

Presentation by Rt. Rev. Sir Alexei Smith, KCHS,  
on Saint Ephrem the Syrian

In his famous encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope Saint John Paul II famously wrote, “the Church must breathe with her two lungs!” In the first millennium of the history of Christianity, this expression referred primarily to the relationship between Western and Eastern Christianity, that is Rome and Byzantium. Those of you who have been in the Holy Land with me know that that is what we do there - we explore and experience the Holy Land breathing with both lungs of the Church.

During the pandemic, I have been participating online in the Oxford University’s Interfaith Forum, and one of the regular presenters – Professor Sebastian Brock, the world-renowned Syriac scholar - correctly I think, has pointed out that “unlike a human being! – The Church is in fact endowed with three lungs, from all of which she needs to breathe.” This third lung, which for convenience we can designate as the “Syriac lung,” consists of the various Churches of the Syriac tradition – not necessarily from Syria, that would be like saying all Roman Catholics are from Rome or are ethnically Roman, Italian, but rather worshipping in the Syriac language, a variation of Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. These include both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches, meaning those who accept the teaching of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, and those who do not, and other Oriental Orthodox Churches as well. These three traditions, Latin West, Greek East, and Syriac, should

properly be viewed as three interlocking circles, forming a triangle: all three share a common core of fundamental Christian doctrines, but each also has, on the one hand, features in common with one of the other two, and on the other hand, features which are distinctive to itself, but these features should be seen as constituting an enrichment to the church as a whole, and from which the other two lungs or traditions can derive benefit.

This third lung, the Syriac, has largely been neglected by both the Latin West and the Greek East, and it still remains little known. But I hope to remedy that this afternoon!

Hopefully, most of you know as I stated earlier that Jesus' native language was Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew. But how many of you know that for most of the church's early history, the Aramaic dialect known as Syriac was the language of the largest Christian body in the world. By the end of the first millennium, the Syriac Church far outstripped the Latin or Western or Roman Church. Syriac Christianity spread via missionary efforts from the Holy Land, through Syria and Lebanon, to northern Mesopotamia and the Sasanian Persian Empire, and eventually to Central Asia, China, and southern India.

The advent of Islam, the Mongol Invasion, the Black Death, and various other social and religious factors isolated and reduced the numbers of Syriac-speaking churches over time, but they still exist today, with about 1.4 million members scattered around

the world. I recently had the honor of helping to welcome their Patriarch, His Holiness, Ignatius Aphrem II, to Los Angeles.

The Syriacs are one of the six Churches with a stake in the Holy Sepulcher. The other five are???? [Greek Orthodox, Franciscan, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopian]. Behind the Edicule, behind the Coptic Chapel, on the western side of the Holy Sepulcher Rotunda walls, is the Syriac Chapel – sometimes labeled the Jacobite Chapel, after one of their first bishops. The walls and altar were severely damage by a fire many years ago and have never been repaired, although the Syriac community in Jerusalem gathers there every Sunday and Feast Day to celebrate their liturgy, which is, as I indicated, celebrated in Syriac, a language closely related to Aramaic, similar to it, but with a different alphabet.

On the far side of the chapel is a low entrance to two complete 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish tombs. Why is that important to know? Since Jews always buried their dead outside the city walls, this alone is proof that the Holy Sepulcher site was outside the walls of Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion of Jesus. There is an ancient tradition that these are the tombs of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea.

The Syriac tradition is renowned for its vast and distinctive literature and its rigorous asceticism. One of the most brilliant theologians of the Syriac Church was Saint Ephrem the Syrian, a great poet and melodist: he was made a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.

Saint Ephrem was born at the beginning of the fourth century in the city of Nisibis in Mesopotamia into a family of impoverished toilers of the land. His parents raised their son in piety, but from his childhood, he was known for his quick temper and impetuous character. He often had fights, acted thoughtlessly, and even doubted God's providence.

Once, he was unjustly accused of stealing a sheep and was thrown into prison. He heard a voice in a dream calling him to repent and correct his life. After this, he was acquitted of the charges and set free, and Ephrem embarked on a path of repentance and salvation. The young man ran off to the mountains to join the hermits. Saint James of Nisibis was a noted ascetic, a preacher of Christianity, and a denouncer of the Arians. Who were the Arians? Those who denied the divinity of Christ, maintaining that the Son of God was created by the Father and was therefore neither coeternal with the Father nor consubstantial. Saint Ephrem became one of John's disciples. Under his direction, Ephrem attained Christian meekness, humility, submission to God's will, and the strength to undergo various temptations without complaint.

Saint James transformed this wayward youth into a humble and contrite monk. Realizing the great worth of his disciple, he made use of his talents. He trusted him to preach sermons, to instruct children in school, and he took Ephrem with him to the first Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325. Ephrem served with James for 14 years.

After the capture of Nisibis by the Persians in 363, Ephrem went to a monastery near the city of Edessa, where he combined asceticism with a ceaseless study of the Word of God, taking from it both solace and wisdom for his soul. Both verbally and in his writings, Ephrem instructed everyone in repentance, faith, and piety. He also wrote the first Syriac commentary on the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses, the first five books in the Old Testament, and other Old Testament texts

In his commentary on the Book of Jonah, Ephrem is not interested in the first part of the book and Jonah's exploits with the whale – which is what most people remember! - but rather concentrates on the second and main part of the story, Jonah's interaction with the Ninevites, calling them to repentance, and to his great surprise and consternation, their complete repentance!

Ephrem evokes the atmosphere of repentance and describes their repentance in glowing terms: “Instead of robes, they clothed themselves with sackcloth; venerable old men heard him [Jonah], and covered their heads with ashes; rich men heard him and laid open their treasures before the poor.... Creditors became forgiving; every man, respecting his salvation, became righteously solicitous” [1, 16-28].

The outlook of all the Syriac ascetics was the same: the monks believed that the goal of their efforts was union with God and the acquisition of divine grace. For them, this present life – and

not simply Lent - was a time of tears, fasting, and toil. Here evidences the asceticism I mentioned earlier. Ephrem writes:

“If the Son of God is within you, then his Kingdom is also within you. Thus, the Kingdom of God is within you, a sinner! Enter into yourself, search diligently and without toil you shall find it. Outside of you is death, and the door to it is sin. Enter into yourself, dwell within your heart, for God is there.”

Saint Ephrem was a great teacher of repentance. The forgiveness of sins, according to his teaching, is not an external exoneration, not a forgetting of our sins, but rather their complete undoing, their annihilation. The tears of repentance—of which he constantly writes – wash away and burn away our sin. The shedding of tears of which he writes, does not refer to just crying due to emotional sadness, but the shedding of tears due to sorrow for one’s sins, that, he says, is true humility, and genuine repentance (ie a sincere desire to turn away from sin that brings sickness and to turn toward God who heals). The Greek term for repentance, *metanoia*, means precisely that, ‘to turn away, to reorient oneself’.

Moreover, such tears enliven, they transfigure sinful nature, they give strength “to walk in the way of the Lord’s commandments,” encouraging hope in God. A person who prays with this disposition invites the transforming, Life-Giving Divine Grace into his or her heart. In the fiery font of repentance, Ephrem writes, “you sail yourself across, O sinner, you resurrect yourself from the dead.”

In his classic work entitled “A Spiritual Psalter” or “Reflections on God,” in “Psalm” 74, he writes of the power of the tears of repentance:

“Who will cure my soul, if not Thou, O Christ, the only physician of souls! Where will I find a remedy for the disease of my soul, if not with Thee, O fountain of healing! Thou who did cure the ailing woman, cure also my soul from the ruin of sin.

May Thy compassion descend on me and help me to overthrow the enemy. Fortify me who am infirm by the strength of Thine arm, and the Evil One will be ashamed when he sees that I am prepared for battle. Animate me and the Evil One will be humiliated. In shame will he be turned back, and I will glorify Thy name.

Accept the tears of my wretchedness and blot out the record of my debts, and again the enemy will be ashamed, seeing that Thy loving kindness has destroyed the fruit of his wicked deeds and that I will not be punished. May Thy compassion come to mine aid, that I might pass safely through the realm of temptation, and that I might thereafter be close to Thee, with Thee always.

My sinful soul will glorify Thee and Thy Father and the Holy Spirit, for she [interestingly, soul is described as feminine!] has wept and been heard, and, washed with tears of repentance, she has been made a temple inhabited by the Divinity which has created the world.”

Of all the Lenten hymns and prayers of the Eastern Churches, both Greek and Syriac, one short prayer can be termed THE Lenten prayer, and that is one attributed to the great teacher of the spiritual life we are considering today, Saint Ephrem the Syrian.

In Greek or Byzantine Churches, it is recited twice in every weekday service, and is accompanied with bodily prostrations, similar to those of the Muslims – 7 points of contact with the ground: head, palms, knees, feet]. Why does this short and simple prayer occupy such an important position in the entire Lenten worship of these churches?

Because it enumerates in a unique way all the negative and positive elements of repentance and constitutes, so to speak, a “check list” for our individual Lenten efforts. This effort is aimed first at our liberation from some fundamental spiritual diseases which shape our lives and make it virtually impossible for us to start turning ourselves to God:

Slothfulness, inquisitiveness (better translation of the original would be faintheartedness), ambition [better translation, lust of power], and vain talking [sometimes translated as “idle talk”].

The disease or spirit of sloth, one of the deadly sins because it poisons the well which is the very source of our spiritual energy: the spirit of faintheartedness, a listlessness which negates life; the lust of power, not so much an ambition as a total centering on self which translates into indifference, even contempt, for

others, and finally the spirit of idle or vain talk, which demeans the divine gift of “the Word,” God’s image in us.

Then the prayer moves to the positive aims of repentance, which also are four: purity or chastity, not reduced to its sexual connotations, but rather a whole-mindedness, that which renders a person moderate, temperate, in full control of themselves; humility, which alone is capable of truth and thus the elimination of all that is false in us; patience, the closer you and I come to God, the more patient we grow with others and the more we reflect that infinite respect for all things which is the proper quality of God; and neighborly love, for it is with love that you and I authenticate God’s image in us.

All of this is summarized and brought together in the concluding petition of the Lenten prayer in which we ask, “the grace of being aware of my sins and of not thinking evil of my brethren.” For ultimately, there is but one danger – pride. Pride is the source of evil, and all evil is pride. Yet, it is not enough for you and I to see our own errors, for even this apparent virtue can be turned into pride. Syriac spiritual writings are full of warnings against forms of pseudo-piety which, in reality, under the cover of humility and self-accusation, lead to a truly demonic pride. But when we “see our own errors” AND “do not judge our brethren,” when, in other terms, purity, humility, patience and neighborly love are woven together in us, then, and only then, the ultimate enemy – pride- will be destroyed in us.

We have much to learn from Saint Ephrem: I invite you to breathe with this “third lung” of the Church this Lent.