

The Holy Synod Meeting, October 2023

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

On Saturday evening, October 21, in a solemn prayer of thanksgiving and joy, the metropolitans of the archdioceses of the Patriarchate of Antioch, from various continents, announced the canonization of the two new martyrs, Priests Nicholas Khasha and his son, Habib. This solemn celebration was attended by a large audience of clergy, faithful, scouts of the Orthodox Archdiocese of Tripoli, and the choir of the Balamand Theological Institute. For the first time, the apolytikion of the newly recognized saints was sung. May their intercession be with all of us. Their joint feast is set for July 16 each year.

The two martyrs lived virtuous lives marked by dedicated priestly service and great devotion and asceticism. Each died as a martyr for his faith and priesthood. Saint Nicholas was martyred in the city of Mersin (in present-day Turkey), under brutal torture by order of a security officer, on August 2, 1917. He was tortured to make him confess the names of his parishioners to whom the Consul of England in Cyprus had sent some letters, via another parishioner who confessed the matter to Father Nicholas before handing the letters to their recipients. Knowing the seriousness of the matter, Father Nicholas prevented him from delivering them and destroyed them. He endured brutal torture until martyrdom and did not acknowledge the names of his congregants.

Thirty-one years after his martyrdom, his son, Father Habib, was also martyred during a spiritual retreat in Mount Hermon, which is shared by Syria and Lebanon, where he was met by a gang of smugglers. He surrendered his soul after he had received from their hands a variety of insults and brutal torture to make him deny his faith, and he did not. When the Lebanese police found his body, there was not a single unbroken bone in it. He was martyred on July 16, 1948.

The Fathers of the Antiochian Synod also included St. Raphael, Bishop of Brooklyn, in the Antiochian ecclesiastical calendar, at my request.

The Fathers also designated the second Sunday after Pentecost, the Sunday following All Saints Sunday, as a special commemoration for the Saints of Antioch.

Icons of different sizes of both Saint Raphael and the New Holy Martyrs, as well as their biographies, were printed in two separate books. The service of the two new saints was also written by the hymnographer Father Athanasius of the Holy Monastery of Simonopetra of Athos. A special liturgical service will also be prepared for the feast of All Saints of Antioch. Translation of the biography and service into English is to be done soon thereafter, in our Archdiocese.

In the context of the inflamed situation in a number of regions and their negative repercussions on ecclesiastical relations, the fathers of the Holy Synod sent a practical message to all on the priority of reconciliation and peace. They decided to restore the broken communion amongst the clergy that had existed between the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem and to find a solution to the issue of the jurisdictional dispute over the territory of "Qatar" in a way that preserves the See of Antioch's right of historical jurisdiction over it. A delegation of the Antiochian Synod will visit Amman, the capital of Jordan, to express the love of the sons of the See of Antioch for the sons of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, to stand by them in these difficult and fateful circumstances, and to hand over to them the aid collected in the churches of the archdioceses.

In addition, in an extraordinary session, the Synod of Antioch elected Archimandrite Antonios Saad as Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of Bosra, Houran, and Jabal al-Arab, Bishop Gregory (Khoury) as Metropolitan of the Archdiocese of Homs and dependencies, and Archimandrite Dimitri Mansour as auxiliary bishop to the Patriarch with the title of "Bishop of Qara." The Synod also elected Bishop Romanos Al-Hannat, the Patriarchal Vicar, as Secretary of the Holy Synod of Antioch.

The fathers of the Holy Synod studied a presentation on the livelihood of the priests in the tragic economic conditions experienced by the inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon, prepared by me. The presentation included a theoretical section looking at three sources of securing the livelihood of the priest. The implementation of this vision cannot be done now, because of the catastrophic economic situation in the two countries. The second section also included a proposal to establish a common fund to be funded by the archdioceses of the diaspora to support the livelihood of priests.

The Holy Synod reviewed several pastoral topics such as the unification of liturgical services, humanitarian aid, clergy decency, and discipline. They also listened to studies and reports on global developments and their reflection on ecclesiastical affairs.

The Holy Synod was preceded by a conference held by the St. John of Damascus Theological Institute at the University of Balamand, titled “The Antiochian Orthodox Church from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century: Towards an Accurate Understanding of History.” A number of researchers in church history from many various backgrounds and universities such as Lebanon, Syria, Greece, Turkey, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, America, and Germany participated in the conference’s presentations.

In particular, the conference contributed to clarifying the ecclesiastical situation in the period that witnessed the establishment and growth of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in the East.

We are deeply grateful to the Lord of the Church who enabled the fathers to meet despite the tragic situation taking place in the region. The convening of this Synod meeting has shown that nothing surpasses the importance of meeting our brothers and sisters in a spirit of prayer and love. May God support us all to be messengers of peace, love, and joy in this troubled world, which lacks His living presence among us.