

An Introduction to “Most Christians Are Not Born”

The following chapter, *Most Christians Are Not Born*, is part of a book entitled **And If I Told the Ways of Childhood** originally written and published in Arabic in 1979 and later translated into French in 1997. The author, Metropolitan Georges Khodr is bishop of Byblos, Batroun and Mount Lebanon. The book is his most personal text and yet it is not an autobiography in the strict sense. Metropolitan Georges certainly speaks about himself, his country and his Church. But he is careful not to analyze himself to the extent that the focus of the book loses its ability to draw the reader into an encounter with Christ.

Born in 1923, Metropolitan Georges is a native of Tripoli, Lebanon. From the First World War until 1943 Lebanon was under the French Mandate which for many Lebanese was but another expression of suppression. Replacing four hundred years of Ottoman hegemony, French colonialism was another obstacle to national independence. According to Maxime Egger’s comprehensive *Introduction to And If I Told the Ways of Childhood*, November 11, 1943 marks a turning point in the life of Georges Khodr. According to Egger, Khodr, while participating “in a... peaceful demonstration against the French government which had betrayed Lebanese authorities in their quest for [national] independence, saw tanks machine gun the crowd and kill eleven of his comrades.” (p.6) The event, which occurred while Metropolitan Georges was a law student, further revealed to him the horror of worldly power in contrast to the self emptying love of the crucified Christ. In 1944 he graduated with a law degree from Saint Joseph University, a Jesuit institution, and considered a career in diplomacy.

Two years before graduating, Georges Khodr with fifteen other students from the faculties of Law and Medicine founded the Orthodox Youth Movement (better known as the MJO, Mouvement de la Jeunesse Orthodoxe) on March 16, 1942. Through the Church’s youth new life was infused into the Antiochian Patriarchate with a return to the sources i.e. liturgy, scripture and the patristic writings. By returning to the sources the MJO also helped to inspire the re-birth of monasticism in the Patriarchate. In speaking about the beginnings of the MJO, Metropolitan Georges passionately recalls the urgency for a “renewal within the very bosom of our Church which at that time had become profoundly sclerotic.” He goes on to say that “we launched a movement founded on the study of the bible, frequent communion (la ‘communion permanente’) and reading the Church Fathers. We created a journal *An Nour* (The Light). Filled with the Spirit of Christ, burning with the Gospel we invented a new language, far from the prevailing pietisms and insincere expressions [of faith], the movement spread like fire across the country. Yes, in our Church, the elders were resurrected by their children.” (p.7) As new life was being introduced to the patriarchate through the MJO, the law student, Georges Khodr, was also undergoing an interior transformation that enabled him to overcome the debilitating limitations of an unhealthy and oppressive shyness that had existed from childhood. The MJO helped to uncover within Metropolitan Georges a concealed courage that would ultimately be used to proclaim the Gospel of new life and freedom in Christ. With the founding of the MJO “the day had finally come when suddenly I dared to express myself. All my fear vanished in an instant. But at the core [of my being] something remains of that primary shyness and fear.” (p.9) This persisting shyness and fear helps to explain why Metropolitan Georges uses the third person, “*my friend*”, and

not the first person “*I*.” More than a literary technique, “*my friend*” expresses a spiritual posture which enables Metropolitan Georges to stand apart from himself which, paradoxically allows for the intimacy needed to speak openly about himself and the world.

Rather than pursuing a career with the diplomatic corps, Metropolitan Georges went on to study theology at Saint Sergius Institute in Paris. After graduating in 1952 he was discouraged by his superiors from entering a monastery and was ordained priest on December 19, 1954. Shortly after ordination Georges Khodr was assigned to a parish in his native Tripoli which he served until he was consecrated to the episcopacy on February 15, 1970.

At home in the East and in the West, Metropolitan Georges has distinguished himself as a master of the written and spoken word which have enabled him to become a prominent representative of the Orthodox Church in ecumenical and inter-religious dialog. In August 2012, there appeared an article in *Al Akhbar* by Joanna Azar who described how Metropolitan Georges saw his episcopal ministry as extending beyond the boundaries of the Orthodox Church “The bishop, according to Khodr, does not tend to the people of his Church only. He sees himself a bishop of the Orthodox, Maronites, Muslims and Druze.” This universal ministry of an Orthodox bishop transcending ethnic and religious boundaries has brought Metropolitan Georges into the arena of dialog enabling him to acknowledge, engage and challenge the world which surrounds him. Dialog also taught him to see the “other” not as enemy but as brother and sister with whom he seeks to share the Gospel. Unfortunately, dialog amongst other Christians as well as Muslims has been a source for narrow and shallow criticism to be leveled against him. Nevertheless, his works as theologian, ecumenist, pastor and spiritual father have not gone unnoticed within and outside of the Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Georges was granted the degree of doctor of divinity, honoris causa, from Saint Vladimir’s Seminary (1968) and from the Faculte de Theologie Protestante de Paris (1988).

In spite of the many positive developments that have occurred throughout the Antiochian Patriarchate and world wide Orthodoxy, *Most Christians Are Not Born* points to some of the most obvious and detrimental theological, spiritual, sociological and political tensions and struggles within the Church. *Most Christians Are Not Born* is an honest and blunt description of some of the systemic problems and sins which continue to prevent the Church from serving God and *all* his people. For Metropolitan Georges these systemic problems and sins manifest themselves in every stratum of the Church. Until the second coming of Christ the wheat and tares will grow in the same ecclesial field.

Most Christians Are Not Born is, as one reads from the book jacket, part of a story which focuses on a soul “which advances towards the light of the Resurrected Christ.” Within this light Metropolitan Georges reminds us that the Church, as the body of Christ, is given to the world for its life and salvation.

Metropolitan Georges Khodr

Most Christians Are Not Born¹

(translated by Father Robert M. Arida)

For a long time hope lived, but then came the time of disillusion. It is not enough for men to realize that they are to repent. For knowing that their passions lead to a disastrous fate, they do not cease to nurse them. They fall again into the same sins [either] through weakness or delight. Truly, they have very little interest in God. Moreover, many have no interest in him whatsoever. And nothing indicates that the bearers of the message, i.e. “the stewards of God’s mysteries” should be more profoundly anchored in divine things.



Many examples convinced *my friend* that having faith and professing a way of life that reaches out to sanctity do not necessarily go together. Man is able to gargle holy words and flaunt religious practices without so much as ceasing to be an atheist: faith is not an affirmation but [rather] an adhesion - a union [with God]. “The just live by faith.”² That God be in the air you breathe, that he fill you with his presence, that he consciously is your only recourse, that you bring all your thoughts to him, that you desire to re-join your will to his, that you are convinced that there is only good within you if you seek after his glory; these are the elements which define faith. Their absence within a man reveals his unbelief. Being aware of this or that his unbelief is concealed by religious folklore along with his attachment to confessional and sociological aspects of the Church changes nothing.

My friend was sure of one thing; if men of *religion* are numerous, then men of *God* are but a handful. Being close to God excluded him from his own along with many of those who, though they worked with him for the Gospel, turned out to be men of the world. In a dramatic way *he* became conscious of this reality stressed by the Holy Scriptures: the wheat and the tares grow together in the same field.³ It was as if it was necessary for the historical Church to remain in the grip of evil thus becoming the cross of humanity. Is the Church truly the place of salvation? Wouldn’t it be better for man to leave the visible Church [which is] so miserable in order to be closer to the heart of Christ? For what good is it to exert energy on renewing the Church? What good is it to try [re] organizing the institution? What good is time spent on forming study groups, editing books, looking after all the intellectual, cultural or social aspects that the religious institution

© Father Robert M. Arida. Translation and annotations.

¹ I wish to thank our parishioners Olga Baloueff and Michael Clark for their advice and input. Any errors in the text are my own.

² See Romans 1:17

³ See Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

presupposes/accepts if the number of those who are truly pure remains so insignificant? Does grasping onto hope justify such efforts?

Day after day one persists in trying to build and to establish these things knowing that these attempts risk being aborted and that the Church is at times a source of dryness, of gimmickry and of disgraceful behavior.

Nevertheless, *my friend* knew that it was not only in the Church that man received so many wounds. In society [i.e. the world] man expects to be bruised. But isn't the Church better than society? In fact, both suffer from the same evils.

I do not think that the wounds sustained in the Church can never be healed. It is in the Church that we still receive the living Gospel; we can properly read it in the company of all the saints who have meditated on it and loved it. "Where will we go? You alone, you have the words of eternal life."⁴ We, therefore, have no other choice but to remain members of the Church of sinners. Our choice entails accepting the others as they are. We stay in the Church because it is only in it that the body and blood of our Lord and Master are found. Without them there is no life in us. We must remain in the Church made up of the wheat and the tares, for we are awaiting a miracle which will transform us as it will [also] transform our brothers. We will learn in drinking from the cup of salvation that which a book will never unveil for us⁵. We will lose our dreams and we will look after our wounds. The wounds caused by the nails driven in by those who comprise the Church are often very beneficial.

The Church of sinners, a mixture of those who repent and those who are far from repenting, ceased to scandalize *my friend* when he became conscious that we are all capable of the worst treachery. "All creatures are born according to instinct."⁶ Although brought to baptism by his parents, a man rarely becomes fully Christian, for no one invites him to probe the depths of his being. For many, baptism is limited to an immersion into water. So many Christians, priests and bishops included, remain insensible to the breath of the Spirit. Most Christians are not born. They are like the aborted.

The Church is always out of breath. Aware that she cannot abandon the spiritually handicapped, she loses track of time granted to her and [consequently] finds herself full of confusion because of the shame her children bring upon her as she supports them.

[With] the aborted becoming the norm, *my friend* expected the worse abominations on the part of the pastors and their flocks as being focused on the most useless things. Disturbed by seeing the faintheartedness spread among the leaders, he regarded the ascension to power of the most insignificant as the fruit of a resolved will, of a diabolical manipulation. In other words the devil, so it seemed, with cunning pleasure takes his revenge on the Church by controlling it through its leaders, who he endows with a self

⁴ See John 6:68

⁵ Basically, Metropolitan Georges is stressing that Christianity is experiential and not something solely learned from books.

⁶ Metropolitan Georges might be referring to the innate tendency of self preservation.

satisfaction that is impermeable to any criticism, this being [in itself] an immediate qualifier.

Paradoxically, *my friend's* analysis of the sad reality of ecclesiastical life reinforced his conviction that the Church is the place of salvation and that Christ always finds within it a place to rest his head. For it is only in her that death no longer has a hold on us [and] that the divine consolations are abundantly poured out upon us.

My friend was never susceptible to the criticisms made against the historical Church. They were found void of all meaning. The sins of the Church are those of ordinary (**mediocre**) persons that we baptize. These persons, through human rivalries and by means of the great of this world, are carried to the command posts of the Church. These persons monopolize the history of the Church. Without them there is no history. We record in writing the wickedness of men, their unfolding in time. History is materialistic in the most appalling sense of the term. The Lordship of God does not necessarily manifest itself in history through the visible victories of piety or by a society made up of the "pure." God also discloses himself in calamities, in wars, in the "failure" of the Churches and the destruction of the temple.

In a way, no society has ever tangibly reflected the presence of God. God comes eternally. The whole resurrection is realized in the age to come.

But, in spite of everything, hope enjoins us to build our today, replenishing it with the Spirit and creating a Christian culture and Christian world. Utopia is but a part of the whole vision of a new universe, for our faith cannot be fulfilled without including the horizons of an ideal society. The difficulty, however, of a Christian utopia in the East consists in the fact that because the society has become Muslim there prevails an ideology in which Christianity no longer has much meaning.⁷

My friend considers the idea of a Christian homeland as a heresy, not only from a political point of view, but also, and in the first place, from a spiritual point of view. By their presence on Islamic territory, the Eastern Christians must strive to promote a genuine social interaction with the Muslims within the context of their history and civilization.

The circumstances are such that the country of *my friend* shrank to a point that it is no longer a question of making a "Christian" homeland. Yet, given that this country has lived - in either a recurrent or permanent way - a complex [within himself] of being a Christian vis-a-vis the Muslim led him to take notice of himself, and to affirm a set of Christian values in contrast with Islamic civilization.

My friend did not contest the limits of the national entity into which he was born. But, at the same time, he did not think that the ultimate problem of man ought to be linked to a terrestrial entity. What is important is that every country be more human.

⁷ Consequently, the vision of a Christian utopia must not obscure or confuse the Christian's existential reality. Neither can the idea of a Christian utopia be driven by political ideologies. The Gospel must grow where it is planted. Where it has been supplanted the Church is responsible for sowing new seeds in the minds and hearts of all people.

He feared the damaging effects of theories founded only on political realities. He feared that they were against all logic: man, in effect, was able to easily place history at his service and to disfigure all truth by defending pre-established positions based on indomitable emotional criteria.