

« Along the path to holiness »

Pastoral Letter of His Beatitude, Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem
on the occasion of the Canonization of
Blessed Marie-Alphonsine (1847-1927)
and Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified (1846-1878)

“Peace to you all who are in Christ! (1 Peter 5:14)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

This biblical salutation opens our Pastoral Letter, prepared in the See of the Apostle, James the Less, the first Bishop of Jerusalem, which brings us double joy. This year is dedicated to Consecrated Life, which coincides with the canonization of the two daughters of the Holy Land: Blessed Marie-Alphonsine Ghattas from Jerusalem, foundress of the Congregation of the Rosary Sisters, and Blessed Mariam Baouardy from the village of Ibillin, foundress of the Discalced Carmelites of Bethlehem, who, took the religious name Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified. The news of the canonization of these two holy women is a blessing from heaven on our land, devastated by violence yet persevering in our longing for peace and justice.

This long-awaited announcement of the double canonization, restores in us our trust and hope in Christ. The Lord wants to comfort our country, torn apart by conflicts and wars, and our people who continue to suffer and endure through injustices. Nevertheless, divine grace has always given rise to saints, who reveal to us the face of Christ, “meek and humble of heart,” full of love, mercy and forgiveness. Despite their human weaknesses, these saints imitated Christ, and continue to do so, in this most Holy Land, where God Himself walked!

The tribulations which we endure encourage us to become saints, through the example of our two holy women. This is not something impossible to do. Mother Marie-Alphonsine was humble on earth and is now “great in the kingdom of heaven.” She attained spiritual motherhood for a multitude, in becoming the foundress of a religious congregation so dear to our hearts.

Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified, was a living symbol of God’s love. From her childhood, she understood that everything here on earth was passing and mortal, and that only Christ prevails in eternity. She entered the cloistered Order of Discalced Carmelite nuns, whose presence in the Holy Land is deeply appreciated. It is a discrete presence of prayer, meditation, humble work and absolute consecration to the Lord.

The Divine Master said: “Let your light shine before men!”(Mt 5:16) This commandment, reminds us always that Jesus himself is the “true light that gives light to everyone,”(Jn 1:9) and gives to humanity, prudence and strength. Christ is the only Light, all others are but a shadow of the truth. It is Jesus who gives splendor and radiance to living beings and everything that is good and beautiful. As saint Justin of Nablus said, “They are but rays of the Sun, who is the Word Incarnate.” (cf. *Dialogue with Trypho* cp. 121)

Holiness: simple and authentic

Our two new saints are lamps for our path. Their love and faith inspire their religious families, the faithful in the Holy Land, the Middle East and the entire world. In their lives, they resembled in

their vigilance the “faithful servants who awaited the return of their master,” (*Lk 12:36*) as well as the wise virgins who waited patiently for the arrival of the Bridegroom. For this reason they have entered into “the banquet of the wedding feast of the Lamb” (*Rev 19:9*). There is no risk of remaining in “in outer darkness,” neither for them nor for the people who follow them!

They were simple in greatness and great in their simplicity. Their simplicity did not extinguish their greatness. Their entry into holiness manifests the victory of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, of love over selfishness, and of faith over indifference and rejection of God. The integrity of their life glorifies God. It exalts their gifts and good deeds, just as the holy Virgin Mary proclaimed in her eternal canticle, the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; for the Almighty has done great things for me and Holy is his name.” (*Lk 1:47 ff*).

Our two new Saints, through an exemplary life, their silence and recollection, their fidelity amidst suffering and their heroic selflessness in sacrifices, offer us a magnificent lesson which can be summarized in the words of the Lord Jesus : “the one who perseveres to the end will be saved.” (*Mt 24:13*) And, like Saint Augustine, we can exclaim: “Can you not do what these young men and maidens can?”(*Confessions 8:27*) As Christ asks of us, our two Saints entered the narrow gate. Unfortunately, “few will manage to succeed.”(*Lk 13:24*) But for them, the door which was initially “narrow” became wide open to get to Christ!

The miracles for their canonization

The Church bestows the title “Servant of God” to a person whose Cause for Beatification has been opened. After the person’s writings have been examined and heroic virtues proven, the Servants of God are called “Venerable.” After this comes the beatification, followed by canonization. To reach these last two stages, a miracle attributed to the intercession of the Venerable or Blessed is necessary.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, to declare persons as holy means that they have entered for all eternity to “share in the Master’s joy”(*Mt 25:21*) and that they can intercede for the faithful who invoke them, seeking graces, good things and protection. Certainly, it is possible to seek the intercession of the “Blessed” at the level of the local Church. But for all in the universal Church to ask for their prayers and intercession their canonization is necessary.

The miracle through the intercession of Blessed Marie-Alphonsine

On the day that we celebrated her beatification, the future saint worked her second miracle. The investigation carried out by the Latin Ecclesiastical Tribunal in Jerusalem confirmed that Mr. Emile Mounir Salim Elias, a resident of Kfar Kana (Cana of Galilee), born on May 25, 1977, an expert surveyor, who two days before the beatification was working in the region of Bayt Dajan, near Holon, Jaffa. He was trying to raise a measuring equipment to a height of around five metres. He did not realize that his equipment was coming in contact with a high voltage cable. As he was not wearing gloves, he was electrocuted by an electric current of thirty to forty thousand volts. It was a horrifying shock that plunged him to the ground from an elevated height, with eyes open, not breathing and no signs of life. Mr. Elias remembers nothing more than having lifted up his surveying equipment. He was in a coma for two consecutive days. According to the hospital report, he was no longer breathing and his heart had stopped beating. His body had turned bluish in color and dying.

Mr. Elias did not know much about Mother Marie-Alphonsine and had never prayed to her. But, after he woke up from his coma, he learned that many of the faithful prayed for the intercession of Mother Marie-Alphonsine for his deliverance from death. It was obvious that his healing was

nothing else but a miracle. Humanly speaking, nothing could save him. Through the intercession of Mother Marie-Alphonsine, Mr Elias is still alive. God willing, he will attend the canonization celebrations in Rome, Jerusalem and Nazareth.

The miracle through the intercession of Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified

The Blessed worked her second miracle for a Sicilian child, Emmanuele Lo Zitto from the region of Syracuse, who was born by caesarian section in 2009. The child suffered from severe congenital heart failure, causing serious circulatory problems, limiting the flow of nutritional elements and oxygen throughout the body. The infant was transferred from one hospital emergency facility to another. The doctors determined that his situation could only get worse. He was taken to the intensive care section, then to another hospital specializing in infant cardiac surgery, where he had emergency surgery even though the surgeons were aware of the irreversible condition and of his imminent death. Surprise: the operation was a success! The doctors also noted a rapid recovery in the following hours and days. Subsequent examinations and analyses established his complete healing.

The medical and theological commissions concluded that healing was “rapid and complete,” and confirmed that there was “no explanation from the point of view of medical science.”

In fact, the miracle had taken place through the intercession of the Blessed Carmelite. A couple, friends of Emmanuele, knew of his illness and asked for his healing through the intercession of Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified, to whom they were devoted after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and a visit to the Carmel in Bethlehem. Their pilgrimage was at Christmas 2008, about five months before the birth of Emmanuele. During their pilgrimage, the couple also had the occasion to venerate the relics of the Blessed. They asked friends and people they knew to invoke the intercession of the Carmelite Nun. As well, “a prayer network” was established with the Carmelite nuns in Bethlehem, Haifa, Jerusalem and Nazareth for the healing of the child. And the grace was obtained.

Saints: veneration, intercession and imitation

These three words make up the threefold purpose of the canonization. We worship the Lord alone, but we venerate the Saints because they are the vessels of His gifts and regarded worthy to enter into eternal life. They reign with God in the heavenly homeland as the chosen beloved. Through the Saints we glorify God, the source of every grace and every gift.

Saints are human like us, who were exposed to temptations and failings. But each of them can say “I have fought a good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.” (2 Tim 4:7). They were not born saints, but “they conquered the Kingdom by force.” After Christ, they are our models in life. It is not enough just to admire their virtues and their works. It is necessary to imitate them and let ourselves be guided and enlightened by their wisdom.

The Saints teach us that holiness does not consist in doing miracles but rather in seeking God’s will in everything: “Loving him with all our heart... and loving our neighbor as ourselves,” for the love of God. Holiness means taking the eight Beatitudes as a rule of life. In this sense, the Saints guide us “on our journey to God” since they themselves have taken that same journey.

We are not born saints coming out of our mother’s womb. We are made saints, despite all our weaknesses. The task is possible. Jesus clearly said: “I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”(Lk 5:32)

Holiness is the fruit of a divine grace and does not come from human efforts. After an ecstasy, Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified said: “If Jesus abandoned me, I would be worse than Judas! But, if he keeps watch over me, I would be like John the beloved.” (A. Brunot, *Mariam, la petite arabe. Soeur Marie de Jésus Crucifié*, ed. Salvator, Mulhouse, 1992)

With regards to humility and trust in Divine Providence, Blessed Marie-Alphonsine, one day said to one of her religious Sisters: “By humility, we must conquer heaven.” (P. Duvigneau, *Mère Marie-Alphonsine et la Congrégation du Rosaire, Gersusalemme 2000*)

Significance of holiness

It is not about escaping from the world. Not all of the faithful are called to religious life, to retreat into the contemplative/cloistered life in monasteries or convents to become saints. Each and every one ought to respond to a vocation according one’s way of life. All paths lead to the same goal, beginning with the apostles and the saints of the early centuries, many of whom never lived in monasteries. The way of holiness is that of the Gospel of the Beatitudes. All of us have our own vocation to live and are called to true conversion of heart.

There is no monopoly in achieving holiness. To be holy is simply to be faithful to our Christian vocation. The fidelity of the priest, of the religious, of the lay person has its origin in the fidelity of Christ. For a priest, a religious, a father or mother of a family, a student, a worker, an employee...holiness always consists in living the faith with fidelity and fullness, according to one’s way of life.

People search for money. But saints make themselves poor for God. The goods of this world are insignificant to them. They have renounced them, as well as pleasures, to become free. The saint knows not quarrel or revenge. In the face of everything, they demonstrate kindness and benevolence. The words of Christ are engraved in their hearts: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.”(Mt 5:12)

Blessed Marie-Alphonsine and Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified are two great examples. Holiness does not mean sadness or melancholy, but joy! It is not a call to despise the present life and its pleasures, but a call to live a full life in authentic joy. The lives of the Saints are full of amazing eyewitness accounts of this radiant and inexpressible joy.

Saints are quite numerous. We know those who are remembered in the liturgical calendars and martyrologies. There are far too many of them to be listed. There are others who are known to God alone. The beloved disciple John saw them in the Apocalypse: “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb!’”... These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” (Rv 7:9-10,14)

All of these elect have welcomed the word of Christ in the Gospel: “Be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48), and the words of the apostle Paul: “God wills you all to be holy.” (1 Thes 4:3)

Blessed Marie-Alphonsine emphasized that holiness is a commitment for everyone: “We must strive for holiness and attract all our brothers and sisters in Christ.” Holiness is based on charity. The stronger our love becomes, the greater our holiness increases. At the end of her life, trying in some way to summarize these principles, she wrote: “Love is as strong as death. It makes us appreciate poverty, endure hunger and cold, rejoice when offended, accept sickness, resist

temptation and put up with persecution. Love always urges us to always provide for the needs of other.”

On the path to holiness

The first difference between us and the Saints is that they are already in eternal happiness, which we hope to possess: “Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer.”(Rm 12:12) In his first letter, Saint John puts us in an even deeper truth and more comforting for our souls: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed... Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure.” (1 Jn 3:2,3)

Dear children, brothers and sisters in Christ! Through sin, we risk losing our dignity and hinder our spiritual growth. We must therefore “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”(Phil 2: 12) And, “let us not grow tired of doing good for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up.”(Gal 6:9)

A second difference lies in that we are on earth and that we have the time. Perhaps the Saints give us this ‘time’ that we have, to love better, to purify ourselves more and to become increasingly like the spotless Lamb. We have time, but we do not sufficiently appreciate its value. Either we let it flow in vain or we transform it into a talent which bears fruit. Yet the Master is clear: “Walk while you have the light.”(Jn 12:35) It is as if he is saying: “Go on your way while you have the time!”

Our two Saints listened to the Word of God. They found the way. They responded to the call of Christ. They set off for his Kingdom. They took no other way but Jesus himself.

Our Saints loved Christ above everything and everyone else. They chose Him over their families, their friends, money and prosperity regardless of difficulties and trials. They loved the Gospel more than any other book. It was for them the source of spiritual life and the inspiration in community life. The Beatitudes were the law of their behavior, the light during the “dark night” on the road which leads to the Kingdom. They lived the Beatitudes in spirit and in truth.

Blessed Marie-Alphonsine lived a charity that was heroic. The examples of this were countless. After her death, one of the Sisters who knew her gave this testimony: “I had the grace to live six years with Mother Marie-Alphonsine in Bethlehem. I affirm that I have never heard her speak ill of others. In addition, I admired in her two other virtues: her availability and her reverence for the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of the Rosary.”

The Saints and us

If God honored the Saints and called on the Church to venerate them, it is because each one of us is the same. To venerate them means to love them, to respect them, to seek their intercession and to imitate them.

- To invoke their intercession, the apostle Paul asked the faithful to pray for him, to remember him before the Lord. If we ask the living to support us by their prayers, is there not a greater reason that we ought to seek the intercession of those who are now living eternally in God’s presence: the Blesseds and the Saints? (Rom 15:30 ; 2 Cor 1:11 ; Col 4:3 ; Eph 6:18 -19).
- Imitate them: logically, we imitate those we admire and venerate. When we celebrate the Saints, we do not increase their goodness or their glory, because they are already perfect. We do so to imitate their way of life. And the more we venerate them, the greater we are committed to following their example. This is the reason why the Church venerates the memory of the

Saints. In exalting their glory, the Church wants us to come to the glory they have already reached.

The graces we ask from the Lord

With all our heart and our prayers, we ask the Lord to grant us:

- Committed laity, inspired by a living faith that is conscious and effective.
That this faith shed its light on every area of their public and private life, so that they become true witnesses of Christ in family, professional, political, financial, cultural and social life. Holiness is the outpouring of the Spirit which spreads in the faithful in such a way that it spiritually enriches and breathes life into the society where it is located.
- Sainly priests who are intrepid apostles, living exclusively for the sake of the kingdom
That, in their total love and constant renewal for Christ, their hearts be filled with a deep joy. That with determination, they “put their hand to the plow” without “looking back” and regretting what they have left behind!
- Dedicated and selfless nuns, living only for Christ.
That they come to meet Him, like the wise virgins with their lamps alight and with abundance of oil. The arrival of the Spouse never surprises them!

The Virgin Mary was the first consecrated person to give of herself totally to Christ! She, it was who, at the revelation from the angel, said “Yes” unreservedly, without hesitation and without delay. The religious without reproach is one who imitates in some way an image of the Virgin, in her love and her faith, in her purity and her chastity, in her tenderness and her obedience, in her silence and stability, in her material poverty and her spiritual richness. The religious encounters Christ through his mother, the Virgin Mary. Following Mary’s example, they devote their life exclusively for Jesus, who is extravagant in his love, as they live the Gospel deeply. We hope that among us, religious in communities increase, who in some way resemble Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified and Mother Marie-Alphonsine. They are a living sign that holiness is not a utopia.

Conclusion

Dear children, brothers and sisters in Christ, Laity, Clergy and Religious, this message on the occasion of this two-fold celebration invites you to perfection and to a renewal of spiritual life. Each and every one of us is called to holiness following the example of Blessed Marie-Alphonsine and Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified. Both are models of self-giving, dedication, service, patience, silence and generosity. The Lord calls us to holiness – each one according to one’s state in life. Just as he did for our two saints, God also gives us graces. If we follow their example in love and purity, in selflessness and generosity, we will obtain the glory with which they have been crowned.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us remember that the love to which we are called cannot be fulfilled except by the total and unconditional gift of self, without counting the cost, according to the example set for us by these two daughters of our land, who are already praying for us. It is not impossible for God’s grace to accomplish great things also in us!

In closing, we give thanks for the Congregation of the Sisters of the Rosary, which has given and continues to give to the Church religious women dedicated in their apostolate, especially in the fields of education and healthcare. We give thanks to the Carmelite Order, which from the branches of the tree of Carmel counts, among its numerous fruits, giants of holiness such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux and Mariam Baouardy of Ibillin.

+ Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch