

## INTRODUCTION

### A Pilgrimage on Sainthood

*The saints did not come to this world from outer space. They were people like all of us, subject to suffering pain and all the problems of this broken world.<sup>1</sup>*

#### ***Few Incidents that Led to this Pilgrimage***

There are always reasons, incidents and purposes in a person's life that trigger a desire and/or need to travel, especially when the destination of such pilgrimage is known. I will, in this introductory note, count some incidents, the reasons and the purposes that led me to take on this pilgrimage.

The first incident was twenty years ago. It happened when I immigrated to Montreal and was fresh in my faith. I was listening to a sermon in a very cozy, well maintained and very special church. It was special for its saintly ambiance that was inspired by the prayers of its congregation through the petitions, and the exclamation of the beautiful angelical voices of the choirs,<sup>2</sup> the assembly *ecclesia* - laity and clergy as one. It was also special because it was immersed in the depths of colors and light, and it seemed transported above the ground by the aroma of its incense, the breathing of its people and the flames of its candles.

Beside this indescribable ambiance, the sermon was of a completely different, however, enlightening style. The preacher was not like a preacher, but neither a speaker. He was unknown to me. I was still new in the country. His hands, voice, gazing eyes and easy words had shaken me and for the first time in my life I listened. He made me, he forced me, to listen. He did not speak about the Gospel of that Sunday nor did he introduce heavy words, but rather he was expressively touching the hearts and the souls of his listeners.

I listened to the flowing words without pain and with exceedingly joy. This Pastor addressed the faithful as they truly are. He addressed them as saints. "Among you are

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<sup>1</sup>Bishop Demetri (Matta) Khoury, *A Cloud of Witnesses, Saints and Martyrs from the Holy Land* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2008), p. xvii, from the forward by Metropolitan PHILIP, Primate, the Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America.

<sup>2</sup> Two choirs one with Arabic for Byzantine and the other with English Slavonic Music.

many hidden saints...Do not look at these icons only as saints (he pointed to the beautiful Iconostases and he turned his index towards them continuing to say) but search in your hearts and in the milieu of your living". These were not his exact words, however, his message remained engraved in me until this day, and has inspired me. He completely changed my narrow view on sainthood and inspired me to change it.

The second incident was right after that conversion. It was at a Bible study meeting. I don't recall the main subject of conversation but I still remember vividly a heated discussion about sainthood. Do we strive to become saints? Are we called to become saints? Who are the saints? Are they perfect? What is their role? All answers flew by and the questions remained on the ground.

During this meeting a confrontation happened about the subject of sainthood while discussing the powerful acts of saints and the veneration of icons. A devoted group of Baptists had come to the Bible study evening at the invitation of our group. This topic was the most trivial one with regards to the questioning of Jesus Christ as the only intercessor. Biblical verses against Biblical verses, logic against logic and personal experiences against personal experiences were brought up by each group to convince the other group, but to no avail. Each group left and went back to their daily routine thinking that it was the winner and the most powerful group.

A third incident happened during a class of theology. The professor was explaining one of the Holy Fathers and speaking about him while we were reading some of his texts in English. I questioned one of his sayings. To my surprise, one of the students argued with me about questioning the sayings of the Holy Fathers. His exact words were: How dare you question one of our saints? Who are you to question? These are our Holy Fathers and saints, and their writings are unquestionable.

While the above incidents raised my desire to find answers and search for the teachings of the Church about sainthood, the last confrontation put me face to face with another view about the saints and the fathers of the Church. It is a view of infallibility and of perfectness that may suggest that sainthood is for an elite rank among the people, and thus is a process of striving that a person may acquire only by his own effort.

### ***Theology and Personal Development***

The above incidents, along with many personal questions and various inquirers and inquiries that I have encountered, have passed by. But they have sunk into my mind as the pieces of a jig saw puzzle that could not find their right fitting places and enable the realization of the intended picture. Through these years I was a wanderer in my faith; I was still new but not a fresh catechumen of faith as I used to be. I did digest crumbs and good food but they did not produce any result until I had another encounter with God's revelations through Orthodox theology.

Here there was another astonishment that had captured my whole being. I can illustrate it and compare it to the sermon that I previously mentioned. Since then, I became like a child who sees everything around him anew, and had to discover it, play with it, dismantle it, break it and try to assemble it once again. Like a newborn baby I was looking, touching, hearing, tasting and smelling everything. Everything got a new look or new appearance, a new essence. It became alive. It became a worthy item and has a significant role to play. It became a gift of grace and a visitation from above. It is in the cosmos for a purpose and its particles reflect the love of God towards humanity.

This discovery led me to another breakthrough. It forced me to get out of my shell and spread out touching the lives of others. It allowed me to see God physically at work, and the purpose of my presence as part of His creation. It has awakened the love, the mercy and the grace of God in me. They became like burning fire which would consume me if I kept them to myself. They became like an illuminating shining light that will brighten, enlighten and guide the world if I put them into action.

This awakening is the result of my encounter with Incarnational theology and its fascinating, overflowing grace, which captured me by the intensity of its functional action. It put me face to face with a human God, a God in action and in continuous movement reflecting the movement among the three persons of the Trinitarian God. He is a God who does not stop working,<sup>3</sup> who is in a ceaseless transcendence, yet manifestations epiphanies. He is a God of heart and feelings, a God of endless, abundant and selfless love.

Although I was an Orthodox Christian all my life, I had never imagined and encountered a God who comes near and even dwells in me, nor did I ever think I could dwell in Him.

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<sup>3</sup> "My Father has been working until now and I have been working." John 5:17.

I was living on earth and He was living in the heavens above. There was no connection or correspondence. But through my encounter with Incarnational theology, this God was changed. Fortunately enough, I discovered that it was me that had been changed and not Him.

Through books and courses of theology I learned that Orthodox theology is not a study that it is based on something, but rather everything else is based on it. It is not a set of words and definitions, but rather a “Being in Act.”<sup>4</sup> Theology for Orthodox Christians simply means theology, like water means water and not (H<sub>2</sub>O). It is not composed of things but rather is a totality in its own.

Orthodox theology is based on the “*Theos*” God and His “reflection or words” “*Logismos*” or “*Logos*”. But who is this God? Orthodox theology answers: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*”<sup>5</sup> He is the God of dwelling who took flesh, inhabited the earth, communicated and communed with people in every aspect of their lives, got martyred for their sake to deliver them from the bonds of their infirmities and sins, gave them a new life through His conquering death and His ascension back to His original dwelling place, leaving behind Him the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to establish the Kingdom of salvation in every being.

But this encounter with theology and Incarnational theology were not the end of my discoveries. Theology was like an entrance door to a life full of mysteries and each of these mysteries has a mysterious life full of wonders by itself. This is not the place to write about these various mysteries, but it is worth mentioning that they are all, directly and indirectly, related to the topic on sainthood.

Through books and studies I was taught, learned and found that there are endless horizons yet to be discovered. It is a lifetime process, progress and experience. However, at some point, I shall stop wondering and wandering, and be satisfied with the blessings I have received, as Moses stopped climbing the mountain and was satisfied

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph J. Allen, *Orthodox Synthesis, The Unity of Theological Thought* (Crestwood, N.Y: SVS Press, 1981) p.97.

<sup>5</sup> John 1:1, 14.

with what he saw from behind the cliff.<sup>6</sup> The mysteries shall be no longer wonders and hidden secrets, but they shall be the normative life of the Orthodox Christians. So, I learned to keep my simplicity, humility and stay like a child in the world of God, while acting as a man of God.

Ultimately the true learning I acquired was about the sacramental life of the assembly.<sup>7</sup> It was there that I felt and saw the work of God in action, and there where I saw the transformation of things into their true reality and purpose. It was there where I became a son of God and an inheritor and partaker of His Kingdom. It was there where theology became real, visible and accessible. It was there where I felt that I belonged, and now my longing was no longer for a God who is far away, but for a God who encompasses me, who is in me and everywhere, the God who had shown me his endless love.

The Sacramental life of the Church united me to Christ and all the members of the Body of Christ. I saw myself as one united with the Cosmos in its three modes of life: a- *the vegetative soul*, the power of growth and nutrition as found in plants, the senseless creatures; b- *the irrational animals*, the form of life which includes properties of the vegetative form in addition to a power of management through the aid of the senses, and the power of procreation; and c- the perfect form that is found in *rational nature*, “*which is nourished and endowed with sense, and also partakes of reason and is ordered by mind,*”<sup>8</sup> in which I have a responsibility and duty.

The Sacramental life has added to my understanding that sainthood is a grace from God and that because of Jesus Christ, I became a saint. My participation in His mysteries, and my living a virtuous life, are my thanksgiving offerings of selfless love to His gracious gifts. They are the yearnings of the lover to the beloved. They are the striving to be worthy of being called to be a saint and bearing the Name of Jesus Christ.

### ***The Decision***

The Master of Arts in Applied Orthodox Theology was the call to embark on this pilgrimage. The discoveries that came from my studies and my personal experiences

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<sup>6</sup> Exodus 33: 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> The entire Orthodox actions are sacramental. It is not limited to the seven sacraments only.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, quoted in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. V, T&T Clark Eerdmans, p. 393.

through the Sacramental Church, and the development of my Faith through the experience of the Holy Fathers, have brought back the scattered pieces of the jig saw puzzle and forced me to put them together to form a correct picture, though not perfect or complete, to inspire my fellow man.

Through the stations of this pilgrimage, I will try to demonstrate that saints are those who are alive as those who are asleep in the Lord in the hope of the Resurrection. They are both the canonically recognized and the uncanonized. They are the intercessors before God, but they were not always perfect and they lived a sinning life. They are saints because of Jesus Christ and not due to their own efforts only.

The first station of this pilgrimage will be about the origin and the cause of sainthood, and the creation of the saintly man. The second station will speak of the "hidden" sainthood - the sainthood that is veiled by ignorance. The third will highlight the rejuvenation of sainthood through the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ that does not occur in the so-called theologies of the various religions and cults. The fourth station is the discovering through the verses of the Holy Scriptures and the Qur'an of official teachings on sainthood. The fifth station, coming from the results of the fourth station, will emphasize the role of the Christian saints as an applied theology. The sixth will look into the "Holy Nation", the "setting apart" and its history, and the seventh examine very few sayings about sainthood from Sufi Muslims and Jewish writings that will demonstrate that sainthood *Qadasa* is not known to non-Christians while the writings of the Orthodox Holy Fathers declare that sainthood is an act of love for God and the other.

"You Are Saints" will be my pilgrimage to illustrate that every human being has the opportunity to become a living saint.