

The Levant, Mount Lebanon, the Maronite church

The Levant is the term used in the past to designate the group of cities known for their commercial expertise and through which the Europeans paved their way to the east; From Istanbul to Iskandariah, all the way through Izmir and Adana (Turkey) and Beirut (Lebanon). These cities were like a melting pot for various cultures where languages, traditions and religions fused together.

The Middle East region has been known by different names along history; among which the term Levant, a term coined by the merchants of Pisa (Italy) immediately after the arrival of the Crusaders (in the end of the 11th century) and the term "Land of Syria" which was coined by the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. As for the French, they coined the term Proche Orient meaning Near East; the term Le Levant meaning the Orient or the direction of the sunrise. The Levant has a longitude of about 600 Km going from Iskenderun in Turkey, all along the Mediterranean coast to Gaza in the south; and latitude of about 100 Km going from the geographical depth starting from the sea to the desert borders.

Mount Lebanon

Among the rise of great nation and empires in history, there lies a beautiful, small and majestic mountain on the coast of the Levant.

This mountain known as Mount Lebanon extends along a distance of about 100Km and its highest peak reaches an altitude exceeding 3000m.

The Lebanon Mountains belong to a mountain range extending from the south of Mount Taurus in Turkey all the way through the Alawiyin Mountains in Syria, reaching Jabal Amel in the south of Lebanon. This range of mountains declines in the south and looks more like slopes in Galilee and Jerusalem.

Mount Lebanon was inhabited since the 3rd century BC by various tribes and groups of people. These people have their origins rooted in other regions of the Orient; such as the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq.

Mount Lebanon never became a unified community having a single identity and a common destiny.

It is worth to note that the term "Mount Lebanon" was subjected in turn to historical development.

Thus, until the end of the 16th century, this term was strictly used to designate the northern regions of the Lebanon Mountains, namely Jbeil, Batroun, Bcharre, and Ehden which were inhabited by the majority of Maronites. Whereas, other regions of the Lebanon Mountains had been known by different independent terms, namely Keserwan region, Shouf region, Jabal Amel and other regions in the South.

Also, there was the region of Akkar, Baalbek, Hermel and the Bekaa Valley. The Shouf Mountain was known by a more frequent term, which is the Druze Mountain, and the governorship was in the hands of a Druze feudal lord or Emir. After that, the term "Mount Lebanon Emirate"

became locally used in the second decade of the 17th century and its Emir (prince) became “the prince of Mount Lebanon”.

However, this fact did not matter much to the Ottoman Empire as the Sultan continued to issue an official decree called (firman) by which he appoints “the Druze Emir” (who is practically a local leader assigned the task of tax collection to the benefit of the Ottoman Empire to which he vows commitment) in the region of the “Druze Mountain” even after the Emir of Mount Lebanon became a Maronite since the year 1770 (Prince Youssef Chehab).

During the French Mandate of Lebanon (1918-1943), Father Henri Lammens launched the concept of Lebanon the shelter. Nevertheless, this theoretical concept does not stand on solid grounds given the dominating historical facts; and this is because the Lebanon Mountains are not like the Himalayas and their inhabitants do not possess the power requirements to stop the military assaults along history. Thus, in most cases, when the Crusaders or Arabs or other armed groups wanted to invade the inhabited regions in Mount Lebanon, their attempts were crowned with success.

The religious minorities took five centuries to arrive and settle in Mount Lebanon and this was during the period between the 7th century and the 12th century. Yet, Mount Lebanon was not a virgin land empty of people before that period. Since the ancient times, Mount Lebanon has always attracted expeditions as it was inhabited. Even during the Phoenician era, there were fifty cities and villages in Mount Lebanon separated hundred meters from each other.

Moreover, Lebanon was inhabited by indigenous people ever since the dawn of history, in addition to those who immigrated to Lebanon from other regions; such as the Phoenicians, the Arabs, the Persians, The Turks and others. As for the religious communities, these were also an amalgam of the emigration of various people who embraced before their coming to Lebanon the precepts of the Maronite, Druze, or Shiite sects or local tribes which embraced any of the principles of these three sects. It is worth to point out that archaeological excavations have shown houses and agricultural structures dating back 5000 years in history, the fact which proves the community of social life in Mountain Lebanon.

After the Levant was under the Arab Islamic rule, the Islamic Empire faced a series of plights, internal conflicts and assassinations. These occurrences were simultaneous with hardships that Islamic Religion was going through and which lead to the Sunnite-Shiite chasm. The conflict erupted among the ranks of Islamic leaders about the priority in holding political office after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The office of the successor of Allah’s prophet, (the Caliph) raised much controversy and aroused conflicts.

Within this geopolitical given, and in the middle of these great historical currents, there grew a small group whose destiny was to face all these conflicts mostly by itself. These men sprang from the rock fortresses and spread in the plains. They were armed by dignity and faith for several centuries, and they have known the sweet taste of victory and the bitter taste of defeat as well as loads of sufferings in most cases. Furthermore, their history was characterized by anxiety and faith; for these men were students of liberty and prayer. From this small group rose an ascetic monk named Saint Maron who lit the torch of the Maronites after his death.

In the first quarter of the fifth century AD, an ascetic monk and priest died in the region of Cyrrihus (Korosh) in Northern Syria between the two cities of Aleppo (Syria) and Antioch (Turkey). It was a region known administratively in the Roman –Byzantine period as Syria Prima. The Maronite anchorite named Maron was Aramaic and spoke Syriac.

Theodoret, the Bishop of Cyrrhus (Cyr) wrote about Maron in his book entitled "The history of the righteous men of God". He states the following: "Maron's life was not only restricted to that of a hermit's daily routine as he added to it a touch guided by his heavenly wisdom.

Thus, through this divine wisdom, he used to perform miracles and so when he gave his blessings, fever faded away, evil spirits were defeated and various diseases were cured by his single remedy, which is prayer..."

Saint Maron did not institute a Church or an Order for monks and he did not write books about theology or philosophy. All what he did was consecrate his life to Jesus Christ in a unique way. Also, he had many followers; such as monks and sisters like Sr. Keira, Sr. Marana and Sr. Domnina who learned from St. Maron and treaded in his footsteps.

Despite the fact that St. Maron died before the year 423, the year in which Theodoret was raised to the bishopric of Cyrrhus, his followers, among whom monks and anchorites, had to wait about a quarter or a third of a century after the decease of their spiritual master to be organized altogether in a monastery along the Orontes River in Syria which holds their master's name and is known by St. Maron Monastery.

After he succeeded in proving the veracity of his views in the Chalcedonian Council in 451, Theodoret of Cyrrhus attempted to establish a monastery for these anchorite monks, known as the monks of St. Maron. These monks were proponents of the Chalcedonian Council and of its theological thoughts and doctrine, that is, they believed in the teachings of the One Holy Apostolic Church. The Monastery was built in 452 by an Order from the Byzantine Emperor Marcian and soon after it became the solid fortress of the Orthodox-Catholic doctrine according to the Chalcedonian definition in the region of "Syria Prima". This monastery was not only a place of prayer and work but it was a fortress for the orthodox-catholic doctrine and the beginning of a mission.

Some documents, which date back to that period show that there was a relationship between the monks of the Monastery of St. Maron along the Orontes in Syria and the Pope in Rome. Perhaps the letters which both parties exchanged are a solid proof to that hypothesis; such as the letter addressed by Pope Leo the first to the Bishop Theodoret in April 452 and after that the correspondence between the monks of the Monastery of St. Maron and Pope Hormisdas in the aftermath of the massacre which occurred near the town of Shizr in 517 and which led to the murder of three hundred fifty monks of St. Maron's Monastery. Thus, the contact between Rome and the Maronites is not new, even though it was discontinued along history due to political and geographical factors.

Moreover, this relationship between Rome and the Maronites might have prevented these latter to become isolated and narrow-minded; for it allowed them to learn about the theological and cultural developments of the West.

The prime objective for the establishment of St. Maron's Monastery along the Orontes was to preserve the Chalcedonian doctrine; yet this Monastery flourished until it became the center for many monasteries branching off it in the region of Korosh. With the help of the believers

who believed in its mission and its truthful doctrine, the Monastery became a Church providing the continuity of the Apostolic Contract in Antioch. This fact was reflected in the independence of the Maronites when they elected a Patriarch (in the end of the seventh or the beginning of the eighth century) and Bishops from the monks of St. Maron's Monastery.

Among the lofty ideals behind the establishment and crystallization of the first Maronite community was liberty. According to Dr. Charles Malek, one of the authors who wrote the World Charter for Human Rights issued by the United Nations in 1948, the Maronite community, first and foremost, sought and fought for freedom, sovereignty and the preservation of its heritage and values as well as the providing of a secure future. Consequently, when the living conditions became difficult at the dawn of the Arab Conquest, the Maronites were deprived of freedom and of spiritual and material stability; and so they could not stay in the Northern rich land of Syria, which lied at the line between great conflicting powers at that time: The Byzantines and the Arabs. In addition, there was their old-new everlasting conflict with the Syriac Orthodox (Monophysites or Jacobites). Thus, the Maronites chose to migrate and live elsewhere for the sake of continuity. They preferred to lead an austere life with freedom in the wild Lebanese mountains with its sinuous roads rather than lead a comfortable easy life in the rich plains of Northern Syria where they live in a continuous and almost everlasting conflict and where they face the danger of losing their political, cultural and religious freedom and identity. Thus, by making this choice, they experienced something unique in history; a true deep evangelical experience reflected in St. Matthew's Gospel in the following verse "When they persecute you in one town, run away to another one..." (Matthew 10:23).

Moreover, the Maronites took the old path chosen by early voyagers, that which is along the Orontes River until they reached its source in Hermel (Lebanon). From there, they climbed the Lebanon Mountains alongside the Cedars region and the village of Aqura where the cavaliers of the Arab conquerors couldn't reach them.

Thus, the Maronites settled consecutively in the mountains and valleys in the regions of Mnaytra, Bsharre and Baskinta. Soon after, these Syriac Maronites joined the Maronites in the Lebanese Mountains and the Lebanese natives who preached the Gospel and they formed altogether a single nation and a single community known by the name of Maronites.

The Syriac Maronites took turns in migrating to the Lebanese Mountains along several years. Their migration lasted until the middle of the tenth century after their mother monastery Beit Moroon along the Orontes in Syria was completely destroyed in 938. That day, a majority of these Maronites migrated to the Lebanon Mountains. Furthermore, it is also mentioned in old traditional tales that a group of them migrated during that period to the island of Cyprus.

Ever since their migration to the Lebanon Mountains between the seventh and the tenth century and until the arrival of the Crusades to the East at the end of the eleventh century, the Maronites went through a tough experience reflected in austerity and isolation, whereby they lived away from the limelight. Nonetheless, this isolation allowed them to build a new structure

for their church, the Church-Nation; whereby the Patriarch was considered a religious, civil, and military leader at the same time.

After that tough experience, the Maronites lived a totally different one when the Crusades were flooding to the East. This fact gave the Maronites the opportunity to open up to the rest of the world. Thus, they remained faithful to their religious doctrine and their sole concern was to be committed to their religion and live it practically in their daily lives, treading in the footsteps of their master, while they endured pain with patience and heroism. Yet, as soon as the Crusaders were completely defeated in the end of the thirteenth century, the Ayubis and later the Mamluks took reign over the whole Levant.

The Mamluks (1260-1516) started their reign by directly leading two battles against the Maronites in the region of Bsharre.

The first battle was in 1268 after the Maronites gave a helpful hand to the Crusaders in Tripoli and helped them to resist the blockade imposed by the Mamluks. After the blockade failed to make the Crusaders surrender, the Mamluks held violent disciplinary actions against the Maronite villages of Bsharre region.

As for the second battle, it occurred in 1283 when thousands of Mamluk soldiers went to conquer Bsharre. Consequently, the young Maronite peasants became alert soldiers under the leadership of their Patriarch Daniel Hadshiti who led the resistance of his people.

During the battle, the Mamluks took by the sword the people of Bsharre, Ehden, Hasroun and Hadath el Jebbe, which led to the fleeing of some villagers, who sought refuge in the caves of Assi el Hadath and Assi Hawqa in the heart of the Qadisha Valley. However, because of the betrayal of one of the Maronite leaders, the Patriarch was taken as a hostage and murdered.

The battles led by the Mamluks in Mount Lebanon lasted around four decades and resulted in the killing of thousands of the villagers there. Moreover, during the last battle, which lasted seventeen months between the years 1305 and 1306 and which was led by the Mamluk Sultan Al Nasir Qalawun, the number of dead people from the Shiite community reached fifteen thousand in the regions of Kesrewan, Jbeil, and other regions on the coast. Meanwhile, the Mamluks forced the people who survived the battle to leave the coastal regions and go to the cold mountains and to the Bekaa in order to stop all contact with the Crusaders. After the coastal regions and the neighboring villages were evacuated from their Shiite and Maronite inhabitants and the big cities were evacuated from the Crusaders, the Mamluks launched a demographic settlement operation; bringing thereby Sunni tribes from the Kurds and the Turkmen to settle along the coastal area and withstand the potential reprisal of the Crusaders and the Shiites.

Furthermore, the aftermath of the Mamluk battle against the Maronites in the region of North Lebanon was similar to the battle in Mount Lebanon, for they also killed thousands of people and took the Maronite Patriarch as a hostage. Thus, many people fled to the island of Cyprus which still has a few Maronite villages today.

The Mamluk reign in the Orient was one of the most oppressive and dark eras. Their consecutive battle against the Maronites exhausted these latter who lost all shelter and were facing an almost fading away existence. This was due to the fact that their number was shrinking as well as their provisions, ammunitions, and presence in the cities; such as Aleppo, Tripoli, Damascus, Beirut, Akka (Acre) and Jerusalem. Those who survived among them organized a sit in in the regions of Bsharre, Mnyatra and the neighboring towns. Moreover, the Maronites were struck by poverty and misery and what aggravated the situation, was the natural disasters, the isolation from the rest of the world and the long distance far from commercial activities. Thus, they had to endure the hardships because of their cultural heritage and so, the consecutive ordeals made them an easy prey to every upcoming emergency. However, they overcame the difficulties armed with patience and prayer for the sake of preserving their religious and political freedom; as the Maronite Patriarch Mar Nassrallah Boutros Sfeir states: "This freedom, if we are deprived of it, we are deprived of life." In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Ottomans took hold of the Levant and removed the Mamluk Sultanate from the stage of history.

Furthermore, the Ottomans granted the lands of the Shouf mountain area to committed princes from the Maans, a great Druze feudal family. Soon after, one of these princes known as Amir Fakhr ad Din (1585-1635) became distinguished. He encouraged the Maronites to move from the northern regions in Mount Lebanon to the Metn and Shouf areas. By doing so, he wanted to benefit from the Maronite workforce and from the contact between the Maronites and the West. Also, he wanted to recruit the Maronite men in his army to fight any potential battle against the Ottomans. Thus, he let the Maronites dwell in the regional borders with the Druze so that they form a kind of wall to protect the Emir and his people in any war with the Ottomans. Yet, the Maronites mixed with the Druze soon after and lived together with them as good neighbors.

Patriarch El Douaihy states in his general history book "Tarikh Al Azmina" the following: "During the reign of Fakhr ad Din, the Christians led a decent life, whereby they built churches, mounted horses, wore clothes like other citizens and decorated belts and held decorated knives and guns." Also, they called upon the French missionaries who came to Mount Lebanon, for most of its army soldiers were Christians and its civil servants were Maronites." Indeed, as Kamal Salibi states, the missionaries came because the Emir "saw in the Maronites the virtues of faithfulness, honesty and trustworthiness; thereby bestowing upon them favors." Thanks to these virtues and many others, the Maronites in particular and the Christians in general, were able to win the friendship and the preference of the Sunni Chehab Emirs who "treated the Maronites and the Druze equally." Thus, the Chehabs established contact with France and the West through the mediation of the Maronites. These good relationships between the Chehabs and the Maronites led a part of their Sunni Chehab Emirs and their relatives from the Druze Abi Lamaa family to convert to Christianity. Consequently, the Emirate of the Chehabs became a Maronite Emirate without any predetermined plan conceived by the Maronites.

This period in the history of the Maronites was followed by a state of stagnation in the Church characterized by a political and social instability in the life of the Maronite Church reflected in the fall of the Chehabs Emirate in 1841 and in the ensuing conflicts between the Maronites and

the Druze between the years 1841 and 1860 as well as in the period of the Mutassarifiyya and later in the declaration of Greater Lebanon in 1920 and the birth of the Republic of Lebanon in 1926. Thus, the Maronites had a leading role throughout all these historic instabilities, which led to their holding the office of Presidency in Lebanon, the sole country in the East which has a Christian president.

The Migration of the Maronites

With the fall of the Chehab Emirate in 1841, the great influential European countries, in agreement with the Ottoman Empire put a new political Order in Mount Lebanon known as the Double Qaimaqamate. However, this administrative arrangement came soon to an end after the 1860 massacres, whereby a new order was born under the name of Mutassarifat. The Mount Lebanon Mutassarifat extended along the distance of the current Lebanon with the exception of the Bekaa, Akkar, Beirut, and the South. Thus, the small area which Mount Lebanon occupied and its inability to access seaports and agricultural fields were major reasons for the increase in the people's migration. All these reasons formed clear motivations for the migration of the Lebanese youth. In addition, these young people dreamed of making big fortunes and becoming rich in America; the land of the plenty. Thus, the number of people seeking better opportunities outside the country increased noticeably especially that they wanted to run away from their desperate situations and find a safe haven where better life conditions are found.

The first new waves of migration towards both the American and African continents and later the Australian one started with the establishment of the new political order, the Mutassarifat.

The countries of South America (Brazil and Argentina) in addition to the United States of America in North America were the main countries to which the Lebanese people in general and the Maronites in particular migrated. The means for survival in the Mutassarifat were getting narrower and narrower as well as the job opportunities in the government offices. Thus, migration became a solution for poverty and a way to become rich.

According to the historical references, Antonios Bachaalani from Salima (Baabda Caza) was the first emigrant, since he immigrated to the United States of America in 1854 and died there after two years.

The reasons for emigration can be summed up as follows:

- The deteriorating economic situation dominating Mount Lebanon and the ensuing poverty prevailing among citizens.
- The negligence of the local authority (the Mutassarifat) reflected in the absence of planning fruitful projects which could provide job opportunities for citizens.

In general, the emigrants travelled from the Port of Beirut by ships which used to stop at several stations (especially in Egypt) before reaching the Port of Marseilles (France) where emigrants had to wait probably for weeks until other ships were ready to travel to the American Continent.

In addition to the sufferings endured by the emigrants in their voyages, whereby they were treated in an inhumane way most of the times, many of them, especially in the first stages of migration, upon their arrival to these countries, were subject to theft, pickpocketing and loss. Also, some of them were victims of opportunistic middlemen. In fact, these emigrants did not know how to speak English, Spanish and Portuguese, which were the languages of the countries to which they emigrated, and accordingly they were not able to communicate properly with the natives. Only a few emigrants among them knew where they were going and what was waiting for them. Most emigrants worked as merchants during that period and they were known as *colporteurs* (that is, an ambulant merchant who carries his merchandise on his back). Moreover, they were distinguished by their bold, courageous, risk-taking, and perseverant nature. In general, they were determined people and soon the first emigrants among them totally mixed with the western societies.

When the First World War broke out (1914-1918), disasters, oppression, famine and obscurity prevailed and thus Mount Lebanon witnessed a massive emigration wave. In spite of the poor miserable condition dominating Mount Lebanon at that time, this region received in its turn ten thousands of people who were persecuted and who sought refuge in it, coming from neighboring regions; such as the Armenians, Syriacs and others who fled massacres and extermination executed by the Ottomans who were in turn on the verge of decline.

This period in the history of the Maronites concurred with a state of stagnation in the Maronite Church and with a social and political instability and turbulence... That labor came to an end with the end of World War I and with the birth of the Greater Lebanon in 1920 and the birth of the Republic of Lebanon in 1926. The Maronites had a leading role in all these turbulent events, which led them to holding the office of the Presidency of the Republic of Lebanon, the only country in the East headed by a Christian.

After the end of World War I, Lebanon was under the French Mandate (1918-1943). Soon after, the State of Greater Lebanon was established (1920) through the intercession of the Maronite Patriarch Elias Howayek (1899-1931), then came the institution of the Lebanese Constitution and the proclamation of the Lebanese Republic (1926) which is the first republic in the Arab World.

After that, Lebanon was declared an independent state in 1943 and in 1946 there was the withdrawal of the last French troops. This historic event started a new era and a new period of economic stability and prosperity in Lebanon. Yet, soon came the 1958 crisis to disturb the reigning peace and prosperity. Nonetheless, Lebanon came over that crisis and continued the plan of development and prosperity in all economic sectors...but in politics there are always other objectives and plans. Thus, in 1975, war broke out again and this time, it was a ferocious

war which destroyed everything standing in its way. As a result, Lebanon witnessed a second wave of emigration among all religious groups and particularly among the Maronites. These emigrants travelled to Canada, the United States, Australia, Europe and the Arab Gulf countries.

The worst abominable part of that war was in its last atrocious chapters or in what is known as the wars of Liberation and Elimination where the situation got more aggravated, the country more destroyed and the Christians more divided and more willing to emigrate. After the Civil War ended in 1990 and the Order of the Second Republic or what is known as the Taef Agreement was instituted and the Syrian hegemony was prevailing as well as the persecution and tracking of the opposing Christian leaders and young people, the waves of emigration continued to break among the Christians in general and the Maronites in particular.

These are historic facts which are constant and unchanging no matter how circumstances and regimes change. These are the Maronites coming from far and aiming continuously at living in freedom and dignity first and foremost and at winning their bread in the second place. These are the Maronites, sons and daughters of this land who were used to brave the elements of nature and face dangers! Wherever they landed, be it in Lebanon or in the diaspora; from Europe to America, to Australia, to the Arab Gulf, to Africa... the Maronites are the same unchanging fighters for freedom. This is how they are and this is how they should always be, a people armed with determination, courage and ingenuity.

Within that frame and within the complete flow of incidents... it is natural to highlight the role of the Lebanese Maronite Order, which in turn originates from the Maronite Church and the Lebanese territory! Undoubtedly, the shortest and easiest way to tell about the role of the Lebanese Maronite Order and its monasteries as well as its educational and social establishments in providing a stable, free and secure Christian presence in Lebanon and in the East as well as in providing a future and a continuity for that Christian presence, is delving into the Maronites and into their history. Thus, the Maronites migrated or were forced to migrate (there is no difference in both cases) from Northern Syria during the seventh and eighth centuries and sought refuge in Mount Lebanon. This migration wave was a reaction to their treatment with humiliation and their fear of losing their identity. In fact, this movement was nothing but a political position reflected in their refusal of oppression and cruelty which they were victims of. As a result, they shared with the people of Mount Lebanon, a single identity since they fled to their villages. Hence, the geographical places in which they settled reflect their attachment to freedom and their refusal to bow to external powers which aim at eliminating their freedom and existence. Moreover, the historical presence of the Maronites is represented in the fact that they are **a group of people who want to live in freedom and this is the most important reason for their migration from Syria to Lebanon, from the land which threatens their identity and takes away their freedom to the land which protects them. This protection does not imply isolation and solitude rather it means absolute preservation of one's identity.**

The Maronites owe the survival of their presence throughout history and until the present day to two important establishments which have marked their history: the Monastic Orders and the Patriarchate. The Maronites have known monastic life from the very beginning and brought its precepts with them to Mount Lebanon. However, the daily life of the monks (in Mount Lebanon) was not organized in the beginning and was not running according to determined laws and decrees. Thus, monasteries were independent of each other and were under the authority of a Bishop. Monks and sisters lived in most monasteries as a single group in addition to believers, anchorites and hermits spread here and there waiting for someone to unite them all under a single order.

The situation remained so until the establishment of the Maronite Order in 1695 as a result of a new monastic action taken by four Maronite young men who came from Aleppo and were known as: Gebrayel Helou, Abdalla Qara'illi, Youssef el Bitn and later Germanos Farhat.

These men established the Maronite Order in 1695. This order was first known as the Aleppine Order. After that, in 1706 it was known by the name of the Lebanese Maronite Order, which is still used today, because it was established in Mount Lebanon and grouped monks from the Lebanese mountain villages which are considered as its origin and shelter.

The objective behind the establishment of this order was to organize a monastic way of life which essentially existed and is, in fact, original in the Maronite Church and in that particular mountain. In reality, this Lebanese mountain was destined to be the womb for many minorities in the East and the cradle of their striving for freedom because it has held resistance against enemies and endured sufferings since the Maronite emigration to it and till the present crisis which threatens the Maronites' destiny and identity.

The Lebanese Maronite Order was closely connected to Mount Lebanon to the point of being identical to it. This sameness was not only theoretical but it was reflected in everyday life whereby the monks reacted naturally with their environment in the fields of agriculture, industry (silk...) and education as well as in the decisions and choices pertaining to the nation at critical crossroads in history; such as (the fall of the Emirate in 1841, the massacres in 1845, the uprising of peasants in 1858, the massacres of 1860, the establishment of the Mutasarrifate and the breaking out of World War I ...). The local monks are as a matter of fact, the sons of the villages of Mount Lebanon. They are the children of this land and they are used to taming its nature and facing any threatening dangers.

The founding fathers of the Order planned its objectives which are: work, prayer and mission (going from the monastery and back to it). Furthermore, the activities of these young founders formed a sort of general structure to the newborn Order.

The main essential activities of these monks focused on an idea; which is about "their community, environment and people" and this matter was clearly treated in their monastic Order. Hence, we can deduce from the aforementioned that these monks were aware of the greatness of the heritage and history they had. A legacy which reflects indeed the present state of their people! Moreover, they were aware that they are a young group having not only a cause... but reasons for existing and being independent. Thus, later they insisted on staying

faithful to their mission and preserve their history as well as defend their cause and independence.

In the middle of the twentieth century, the Order established the Monastery of the Holy Spirit-Kaslik to gather all young people under its roof. Thereafter, the Monastery became a university for higher education since the year 1961. After a few years, the Lebanese state signed the "Cairo Agreement" (1969) with the Palestine Liberation Organisation. This agreement included among its articles the right given to Palestinians to use their arms in the Lebanese territory against Israel, which was in turn retaliating against the Palestinians by aiming at their targets on the Lebanese territory reaping victims and destruction. This fact concurred with the flow of the Palestinian Fedayeen (guerrillas of the Palestine Liberation Organisation) to Lebanon after the September 1970 events in Jordan which also concurred with the death of Abdul Nasser and the conversion of the Lebanese Muslims from partisans of Abdul Nasser to partisans of Arafat.

Such was the situation: civil wars, regional conflicts as well as an international cold war. In fact, every regional war or conflict was reflected on Lebanon's domestic affairs especially in the issue of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict. Thus, the Christians lived a period of frustration and fear which increased their desire for emigration whereby they can live elsewhere in freedom and security.

In the middle of all these changes and dangers, the Lebanese Maronite Order was determined dutifully to be ready for any turbulence and face any threats because, as Dr. Charles Malek states "the historical dangers are knocking at the doors of Christianity in Lebanon and in the East and threatening to exterminate it." Thus, being issued from the Lebanese Maronite Order, the Holy Spirit University-Kaslik had to be the center for conceiving plans for resistance and preparing strategies for attacks. What is meant by attacks here is not military attacks where violence has a say but a revolution based on thought, culture and civilization where words are effective. This is so because its arms are its words, its pen and its stance. In fact, the university is totally aware of the importance of raising conscious poised and reasonable minds among young people especially in issues pertaining to the presence and continuity of Christians in the East.

Accordingly, to put things not only in its general frame but more in its eastern maronite frame, we should start by telling about the School of Hawqa (North Lebanon) which was founded in 1624. At that time, the Maronite Patriarch, Youhanna Makhoul (1608-1633) gave an order to establish the first clerical school for Maronites in Mount Lebanon. This school was concerned in providing education for girls and boys who used to study more than six languages, among which: Arabic, Syriac, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian and others. Moreover, they used to study the science of logic and mathematics. After finishing the requirements in Hawqa, these young students were sent to the School Of Rome to pursue their education. The Maronite School of Rome was established in 1584 by order of Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585). The Holy See wanted to found a clerical school in Rome in order to educate the Maronite clergy so that they, in turn, educate their people and communities when they return back to their country...

Later, after the closing of the School of Rome (1808) the responsibility for educating the clergy was borne by the School of Ain Warqa (Ghosta-Kesrewan) which was established in 1789, that is, around the date of the closing of the School of Rome.

Starting from these given facts, the Holy Spirit University, which dawned when the School of Ain Warqa closed (in the 1950's), bore the responsibility of continuing the mission of educating, teaching and moulding students for the purpose of having a civilized society and a better future. Thus, the Holy spirit University was considered in a way or another a continuation for teaching the principles laid by the School Hawqa, the Maronite school of Rome and the School of Ain Warqa.

The construction of The Holy Spirit Monastery began in 1947, and the opening and inauguration were in 1950. The most important objective and the main purpose for building that monastery were to gather the monks and educate them (in both academic and theological fields).

In 1961, the Lebanese Maronite Order decided to transform this monastery into a University for higher education. After the Order was granted the permit from the Lebanese government to institute the Holy Spirit University, the Maronite patriarch Mar Boulos el Meouchy (1955-1975) came to inaugurate the new university campus. The Holy Spirit University was the first private Lebanese Maronite University. Thus, the Maronite Patriarch wanted through his symbolic presence at the inauguration, which was under his patronage, to add a historical and moral legality to this ecclesiastical establishment... which represents another new stage in a long Maronite mission which started approximately sixteen centuries ago.

Soon after, the opening of the faculties and institutes was in succession in this newly born university; in addition to the establishment of the main library (1962). This is how the university became the representation of a concrete project not an abstract one and the fruit of an ingenuous work not a fake one. Later, the university expanded and it opened several branches in the country from the North and the Bekaa to the South. This is how the university, which was born from the Lebanese Maronite Order, which in turn was born not only from the Church but from a people, who begot through hardships and sufferings, Saints, Martyrs, geniuses and learned professors, realized that knowledge, in fact, thought alone can liberate a human being and push him/her to be determined and attached to their "free existence". It is known that any form of existence without freedom is one of the shapes of death. Thus, the university principles revolved around this freedom which is born from the free enlightened thought that is open to culture and intellectual activity. By promoting this kind of thought it has pushed many people towards education and the passion for freedom!

When the civil war broke in 1975 and the Lebanese army was divided, the Christian civil community planned its self-defense naturally. With time, the need arose to clearly define a Christian political thought (doctrine) which explains, gives reasons and shows the purpose for which the Christians bore arms so that the legal self-defense doesn't turn out to be a process of self – judgment!

Thus, the church together with the university went on guiding these members of the Resistance and reminding them of pivotal virtues and principles, while stressing on the crucial aspects of

these principles which, if put aside, cause the spirit of the Resistance to die. Thus, the precepts of the Christian Resistance in Lebanon were defined as follows:

The first precept of the Resistance focuses first and foremost, on Jesus Christ without whom any Christian Resistance is meaningless.

The second precept is the adherence to the united church: since the Christian Resistance adheres to the ecumenical church, its precepts should accordingly depend on the general teachings of the church.

The third precept is the adherence to the local church. Indeed, the Christian Resistance is born from this church found in the midst of an Islamic majority, and it has characteristics which distinguish it from the church in the west which is facing problems other than those faced by the church in the east.

The fourth precept is that Lebanon is the last free refuge for the Christians of the East. Moreover, Lebanon constitutes a mark of distinction for the Christians presence, for their genius works, their open mindedness and deep faith.

Indeed, Lebanon was and is still the hope of the Christians in the Orient who are suffering from oppression, persecution and cruelty because of their faith. Consequently, it is unacceptable to ignore the history of suffering and persecution endured by the forefathers as well as their struggle and Resistance in the Lebanese mountains and on the Lebanese coast.

Based on these four precepts which were clarified, the university aimed at proving that the concept of this resistance is not merely a reaction which disappears once the action does. In fact, the Resistance stays an action in itself with the continuance of the united, faithful and committed Christians on the Lebanese territory. Thus, the university promoted the establishment of a "Research Committee" which is based in it. Also, it included in its ranks the elite among tens of thinkers, researchers and professors in order to design course materials and plans of study as well as conduct researches to foster reasonable thinking among the political and military Christian leaders in making their choices and assuming their stances; Also, in changing their positions to achieve more logical and reasonable goals. Hence, the university strove vigorously in the past and is still striving now for a more competent society and a better future.

The Committee of Research at the University was attached to Lebanon; "which represents freedom and the human being". Indeed, all studies and papers issued from its Research Center were mostly sanctifying the "responsible freedom of individuals." This is so because Lebanon embraces Christianity which was and should forever be in Lebanon, free, sovereign and preserving its heritage as well as safeguarding its future. Thus, if Christianity falls in Lebanon, which is its last haven in the East, it will fall in the whole Eastern Arab- Islamic world since the essence of Lebanon, according to the Committee, lies in the continuance of Christianity in it. So, if Christianity survives in Lebanon, it shall survive in the whole Orient and if it falls in Lebanon, it shall fall in the whole East.

In fact, the University fully understood this reality and worked hard so that the Christian presence becomes free and effective in its Lebanese and Arab environment. This awareness is quite natural, as the university is born from the Maronite Church which fought hard along centuries. Moreover, the university grasped the precepts of the Resistance and wanted it to be solely through the works of intellectual thought reflected in books and words. Its most powerful weapon is the pen and the stances it assumed. Hence, it took the challenge to prepare the students and educate them so that they build a new society and a better future.

The aforementioned points are considered as the most important objectives which the church and the Order fought for attaining through the University. They strove to sow thought in order to reap thinkers, and to sow education in order to reap the elite and the learned. This elite which Plato believes is alone capable of governing and leading a people and it's worthy of doing so.

Here lies the mission and the role of this university, the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik. In fact, this is what the university should promote: a Resistance based on thought, humanity and civilization. Furthermore, the greatness of this Resistance lies in its being spiritual on the inside, and in its birth from a heritage and a history of holiness, sacrifice, persecution and suffering and from a strong belief in the human being and in Lebanon the mission.

It is a Resistance which embraces its followers once they believe in it and it forsakes them once they lose the purity of thinking. Indeed, it is an unchanging Resistance, firm in its beliefs and it has become more and more valuable with time.

The Maronite Saints

Saint Sharbel Makhlouf

He is known as Youssef Makhlouf from Biqa Kafra, was born in 1828 and entered the Monastery of Our Lady of Mayfouk (Jbeil) under the name of Brother Sharbel as novice in 1851. This monastery is for the Lebanese Maronite Order. After two years of novitiate, he was sent in 1853 to the St Maron Monastery in Annaya where he made his permanent monastic profession and took his solemn vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He was ordained priest in Bkerke in 1859. After around a quarter of a century of common monastic life and after he performed his priestly ministry faithfully and carried out his monastic duties in a way that edified all, he wanted to live as a hermit at the hermitage of St. Peter and Paul-Annaya in 1875. He wanted to live with God alone to experience His greatness together with new brothers who are hermits like him, in complete abandonment to God to save themselves and save the world.

Saint Sharbel was one of those Saints who lived in total abandonment of everything through leading a life of faithfulness, silence, sacrifice and isolation.

He suffered a stroke and died on 16 December 1898 while reciting the Eucharistic Prayer on Christmas Eve at the hermitage of St. Peter and Paul. God has performed several miracles through St Sharbel's intercession. Accordingly, the Order requested the opening of a file for his beatification in 1925 and thus he was beatified in 1965 and canonized a saint in 1977.

Saint Rafqa Al-Rayes

She is known as Boutrossieh (Pierina) Shobok Al Rayes from Himlaya-Metn, was born in 1832 and entered the Convent of the Mariamat (Daughters of Mary) in Bikfaya where she took her solemn vows in 1861. However, after that order was dissolved in 1871, Boutrossieh entered the Lebanese Maronite Order (the Baladite Order) and took the name of Sister Rafqa in the Monastery of St. Simon Al Qarn in Ayto where she made her permanent profession in 1872. Saint Rafqa surrendered herself to the requirements of a united life with Christ. She did not make any excuses or give reasons in order not to be totally committed. On the contrary, she recited her prayers contemplating hours in front of the Eucharist. Moreover, she suffered illnesses and endured the hardships of community life, yet she was in all circumstances asking for repentance and surrendering herself to the will of God in all that happened to her.

Rafqa began her journey with pain and suffering on the Sunday of the Feast of the Rosary in 1885 when she prayed Jesus Our Lord to let her share His sufferings so that she could become more identified with Him. Thus, she endured intense unbearable pain in her head and her eyes... after that, the doctor pulled out her eye in an unsuccessful operation which left her totally blind. Soon after, she became bedridden, dislocated of limb and plagued with sores. Eventually, she spent 29 years of her life enduring her sufferings with patience, peace and happiness without complaining or losing hope.

She died in 1914 and God has performed through her intercession several miracles. She was beatified in 1985 and on the occasion of the Eucharistic Jubilee in the year 2000, Pope John

Paul II proclaimed her as an example and a role model in the Adoration of the Holy Eucharist and later, he canonized her saint in 2001.

Saint Nimatullah Kassab Al-Hardini

He is another figure reflecting the idealistic life with Christ. A figure which was not distinguished because he led a harsh life in isolation at the hermitage like St Sharbel or because he endured a life of sufferings and bore the Cross of pain like St Rafqa, but because he led a simple life, living the Gospel daily at the monastery. A simple life, which was combined with a strong will and a firm determination to follow the Christ. Indeed, this is the secret of sainthood for Father Nimatullah Al-Hardini.

Youssef, son of Gerges Kassab from Hardin, was born in 1808. He entered the novitiate of the Lebanese Maronite Order under the name of brother Nimatullah at the Monastery of St Anthony Quzhaya in 1828 where he made his permanent profession and wore his hood in 1830. He was ordained priest in the Monastery of Saints Cyprian and Justina in Kfifan in 1835.

In the school of the Lebanese Maronite Order, which was supervised by the Monastery of Kfifan, Al Hardini taught the brothers studying there, literary theology; and among these students was Brother Sharbel Makhoulf (The Saint). In the monastery, he also learned the art of binding books and piling them.

Father Nimatullah held the office of Superior General of the Order three times in the period between 1845 and 1858. These years were years of conflicts and hardship in the Order, yet he always used to say: "this is how the order was, this is how it is, this is how it shall remain and the greatest is he that can save his soul." Thus, the monks who struggle for virtue in community life will have greater merit than those who choose willingly a life deprived of holy virtues. Saint Nimatullah was able to maintain the balance between the life as a hermit and that as a missionary. Hence, his pious nature was reflected in his daily practices where he showed austerity in food, clothing and sleep as he deprived himself of all desire and whim, prayed unceasingly, showed patience, endurance and humility in assuming administrative responsibility while persevering with his mission in education and teaching... All these practices had hermitical characteristics in the heart of the community. Indeed, Al Hardini was aware of the fact that "the other" is the way to holiness, to God and is even the Eucharist Itself.

Al Hardini died in 1858 in the Monastery of Kfifan. God performed many miracles through his intercession. Accordingly, Pope John Paul II beatified him on the 10th of May 1998 and he canonized him on the 16th of May 2004.

Blessed Brother Estephan Nehme

Youssef Nehme was born in Lehfed in 1889. He entered the novitiate in the Lebanese Maronite Order under the name of Brother Estephan in 1905. The instructor appointed for the novices at that time was Father Ignace Al Tannoury who is known for his virtuous way of life.

Brother Estephan spent more than 12 years of his life in the Monastery of Our lady of Succour-Jbeil, which was at that time the Seat of the Superior General. Brother Estephan was appointed

in that Monastery as the person in charge of the farms of the Monastery in Kfarsiyyada. He was distinguished by his virtues, meekness, patience, love and observance of the laws. His motto was: "God sees me". Brother Estephan lived most of his life in the Monastery of Our Lady of Mayfuq where he was in charge of the Monastery personnel and worked in the fields and carpentry. He died in August 1938 in the Monastery of Kfifan where his body lies there intact. God has performed through his intercession several miracles. Accordingly, the Order filed for his canonization in 2001. Thus, he was venerated in 2007 and beatified in 2010. By that, he joined the series of Saints in the Order; a series which began with Sharbel, Rafqa and is unending with the men of God: Father Ignace Dagher Al Tannoury, Father Youssef al Jubeily, Father Ibrahim al Haqlani, and Father Daniel Al Alam Al Hadathi and many others...

Last but not least, I conclude with a quote from one of the first Maronite historians, the Franciscan monk and the Maronite Bishop of Cyprus "Gebrayel ibn Al Quila'I" where we find a stance which sums up the consciousness of the Maronites of themselves. Thus, Ibn Quila'I states:

" The Maronites are a complete nation, a chosen people, guided by God to seek refuge in the rough mountains where He entrusted them with preserving the faith called on them to abandon all conflicts and stand together as one, leaders and people, with the church. He made it clear for them that they shall not be free from the humiliation which befell them in the past two centuries (in the Mamluk era) unless all people, whatever their affiliations are, follow the path led by the Patriarch..." (Ibn El Quila'I Al Lehfid -1493).