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



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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 and deacons 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.

“And you shall be witnesses to Me” (Acts 1:8)

Dearly beloved in Christ,

Bearing Witness (Evangelization) is the Commandment of our Lord Jesus

The events in the Book of Acts begin with our Lord Jesus’ ascension to heaven. He paved the way for His disciples to witness, preach the Gospel, and carry out the apostolic work to which the Holy Church was called. They were commissioned to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus after His crucifixion and resurrection, according to His commandment: “**But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in**

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باب توما - ص.ب. ٢٢٢٦٠
دمشق - سورية

Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Following this commandment, after the Holy Spirit descended upon them, the apostles began preaching. They embarked on evangelizing and bearing witness to Christ to all corners of the earth, starting from Jerusalem, through Antioch, where they were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

The Syriac Church of Antioch has always played a significant role in sharing this evangelical message. The Church Fathers had a distinct role in spreading the Orthodox Christian faith throughout the regions under the jurisdiction and care of the Antiochian See, extending to the Far East. Among these Fathers was Saint George, the Bishop of the Arabs. We have dedicated this year to commemorate the thirteenth centenary of his departure, in order to honor his apostolic zeal. Saint George played a crucial role in spreading the Christian faith among the Arab tribes in southern Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, strengthening the believers to remain steadfast in the salvation brought by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Syriac Church of Antioch: A witness in the lands of the Arabs and other countries, even reaching China

Since the dawn of Christianity, the Church has remained undeterred by persecutions. Instead, she has drawn strength from the Holy Spirit, who works in her midst. The Spirit has led the Church toward bearing witness to the truth, regardless of the strength of the persecutors, the challenges, and the difficulties resulting from these persecutions. The Church emerges as a witness and martyr for Christ, carrying the light of the evangelical message to all nations of the earth who were walking in the darkness of the world and dwelling in the land of the shadow of death (cf. Isaiah 9:2). She makes salvation available and baptizes all in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

The Arabian lands were geographically under the jurisdiction of the Antiochian Apostolic See. Thus, the venerable Church Fathers took it upon themselves to spread the good news of the kingdom in these regions. They taught the people the principles of the sound Orthodox faith. As a result, many Arab tribes accepted this faith and lived according to the orthodox doctrine of the Syriac Church of Antioch. Among these Arab peoples and tribes were the Hamyarites, the tribes of Qatar, the Taghlibites, the Banu Kindah, the Banu Tayy, the Uqayl, the Tanukh, the Ghassanids, the Namir, the Banu Shayban (Tha'labah), and the Banu Bakr ibn Wa'il in Diyar Bakr, as well as the Lakhmids (al-Manādhirah) and others.

The Church started to organize the pastoral affairs of these Arabs after they had embraced the Christian faith. She established several Episcopates to minister to them. These Episcopates played an important role in the Church history. The cities of Najran and Al-Yamamah each had an Episcopate in the year 225 AD. Six of their bishops attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Among the bishops of Najran was Quss ibn Sa'idah (+600), an eloquent preacher and wise man who would go to the Sūq 'Ukāz and boldly preach Christ against pagan beliefs, holding a pastoral staff in his hand.

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باب توما - ص.ب ٢٢٢٦٠
دمشق - سورية

After the fourth century, Church history mentions several Episcopates in the Arab countries. Among them were: Tadmur (Palmyra), Jadr Am Qays, Basra, Petra, and Al-Hira. Each Arab tribe had its own bishop, sometimes more than one. They were called the bishops of the tents because they accompanied the Arab tribes during their migrations and travels, conducting prayers and liturgical services under tents. Two significant Arab Episcopates were: the first was the Arab bishopric in general, where one of its prominent bishops was Saint George, known as the Bishop of the Arabs; and the second, the Tughlabite bishopric. Additionally, the Ghassanid Kingdom, centered in Jabiyah (Hauran - Syria), housed over 120 monasteries during the sixth century. One of its notable bishops was Saint Theodore the Zealous, who was consecrated as a bishop for the Arabs alongside Saint Jacob Baradaeus. The center of his episcopate was in Bosra, Syria.

The exceptional care of the Syriac Fathers and the strength of the missionary work of the Syriac Church of Antioch in the lands of the Arabs are evident through translation efforts carried out by Christian Arab scholars from the Tayy, Uqayl, and Tanukh tribes. By the order of the Patriarch of Antioch, Saint John of Sedre, the Holy Gospel was translated from Syriac to Arabic in the year 643 AD.

The impact of the witness to Christ and the evangelistic endeavors of the Syriac Church extended not only to regions near Antioch, such as the Arab lands, but also to other countries like Persia, Afghanistan, India, China, Armenia, Ethiopia, Minor Asia, and other lands of the Far East. Our Syriac Church in India is a great example. She stands as the fruit of the apostolic zeal of the Fathers of our Church and their witness to the Lord Jesus. It is truly a gem and honor of the sacred Syriac Church of Antioch.

“The Faithful Witness:” George, Bishop of the Arabs (+724)

The Church history does not provide extensive information about the life of this learned scholar and venerable saint, George, Bishop of the Arabs. He was one of the disciples of the theological school of Qenneshrin. During his youth, he studied under Saint Saverius Sabukht, shortly before the latter's passing. George was well-versed in the Divine Word, a diligent worker in philosophy, and an exegete of the Holy Scriptures. He stood out as a prominent critic and distinguished writer in both prose and poetry. His knowledge spanned various fields known in his time, including Syriac linguistics, philosophy, astronomy, theology, and history.

He received the monastic skema and walked the path of monasticism with fear and love of God. He led a life of asceticism and renunciation. Thus, the divine providence chose him to be a priest and later bishop for the Arab tribes of Tayy, Uqayl, and Tanukh. The center of his episcopate was in Aqula, which is present-day Kufa in Iraq. There, he shepherded his diocese with purity, knowledge, and virtue for thirty-eight years. Saint George, a venerable elder, eventually departed to the heavenly abodes in the year 724 AD, after a life spent witnessing for Christ, proclaiming His name, teaching His sacred Word, and confirming and strengthening his flock from the Arab tribes in Christ Jesus, to whom be glory.

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باب توما - ص.ب. ٢٢٢٦٠
دمشق - سورية

The Martyr Saint Harith ibn Ka'b and all the Syriac Orthodox Hamyari Martyrs

Church history tells us about the heroic martyrs who were persecuted for their faith in Christ in Saba and the lands of the Hamyari Arabs in Yemen. At that time, the Jew, known in Syriac as Masruq and in Arabic as Dhu Nuwas, seized control of these lands in 523 AD. He directed his forces toward Dhofar, the capital of the Hamyari lands, waging war against the Ethiopian tribes who inhabited the region. When he couldn't defeat them in battle, he deceived them to surrender to him. He sent them messages of safety, so they came out to meet him peacefully. However, he betrayed their trust and killed them all. He also burned down their church and sent Jewish priests accompanied by armed forces to the lands under their authority to kill Christians wherever they found them, unless they renounced their faith in Christ and converted to Judaism. Moreover, he ordered to burn anyone who protected a Christian in their home and to confiscate all their belongings.

Not content with this, he dispatched his army to Najran, besieging the city. When he failed to capture it by force, he sent Jewish priests accompanied by armed forces, carrying the Torah of Moses and a message of safety sealed with his royal seal. He assured them that they would not be harmed if they surrendered the city willingly. The people of Najran trusted the message of safety and came out to him. But he broke his promise, ordered his soldiers to bind their hands and feet, and then sent Jews and pagans to apprehend the Christians in the city.

One of the champions of faith in the city of Najran was Harith ibn Ka'b. He was a leader among his people and one of the faithful nobles. Despite the oppressive king's demands, Harith, a venerable elder, refused to deny Christ. He boldly and openly professed his Orthodox faith. Standing before his people, he declared his steadfastness in this faith, joyfully seeking the crown of martyrdom. He echoed the words of Saint Paul the Apostle: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35). Therefore, he along with those who stood with him, received the crown of martyrdom. The tyrannical Jewish king ordered the churches to be burned, along with everyone inside them. When the women of Najran and their children saw the flames consuming the churches, they rushed toward the blazing buildings, eager to share in the martyrdom with the men. Church history records the names of Arab Christian martyrs—men, women, and children. Approximately two thousands of them were bound in chains and brought into the churches. The churches were surrounded with firewood and set ablaze, consuming everyone inside. Subsequently, this ruthless king dug a large pit, where he threw the bodies of the holy martyrs and burned what was left of the remains and buried them. Arab historians have immortalized this event as the "People of the Ditch" (Ashabul Ukhdud).

At the beginning of the holy lent, during which we contemplate the power of evangelism, bearing witness to Christ, and martyrdom for His holy name, it is an opportunity for all of us to remember our responsibility as witnesses to the Lord Jesus amidst the turmoil and changes our world experiences—where faith is weakened, atheism spreads, and spiritual battles rage. We

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باب توما - ص.ب. ٢٢٢٦٠
دمشق - سورية

invite you to testify for Christ and navigate this world, filled with persecutions and significant faith challenges, as befits His Gospel (cf. Philippians 1:27). Every believer is called to witness for the Lord Jesus through righteous deeds that glorify the Heavenly Father (cf. Matthew 5:16). Additionally, we encourage you to reflect on the lives of the martyrs, the champions of faith and the saints who spent their lives in love for our Lord Jesus, imitating and interceding for them (cf. Hebrews 13:7).

May God accept your fasting, repentance, prayers, and almsgiving. May He prepare all of us to rejoice in His resurrection, through the intercession of the Holy Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, Saint Peter, the Chief of the Apostles, Saint George, the Bishop of the Arabs, Saint Martyr Harith ibn Ka'b, and all the martyrs and saints. ܘܩܝܫܐ ܘܩܝܫܐ ܘܩܝܫܐ ܘܩܝܫܐ ܘܩܝܫܐ

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