

“Don’t be afraid of those who kill the body” (Luke 12: 4)

Homily of H. B. the Patriarch Card. Sfeir

We read today in our liturgy this verse of the Gospel, which I just proclaimed: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body." This verse, I dare say, is the guide for the spirituality of the Maronite Church. It is the spirit of this verse that has led you too on the paths of the mission in the countries where the authority of your Congregation and your apostolic zeal took you.

Before reflecting on the meaning of this verse, and particularly on the spirit that it inspires in those who want to practice it, I would like to welcome respectfully my venerable brother in the Patriarchate, His Beatitude Patriarch Stephanos Ghattas, Patriarch of Alexandria for the Catholic Copts. I would like also to welcome you all, Fathers and Sisters, into our country, this country that is characterized by what we call, the Islam-Christian conviviality. I understand that your mission takes place in countries, like ours, where you live in daily contact with Islam. In Lebanon, I do not think that you feel ill at ease, even though you come from different regions of the world, and although you are of different nationalities. I also want to thank you for taking the trouble of coming to this Patriarchal residence which my predecessors chose to build in this region, which may be considered as the cradle of the Maronite Church. Because it is here where our Church was born, and became a Hierarchy with its first Patriarch Saint John Maron, elected in 686.

Let us go back to the Maronite spirituality. It would be easy to understand if you took a look at this Holy Valley. Some authors say that at the beginning of Christianity, it was inhabited by hundreds of hermits who led a life of sacrifice and abnegation in almost inaccessible caves. It took root in this valley. That is why, during the persecution periods, the Maronite patriarchs chose to live in this valley. They remained here for four centuries. About 20 Patriarchs are buried here.

This is in fact a spirituality of deprivation, mortification, renouncing of the self, disdain of the body, prayer and fasting. Saint Charbel, born in a nearby village, Blessed Hardini, who was recently beatified, and Blessed Rafka all led this kind of life. They crucified the body in order to let the spirit blossom. That is why our spirituality was considered as the Good Friday spirituality. But this Good Friday leads to the Sunday of the Resurrection. Our spirituality, in order to put into practice the Gospel verse: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the flesh," did not wait until one came to kill the body. It sought to kill the old man through freely accepted mortification.

But those whom the Lord told us not to fear did not hesitate to exercise their horrible task of believing killers, thinking that doing so they glorified God. Our ancient and recent history gives proof of this. Our country is bathed in the blood of martyrs. But in spite of all that has happened, we are convinced that our presence in this land, next to that where Jesus Christ was born, lived and died and rose, is not only beneficial for ourselves and for the Church, but also for our non-Christian fellow citizens who appreciate this presence among them. Because, for us as well as for all those who are in the same situation, it is a question of witnessing to of Christian values in a society which is not exclusively Christian. Moreover, is it not in this context that our Lord's recommendation gains its whole value? You are the salt of the earth, the yeast in the dough, the lamp that shines in the darkness. This testimony is very precious. It sometimes must be paid with one's blood. Our Lord has told us that. His word is spirit and life. To have life; that is what is essential.

I limit myself to these thoughts. I am sure that when you answered the Lord's call, committing yourself to follow St. Vincent, and becoming missionaries in countries where you are in direct contact with Islam, you were in search of this life. I pray with you just like you pray with us that our Lord will grant us this life.