

ܣܘܪܝܝܐ ܘܟܠܗ ܡܫܪܩܝܐ

SYRIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE
OF ANTIOCH & ALL THE EAST
BAB TOUMA, P.O.BOX 22260
DAMASCUS - SYRIA



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No. EN 118/15

IN THE NAME OF THE SELF- EXISTENT
SEMPITERNAL OF NECESSARY EXISTENCE THE ALMIGHTY
IGNATIUS PATRIARCH OF THE HOLY SEE OF ANTIOCH AND ALL THE EAST
SUPREME HEAD OF THE UNIVERSAL SYRIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE WORLD
APHREM II



We extend our apostolic benediction, benevolent prayers and greetings to our brethren, His Beatitude Mor Baselius Thomas I, Catholicos of India, and their Eminences the Metropolitans; our spiritual children: Very Reverend Corepiscopoi, Reverend priests, monks, nuns, deacons and deaconesses and the entire blessed Syriac Orthodox people throughout the world. May the divine providence embrace them through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and St. Peter, Chief of the Apostles, and the rest of the Martyrs and Saints. Amen.

“When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure.” (I Corinthians 4: 12)

Dearly beloved in Christ, our Holy Syriac Orthodox Church has dedicated this blessed year 2015 to the commemoration of the Centennial of the Syriac Genocide Sayfo. Meaning sword in Syriac, Sayfo brings to mind sad memories imprinted on the consciousness of every Syriac individual. It has left a permanent scar on our religious and national persona. At the same time, it represents a shameful stain on the history of humanity. These massacres, perpetrated against our peace-loving people, are some of the most horrific in the history of the Church which has been persecuted since its foundation. In every era and every place, the waves of persecution struck the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. A large number of martyrs were victims of these persecutions, shedding their blood for the love of Christ.

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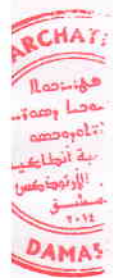
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The Book of the Acts of the Apostles tells us that, after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles in Jerusalem, they were scattered throughout the world, preaching the Word of Life, the Lord Jesus Christ, spreading the good news, the Holy Gospel and calling the people out of paganism to the worship of the One True God. They were subjected to persecution and slaughter only because they were Christians. Pagans started to pursue the faithful from one city to another, slaughtering and killing them. They sometimes fed them to the beasts and starving animals, which attacked and devoured them without mercy, leaving only some of their bones which were venerated by the faithful over generations as holy relics.

Despite the severity and number of the persecutions, Christians remained firmly attached to their faith, refusing to renounce their belief in Christ. They followed the example of the archdeacon and first martyr St. Stephen who said: "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7: 56). They likewise uttered with St. Paul the Apostle: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Romans 8: 35). Thus, they endured all torture and adversity with great courage and patience. They were armed with hope that life will conquer death, and will overcome all difficulties, tragedies and suffering. Furthermore, they believed that death could neither separate them from the love of Christ nor take away the salvation given to them by the Lord Jesus.

Rather than seeing a decline in the number of believers in Christ due to these persecutions, huge numbers of people joined the Church which grew, became stronger and prospered. Thus, martyrdom and persecution became distinguishing marks of the Church, rightly meriting the title Church Militant. In our Syriac tradition, we pray: «*ܘܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ ܕܡܫܚܘܬܐ*», which can be translated as: "With your martyrdom, O Blessed Martyrs, the Holy Church was built, and because of your relics, she is happy and rejoices every day."

The persecutions did not stop, and the era of martyrdom is far from over; killing and slaughter continue in the name of God, religion and belief. What god is pleased with killings, bloodshed and the violation of people's dignity simply because they hold different beliefs and worship God in their own way? Are those who kill in the name of religion aware that, in this way, they are insulting their own religion and showing their god to be a harsh and bloodthirsty deity? They present their god as if he is in need of human sacrifices to continue to exist, while our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us, saying: "Go and learn what this means: 'I want mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call righteous people, but sinners." (Matthew 9: 13). Instead of mercy, they practice injustice and instead of love, they show hatred. From such hatred, violence is born. This violence renders the human mind blind and they do not see the image of God in the face of their fellow men; rather, they perceive them as



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their enemy and seek to destroy them. By so doing, they think they are offering a sacrifice to God.

Dearly beloved, the tragedies, killings and destruction that we are witnessing today show us to what extent humanity can morally decline, even to the point of denying the basic human rights of life and belief, which leads them to commit the worst crimes against fellow human beings. What Christians are going through these days in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and the Holy Land, because of their adherence to their faith and their attachment to the land of their forefathers, is an enormous tribulation that compels them to choose between death, immigration or abandoning their Christian faith and their Church. However, we should not surrender to despair nor allow our determination to fade away; rather, we must continue to witness to our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We will strengthen our faith and hold firm to our Eastern Christian heritage which was established by our forefathers in this region known as the cradle of Christianity. We will also preserve the faith which was planted in our hearts by our blessed saints and nourished by the blood of the martyrs through the ages; a faith that has flourished, yielding commitment and the submission of our lives into the hands of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thus, the violent winds of persecutions and tribulations will never discourage us from pursuing our mission.

Dearly beloved, the Great Lent is a time for us to join fasting with prayers and to ask God to help us carry out our Christian witness in this troubled world. It is a time to ask the Lord to enable us all to be true Christians so that, through us, He may be glorified. Let us accept with joy to drink from the cup of suffering, knowing that we will be victorious in the end.

It is also an opportunity for our beloved faithful, members of the parishes in the Diaspora, whose forefathers shared the same bitter cup at the time of Sayfo, to pray for their brethren in the Middle East. Their immigration from their homeland is a new kind of persecution. Therefore, we call upon them to adhere to the Holy Church and her precious teachings for which their ancestors became martyrs. We encourage all not to forget their brethren who are suffering from persecution because of their witness for Christ. Moreover, we urge our spiritual children to offer alms, helping those who are in need wherever they may be, knowing that these acts of mercy will not go unrewarded by our Heavenly Father. We ask God Almighty to accept your fasting, prayers and almsgiving. May He make us worthy to celebrate together His Resurrection from the dead. ܘܟܠܗ ܡܫܪܩܝܐ ܘܟܠܗ ܡܫܪܩܝܐ

Issued at our Patriarchate in Damascus, Syria
On the 2nd of February, 2015,
The Feast of the Lord's Entrance into the Temple
and St. Simon the Elder
Which is the 1st year of our Patriarchate

SYRIAN PAT.