

Eastern Remnants, Part One

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

In the patriarchal archives, there is a letter from the non-Christian Emir of the Chouf region in Lebanon, dating back to the eighteenth century, addressed to the bishop of the diocese, in response to his request for permission to build a church in one of the villages of those beautiful mountains. The letter states: "We have no objection to building a church for the aforementioned village, provided that its patron saint carries a sword to defend us and yourselves in times of war."

This letter, despite its wit, carries a realistic explanation for the attachment of people in the countries of the Middle East to the soldier saints, or "warrior saints," such as Saint Elias, Saint George and Saint Demetrius. Saint Mercurius is considered the favorite of the Copts of Egypt, who greatly honor him, and are known, popularly, as "*Abu Saifain*." They depict him in icons riding a horse and "*carrying two crossed swords*."

The history of Eastern Christians is a history of permanent witnessing and martyrdom. The East, in which they live, has never known long-term stability, but rather frequent disturbances for which they have often paid the price, oppressively and unjustly. Since power left their hands in the seventh century, they have been regarded as a weak target in the face of the Arab-West and Arab-Asian wars (the Crusaders, the Mongols, the Tatars, the Mamluks and the Ottomans), which made them pay double the price. On the one hand, their faith caused doubt and skepticism among their Muslim citizens, regarding the possibility of religious sympathy with the invaders, especially if these were Christians, which exposed them to revenge repeatedly over time. And on the other hand, because of their patriotism and their solidarity with their fellow citizens and rulers, they paid the price as citizens of the occupied country, just like their Muslim citizens. The Crusaders were crueler to Eastern Christians than to the Muslims, because they saw them as heretics who had broken away; they slaughtered them, looted their churches, and exiled their bishops.

Historians believe that Christians remained the majority of the inhabitants of the East until the early fourteenth century, when the Crusaders left. They attribute the sharp decline in their numbers to the revenge to which they were subjected after the Crusaders left, as well as to their demoralization and misery to which they were subjected at the hands of Western Christians. The result was that many of them abandoned their Christianity and entered Islam.

But the most bitter thing is that these survivors are still in this critical situation. Today, they are Easterners in the eyes of the West, and Christians in the eyes of Muslims. In reality, they are Easterners who are proud of their Eastern identity and bear allegiance to it. Yet, they do not constitute a number that secures the interest of the West. At the same time, they are proud of their Christian faith, realize its authenticity, and bear responsibility for preserving and transmitting it, even to the point of martyrdom.

What is striking about the dealings of Eastern Christians and the aforementioned saints is that their history has never known any behavior that holds these saints responsible for killing enemies, but rather for protecting believers.

This leads us to conclude that the Christian believes that he is under the protection of his Lord first and foremost. From Him, he derives courage, strength, steadfastness, and the ability to bear witness and be martyred.