just for service purposes only. They don’t have any impact on the values of soul. That’s why, approaches that are nourished from spiritual reasons and

which are not noticed at first with the naked eyes become no longer surprising after certain amount of time.

As far as I've observed, the church has a very special place in the hearts and daily works of our Maronite brothers. And this has been turned into concrete support and solidarity by people.

On the other hand, taking a stroll through the soul that exists in the churches and monasteries, which draw attention with their artistic but simple and magnificent architectures, and through the ranges that generate that soul is more fascinating and comprehensive rather than relaxing. Everything here complements each other in a solid harmony and balance. Because every detail has been considered.

At the peaks of mountains, the bell rings that rise from the churches/monasteries which sometimes kiss the heavens with humility and sometimes send love and greetings from the deep valleys (such as the valley Kadisha) to the heavens, appeal to the world of heart and make us, visitors from outside, to feel the spirit of common life based on unity. And they discipline us.

By prayers and rituals that are done in the coolness of the morning and in the dominance of greeneries that cover the mountains, greetings and blessings are sent to the houses which are situated side by side at the top and bottom of mountains and are aligned at different points, and to those who live in them. As far as I've felt, this situation contributes positively to the elegance and kindness of the residents who live in harmony. In all places that we'd traveled and seen, the warmth and geniality of workers evoked this.

In the last days of summer, the sun shining with its silky softness was turning our attention and thoughts to the service concept in the monasteries that are built on forested crests. Without seeing and feeling the spiritual atmosphere embedded here, it is really hard to believe the transforming power of this atmosphere. And it was leading to deep contemplation. This is an important place that needs to be seen by the culture-loving who are concerned about the future of our values and make efforts on this issue without any discrimination of sects. I consider it as a responsibility to make this statement on behalf of the future. Because it is impossible to see the socio-cultural consciousness in any other seeking that exists in the Lebanese Maronite Church which looks alive in every respect.

Although here the proverb that says, "**The neighbor's chicken appears as a goose to another neighbor**" comes to mind, all the intertwined beauties and developments, as proof of this, enlighten the open thoughts. It seems to me that the meanings formed on the foundations of the schools of Nisibis and Edessa, directed by St. Aphrem in history, experience here the real experience of the Syriac culture and make other to experience.

It was as if I was hearing the roads we were driving around, as in the reality of life, were always telling us to **“slow down.”** But I have to admit that while we were strolling around those devious roads, I was feeling myself like a living part of history. Even to the degree, that I’ve realized that here I comprehended better the expression, **“We don’t live to work, and we work to live.”** Now I understand better what this expression means.

A man becomes stranger to himself and others for he drifts away from reading and writing himself, and from trying to know himself. Even though much effort and discipline are required to overcome this drifting away and becoming stranger, first of all, the ways of making the essence (spirit) abundant should be sought. As St. Antony (251-356), who is one of the main anchors of the Christian spirituality and considered as the father of monastic life, states, the whole issue is **“To know ourselves.”** And within this context, he says: **“In order to know God, you must know yourself first.”**

As it is said, **“The one who knows himself, will know his Lord (God)”**, in order not to be unconcerned and not to be infected with the disease of the age, as philosopher/thinker Epictetus (50-135 AD) says, **“The greatest blessing that God has given us is the power to discover the characteristics that we have, but are not aware of.”** And this depends on an active and disciplined work and struggle.

In our present day, when the ordinariness, standardization, individualism/selfishness have become widespread, making efforts as human beings to retrieve the virtues and morals that have left us, to manifest our human depth and to know ourselves will be comforting. It’s not just about being successful, being productive, and having a good career, making a lot of money. The main challenge is not to succeed, but to discover our true distinctive talents and bring them to life to the fullest extent as possible. **The issue is to get rid of the self-assertion in the house, work environment, church, society, politics and administration, and to capture the mood that will be able to help to be servant with a complementary approach nourished by the SHUMLOYO principle.** And despite all, to experience and make others to experience this understanding by the principle **“experience and make others to experience”**, as the Lebanese Maronite Church does. Therefore, we were very happy with our contact with this church. And we were elated. As our responsibility, in all our pleasant and meaningful meetings, and mutual conversations we have expressed that it is a necessity and obligation for the Maronite Church to embrace our ancient Syriac language. We’ve sensed that this, our thought, has resounded within the existing awareness. Even to the degree, that in our meetings with important personalities we were encountering the message, **“Our historical roots reach down to the Syriac language. Syriac language means our historical roots. Please, do not neglect nor lose the Syriac language, as we Maronites have done so.”** I hope that this outstanding

and vital sensitiveness and awakening will bear lasting fruits. If this, our desire and wish, comes true, then the ancient Syriac language will attain the necessary aliveness and reach the opportunities of the age more comfortably by the efforts of the Maronite monasteries built at the peaks of mountains.

I think those who go to Lebanon and those who are going to visit specifically the Syriac-Maronite Church, will realize the spiritual-cultural accumulation that has become a civilization in itself. Because the way of comprehending a person, a place, a land, a region passes through meeting and getting close to them. Impressions gained from distant readings can sometimes be misleading. Genuine touches and genuine conversations are needed in order to comprehend and understand. We should develop this in order to find these very powerful dimensions and meanings of our culture that keeps alive us and that we still trying to make it alive in our hearts. I wrote my impressions to express that I had found those meanings. While doing it, I share these thoughts without forgetting that every person, every place, every country has its own story with ups and downs.

I've learned many things from my contacts with the Lebanese Syriac-Maronite Church. Enjoying every moment... gently... and slowly.

But, as it is said, you should never say **"I've become"** in order to make abundant the essence. If you say so, then you haven't. The moment you say, **"I've become"**, it will be the end.

Therefore, learning (continuously learning) is actually educating ourselves. It is making abundant ourselves. To raise ourselves and comprehension to a higher level. We should not forget that must reach the level of humanity first since we are human beings. Then we must crown it with any kind of service.

Because, according to Abraham Maslow, who is the doyen father of the Psychology that says, **"Everyone is a teacher and everyone is a student continuously"**, **"One of the goals of education should be to teach the worthiness of life."**

Rational minds serve human beings because they are **"human"**. I would like to remind you here a social determination. A social thinker says: **"The events that make human beings human are so serious experiences and storms, that you will either find a door at the end of the road or this road will turn into a labyrinth and you will be lost and annihilated in that labyrinth. You will look for a warm touch that will hold and lift you up. Sometimes that hand is so close to you, but you don't see it, and sometimes that hand finds you, but you don't know its value."**

Most of the time in the flow of life, that road that touch, that key is there... They are within us. Our job is to get in there and find them. And when we find them, it is to know the value of them, to serve them with awareness, and to develop them.

As it is said, **“What is eternally good is not what accords with our advantage, but with justice.”**

Yusuf Beğtaş<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Within the distribution of tasks, the Maronite Church, with its institutions and organizations, cultural literary field and audiovisual press publication in particular, provides help and service to sick, needy, poor, weak, homeless, mentally disabled and drug addicted people without discrimination of any kind based on religion, language, race and sex. There are 1200 mental patients, who lost their mental faculties, in the hospitals (that belong to monasteries) conducted by clergy. These mental patients belong to Christian, Muslim and other beliefs. The nuns serve and care for them day and night with great humility that comes from devotion. In another hospital, drug addicted people are treated and brought back to life by specialist priests/nuns.

Humility can be sensed everywhere as if it reminds the word, **“A full spike leans, but an empty spike stands upright.”** Because the humble person gets inspired from life, other people and the whole universe, and inspires other as much as he/she can. The humble spirit is combined with kindness and compassion. Serving people is a matter of honor for it.

**Humility is the withdrawal of ego to its limits. Knowing its own place. Respecting itself, others and all living beings. Humility is the power that aligns our character with our soul. Humility is a way of cognizance. It is to silent “Me” and put it in its own place, in order to hear “You.”**

Humility is not to lower down our own values, but to value others. Humility is to open doors of the heart to all beings by tying up our ego. It is not to act superior, but to see yourself equivalent to other people and even to all living beings. It is to put your ego in its own place. It is not to harbor a self-assertion. It is to hear the unique divine whisper that surrounds the universe and to withdraw your ego. As a wise man said, **“As the darkness reveals the light, the humility evinces the light of heaven in a man.”**

Isaac of Nineveh (613-700), a popular writer the Syriac culture, also declares that, **“Humility is a divine garment.”**

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<sup>2</sup> I dedicate this article, with my gratitude and admiration, to the works carry out by and the values represented by the St. Ishaiah Monastery, which belongs to the order of El- Rahbâne'l-Antûniyye el-Mârûniyye in Lebanon and to the abbot of the Monastery, Very. Rev. Abuna Fadi Almussalam.

Mor Ishaiah, son of Sumagos, who is the governor of Aleppo, is a student of Saint Eugene. He lived between the years of 351-440. He started to live as a hermit in Mor Eugene Monastery, which is located on an uphill of the Bagok (Izla) Mountain in Nisibis, district of Mardin.