

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HOLY SITES IN THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

MARONITE CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES

H.E. YOUSSEF SOUEIF

MARONITE ARCHBISHOP OF CYPRUS

NICOSIA 14th APRIL 2010

Allow me to express my joy in participating with His Beatitude the Archbishop of Cyprus Chrysostomos II, H.E. Dr. Hans Gett Pottering, Her Excellency Dr. Eleni Theoharous, Rev. Rudiger Noll and Rev. Bishop Porfyrios of Neapolis, in this seminar on religious freedom and the holy sites in the Republic of Cyprus explaining the religious situation of the Maronite Church: the Maronite churches and monasteries.

I would like to start from the reality of the gospel that Jesus Christ gave us: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8: 32).

Freedom is the essential element which shows that we belong to God, to the One who created us according to His image. This basically means that we were created as free sons and daughters, beloved sons and daughters, so as to participate in God’s life, that is, in Love and Liberty. The belief therefore in the Truth, that is, in God who is the Truth, renders the human being internally free and urges him to always seek the kind of freedom which expresses the meaning of his/her existence. So, in Christianity, in Judaism, in Islam and in all human cultures this concept of the Truth that renders every human being free is fundamental.

Based on this, we would like to take a panoramic view of the Maronite Church and its presence in Cyprus starting from the concept of freedom and particularly, religious freedom.

The actual situation of the Maronite churches and Monasteries

Before proceeding to the description of the actual situation of our churches and monasteries I would like to mention that the Maronites have been living in Cyprus for 1200 (one thousand two hundred) years and they constitute today an integral and organic part of the Cypriot society.

Maronite Churches and Monasteries in the North Part of Cyprus

Churches in the four existing Maronite Villages

Kormakitis

- ***St George's Church***

This church was built in 1931 and is dedicated to St George, the patron Saint of the village. It is in a good condition today and the Holy Mass is celebrated there daily.

- ***The Chapel of the Virgin Mary***

It was built in the 15th century (1453 A.D.). It is in a good condition. A park was created around the chapel which was inaugurated on 23 May 2009.

- ***St George's Chapel (Known as St George of the seeds)***

It is a small chapel by the sea (Kornos beach). It was built in 1852. The Holy Mass is celebrated there once a year on the feast of St George of the seeds on 3rd November.

- ***St George's Chapel located in the Monastery of the Franciscan nuns.***

The monastery was built in 1936. The chapel of St George is located in the yard of the monastery and it is estimated that it was built in the 16th century.

Asomatos

- ***Archangel Michael's Church***

This church was firstly built in 1774. It was rebuilt in 1896 and it is dedicated to Archangel Michael, the patron Saint of the village. Its bell-tower was built in 1906. After the Turkish invasion the village became a Turkish military camp but the church remained intact. Today the Maronites are allowed to visit the church every Sunday so as to celebrate Mass.

Karpasha

- ***Holy Cross Church***

This church is dedicated to The Holy Cross. The iconostasis and two icons of the Virgin Mary located in the church date from the 17th century. There are two precious wooden Byzantine crosses in the church: the one dates from the 15th century and the other from the 17th century. The Maronites celebrate Mass there every Sunday.

Ayia Marina

- ***St Marina's Church***

This church was built in 1971-2 and it is dedicated to Saint Marina, the patron Saint of the village. The current state of the Church is unknown since today the village of Ayia Marina is a Turkish military camp and access to it is prohibited.

Other Churches

- ***St Romanos Church – Vouno***

Vouno village is one of the 60 villages in Cyprus which were initially inhabited by Maronites. Though the inhabitants gradually became Orthodox the Church of St Romanos remained Maronite and the Maronites from all over Cyprus used to visit it every year on the 4th of September to celebrate the Holy Mass on the feast of St Romanos. The icon of St Romanos which was located in the church dated from the 14th century. After the Turkish invasion in 1974 the church became a Turkish museum and remains so until today. Its exterior is in a good condition.

- ***St Anthony's Church – Kythrea***

The Maronites moved to this area in 1192. According to some historical sources St Anthony's church was confiscated by the Greek Orthodox but at some point (the date is unknown) it was returned to the Maronites. In 1952 the church was completely destroyed due to an earthquake. A chapel was rebuilt in 1955 one hundred metres away from the original location. During the Turkish invasion in 1974 the church was destroyed; the roof fell in. Today the building is in poor condition and it needs restoration. It is not used at all.

- ***Church of Our Lady – Kambili***

This is a byzantine church. It was in a poor condition until 1956 when it was repaired. After the Turkish invasion it was used as a warehouse by the Turkish inhabitants of the village. Since 1993 the Maronites are allowed to celebrate Mass there whenever they want. They usually celebrate Mass there on 15th August on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. This church has priceless fresco paintings and it is protected by UNESCO. It has been recently restored.

Monasteries

- ***The Monastery and the Chapel of Our Lady of Marki - Marki***

In Marki there used to be a nunnery of Our Lady of Marki which consisted of a chapel. It is said that in recent years the Maronites used the chapel so as to celebrate Mass on 8th September every year on the date of birth of the Virgin Mary. Another source says that the small church was built by John Toti who visited Cyprus in 1636. During his visit he noticed that many Maronites were converting to Islam and so he decided to build a church for them. After the Turkish invasion in 1974 the monastery and the small church became a Turkish military camp and they remain so until today.

- ***The Monastery of Prophet Elias - Metochi (Ayia Marina)***

The first monastery of the Prophet Elias was built around 1735-1740 next to the church of Metochi village which is now a ruin. It belonged to the Lebanese Maronite Order of Monks. In 1762 it was looted by the Turks. In 1943 a new monastery was built a bit further from the old one. During the Turkish invasion this new monastery was heavily bombarded and was destroyed to a great degree. Before 2003 access to the monastery was prohibited. Today the Maronites visit the Monastery on the feast of Prophet Elias so as to celebrate the Hoy Mass. The monastery though is in a very poor condition and it is in urgent need of restoration.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

Following the above description, we notice that two Maronite villages are military zones: Ayia Marina and Asomatos. The first, Ayia Marina, has been totally closed since 1974. We tried and we are still trying to obtain a permission to celebrate the Holy Mass in the village church at least on the feast of the patron saint, St. Marina, on the 17th of July. We hope and look forward to a positive reply to our request. Our demand, as a church, is to have free access to our churches in order to practice our divine worship.

The second Maronite village which constitutes a military zone today is Asomatos. The village is regularly visited by the community on Sundays and during the big feasts for the celebration of the Holy Mass. The visit though takes place on specific and fixed hours and at the end of the Mass the people can only stay and spend some time at the church square. As a Church we request to celebrate Mass and pray on a daily basis, according to the rules of the liturgy of the Maronite Church.

In the villages of Karpasha and Kormakitis, the Churches are open to the people and the Holy Mass is celebrated for the old people who are enclaved and live there. Some of their family members and relatives who visit them on the big feasts participate in the services too.

In the other churches and monasteries things vary. In Prophet Elias monastery a Holy Mass is celebrated once a year on the occasion of the feast of the patron saint, but only under a specific permit. In Kambili, which is now a Turkish village, a Mass is celebrated upon the demand of the faithful in the church of Our Lady of Kambili which has recently been restored. The monastery of Our Lady of Marki is not accessible because it is a military zone.

When dealing with such situations in countries like ours, and in front of so many political and social complications, it is very correct and wise to provide open access to all the religious places that remain signs of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is both a humane and a religious gesture. This culture will build confidence among divided people and problematic societies. Our demand is to freely open all the places of worship all over Cyprus because the house of the Lord, whether this is a church, a mosque or a synagogue, and even the various temples, are all called to be signs of reunion, of spiritual and socio-human renewal despite the diversity in faith. These places are not only spaces of dialogue with God, but are also spaces of dialogue between the people that will build confidence among them based on the culture of love and peace.