

Women's Marian Devotions in a Melkite Greek Catholic Village in Lebanon

Nancy W. Jabbra

This article will focus on two important devotions, May (which is dedicated to Mary),¹ and Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ) (which locally includes substantial devotion to Mary) in a village in Lebanon's Biqa' Valley. Both of these devotions came from Western Europe, but the Corpus Christi celebration appears to be exclusive to the Zahleh area where the village is located. Women are deeply involved in both of these devotions, thus creating a spiritual space for themselves in an otherwise patriarchal church.

Christianity evidently came to 'Ain al-Qasis (pseudonym) during the fourth century CE or earlier. According to the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate in Lebanon² it was established as an episcopal see during that century. The Christianity established there eventually became what we would know today as Byzantine Orthodox. The first church built there, probably early on, was called Our Lady of the Dormition.³ Until about 1940, when Our Lady of the Annunciation was constructed in the village's upper quarter, this was the village's only church. To this day, the Feast of the Dormition on August 15 is the village patronal feast and a major local celebration.

Following the seventeenth century creation of the Vatican missionary office Propaganda Fidei and the Capitulations agreements between the Ottoman government and France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, members of numerous European religious orders, such as the Carmelites, Franciscans, and Jesuits, were active in the Biqa' and other areas in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. They influenced the election of the Patriarch of Antioch in 1724, with the result that the church split into an Orthodox part and a Catholic part.

'Ain al-Qasis became part of the Catholic faction. One of the aims of the missionaries was to create an individual piety based on emphasizing the suffering of Christ and cults of Mary and other saints. They concentrated on women in their efforts.

Mary's life is detailed in several passages from the Christian New Testament, notably in Luke's Gospel. Church tradition in both the Western church based in Rome and the Eastern church based in Constantinople and other cities has added to the basic scriptural accounts. One of these traditions is that Mary did not die, but rather was assumed into Heaven (the Roman version, called the Assumption) or fell asleep and went to Heaven (the Eastern version, called the Dormition).⁴ Another tradition is that after Jesus was born Mary remained a virgin, bearing no more children. Yet another tradition is that people can pray to Mary, who will intercede for them with her son or herself enact miracles. As the mother of God, she is the most powerful of the saints. Eastern icons frequently portray Mary as a Byzantine empress.

Western iconography tends to be sentimental, picturing Mary with Jesus after he was taken from the Cross, holding and nursing the baby Jesus, or stories from other parts of her life. Just the same, in Western tradition, Mary is still the most powerful of the saints. Western Marian devotional cults are the most recent. For example, devotions at Lourdes, France, began following a young woman's visions in 1858; devotions at Fatima, Portugal, began in 1917, and the Mystical Rose devotions developed near Brescia, Italy, after 1947.⁵ These are the bare bones, then, out of which Catholics and Orthodox Christians have constructed a body of beliefs and practices about Mary.

I obtained an account of the 2009 May devotions from an informant who, as president of one of the ladies' sisterhoods (Saint Rita, the other being Our Lady of Perpetual Help), was deeply involved in the observance. She told me that on the last day of April each sisterhood sets up a *samdi* (i.e. a table covered in white and decorated with flowers and religious pictures) for Mary in the church in its quarter. Then, every day at 6:00 pm the church bells would ring, and the sisterhood members, as well as the nuns and other ladies, would assemble in the church. They would pray one part of the Rosary, sing hymns, and recite a litany.

On the last day of May, members of the two sisterhoods, members of the Sacred Heart of Jesus organization, the nuns, the priest, and a lot of people, women and men, assembled in the Annunciation church, the one in the upper quarter. Then they processed down to the main street, carrying a big picture of Mary. Before them went a car with a sound system broadcasting Fairouz (a famous Lebanese singer) singing religious songs. People along the way threw flower petals and wafted incense their way.

Those processing turned and went up the hill to the lower quarter church, the Dormition. The priest and the people entered, whereupon the priest blessed the picture and the people. Then the crowd went out of the church and farther up the hill to the Mystical Rose chapel. There the priest blessed the picture and the people again, the people prayed, threw flower petals, and wafted incense. Then it was over, and people greeted each other.

Since 1973, when I actually was able to observe May devotions, they have grown from a small celebration among neighbors to a major observance involving the priest, the nuns, and many villagers, women and men. Today, too, they hold a lengthy procession throughout the town. Nevertheless, the devotions are still organized and dominated by women, namely the members of the two sisterhoods and the members of the Sacred Heart organization.

Corpus Christi, *Khamis al-Jasad* (Thursday of the Body, that is, the body of Christ celebrated in the

Mass) as it is locally called, takes place in June.⁶ Like May devotions, it has no counterpart in Byzantine tradition.

I first observed the celebration of Corpus Christi in 1973, and then returned to observe it in 2004 and 2009; the following account is from the 2009. In the morning the village priest celebrated the Mass for the holiday, accompanied by pious villagers whose work did not keep them from attending. In the afternoon women in the house where I was staying collected flowers for the *samdi*. They tore apart many of the roses for their petals. Next we assembled the *samdi* outside the front door, decorating it with flowers, petals, and a picture of Jesus. Then some neighbors and relatives came and waited.

At 5:30 the prayers for the observance, led by the priest, started in the Dormition church. The bells rang, and people started going up to the church. Then the procession started down the road. Those processing sang a hymn special to Corpus Christi, and also the Lourdes hymn to Mary. In 2004 I asked one woman why they sang the Lourdes hymn if the holiday was devoted to the body of Christ. She said that they include Mary, the mother, with the Trinity. She shares with them, she is a partner.

The priest, carrying a monstrance,⁷ was accompanied by women, men, and children. They came up to the house where I waited with the others, and entered the car park. In front of the *samdi* the priest blessed the people with the monstrance. The lady of the house burned incense and family members threw petals. Then the procession left to continue its path to the Annunciation church, past Saint George's shrine, and back into the Dormition church.

There the priest went to the altar and blessed the people with the monstrance. Then the celebration was over.

In sum, I have described two celebrations which, while not commanded in Christian scripture, are also not incompatible with it. They have enabled women to carve out a spiritual place for themselves in a patriarchal church. It is not that women don't

attend Mass and other liturgies conducted by men; they do, and happily. But the May devotions were developed entirely by women, and only bit by bit have men become involved. Even now women dominate them. Corpus Christi appears to have been developed by men, but in the village it is

women who prepare the *samdis*, wait at the houses, and constitute the majority of those processing. Significantly, they sing the same hymn to Mary that they do in the May procession, namely the Lourdes hymn. Mary is celebrated even on an occasion devoted to her son.

Nancy W. Jabbra is the Chairperson of the Department of Women's Studies, Loyola Marymount University, USA.
Email: njabbra@lmu.edu

ENDNOTES

1. Devotion to Mary appeared during the early centuries of Christianity in both the Eastern and Western Churches. However, the dedication of May to Mary is Western in origin. Orthodox Christians do not dedicate May to Mary.
2. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Lebanon, retrieved on June 19, 2009, from <www.pgc-lb.org/english/Church3.shtml#Zahle>.
3. The church is located on the northeastern edge of the village. History has not recorded the date of its construction.
4. Traditions about the dormition and the assumption developed in the early centuries of Christianity in both the East and West. They differ slightly. In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared that the assumption was official Church dogma.
5. A couple from the village built a shrine to the Mystical Rose (Mary) on a hill above the Dormition church in about 2000.
6. The familiar story is that *khamis al-Jasad* has been the patronal feast of nearby Zahleh since 1825, when the then Melkite Bishop arranged a procession to stop an epidemic that was raging in the town. The oldest picture I can find dates to the turn of the 20th century. See Al-Ma'luf, 1977.
7. A monstrance is a stand for displaying the bread consecrated during the Mass. Usually gold in color, it consists of a round base, with a short upright and a sunburst on top. In the center of the sunburst is a round glass door through which one can see the consecrated bread.

REFERENCES

- Al-Ma'luf, I. I. (1977). *Tarikh Zahleh (History of Zahleh)*, 2nd edition. Zahleh: Zahleh Fatat Publishers.
- Khater, A. F. (2008). God has called me to be free: Aleppan nuns and the transformation of catholicism in 18th-century Bilad al-Sham. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, 421-443.