



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

The Maronite Catholic Church in the Holy Land



The maronite church of Our Lady of Annunciation in Nazareth

Deacon Habib Sandy from Haifa, in Israel, presents in this article one of the Catholic communities of the Holy Land, the Maronites. The Maronite Church was founded between the late 4th and early 5th century in Antioch (in the north of present-day Syria). Its founder, St. Maron, was a monk around whom a community began to grow. Over the centuries, the Maronite Church was the only Eastern Church to always be in full communion of faith with the Apostolic See of Rome. This is a Catholic Eastern Rite (Syrian-Antiochian). Today, there are about three million Maronites worldwide, including nearly a million in Lebanon.

Present times are particularly severe for Eastern Christians. While we are monitoring the situation in Syria and Iraq on a daily basis, we are very concerned about the situation of Christians in other countries like Libya and Egypt. It's true that the situation of Christians in the Holy Land is acceptable in terms of safety, however, there is cause for concern given the events that took place against Churches and monasteries, and the recent fire, an act committed against the Tabgha Monastery on the Sea of Galilee.

Unfortunately in Israeli society there are some Jewish fanatics, encouraged by figures such as Bentsi Gopstein declaring his animosity against Christians and calling his followers to eradicate all that is not Jewish in the Holy Land. This last statement is especially serious and threatens the Christian presence which makes up only 2% of the population in Israel and Palestine. **In this atmosphere, the hope and courage of Christians is not lacking, quite the contrary, they continue to root their deep faith here in Our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, incarnate in the Holy Land.** In addition, the presence of the representative of the Holy See, His Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio, who defends the interests of the Church and its institutions and watches over the religious congregations and Christian organizations of all rites, gives great support for the presence of Christians in the Holy Land.

The **Maronite community** of **about 11,000 faithful** has inhabited the **Holy Land for one thousand years**; the majority, however, had left Mount Lebanon after the massacres of Christians by the Druze, who were aided by the Turks, in the 19th century. Many of them then fled to neighboring areas and settled permanently. They currently live in the following towns and villages: Nazareth, Haifa, Akko, Jish, Isifiya, Shefaram, Aïn Kenya (Golan), Jaffa, Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Amman in Jordan. **Another wave of Maronites left Lebanon in 2000** when the Israeli army withdrew from southern Lebanon. Families settled in Nahariya, Kiryat Shmona, Tiberias, Safed, Ma'alot-Tarshiha, Karmiel, Haifa, where they still remain today.

The Maronite Diocese of Haifa was established in 1996 after it broke away from the Maronite Diocese of Tyre. After being appointed Vicar General in Bkerke, Lebanon, Msgr. Moussa El Hage succeeded Msgr. Paul Sayah at the head of the Maronite Diocese of Haifa in 2012.

Our community is served by a group of diocesan priests, a religious community of Lebanese Maronites in Jaffa at the Monastery of St. Anthony the Great and a religious Antonin Maronite priest who looks after the Lebanese community, living in Galilee since the 2000. But **the Maronite clergy is present in the majority of religious communities of men and women of all faiths in the Holy Land**. For example Franciscans, Trappists, Carmelites, Salesians, Vincentians, Capuchins, convents, Sisters of the Holy Rosary, Sisters of St. Joseph, Sisters of Charity, Carmelite Sisters, Franciscan Sisters of the Cross, Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary, etc.

This community, which was named after **Saint Maron** the Anchorite, in the 4th century, owes its existence to its attachment to the Holy Catholic Church and its spiritual leader, the Maronite Patriarch in Mount Lebanon. It is fuelled by its faith in God and its commitment to the Virgin Mary and the new Maronite saints, especially **St. Charbel**, a Maronite Catholic priest, monk and **hermit**.

In the more strictly religious and monastic field, Maronites have helped the Eastern Catholic Churches (also known as "sister churches"), not only providing an impressive number of vocations to the Western orders and congregations established in the East, but also helping in the training of monastic families within the Eastern Catholic Christian communities, such as the Melkites in 1736, the Catholic Syrians in 1780, the Chaldeans in 1845 and the Armenians in 1852.

The Maronite community in the Holy Land had a single visit from its spiritual leader, **the Maronite Patriarch, Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï, from May 26 to 29, 2014**, for the first time in its history. He was also welcomed with joy by other communities throughout the Holy Land, far beyond our Church. Now we are beginning to enjoy the benefits of this visit at all levels, ecumenically and interreligiously.

The relationship of your Order with the Holy Land is deep and very old. You nourish it through prayer, material support and regular visits to the Holy Land. During these organized visits and meetings, you invoke peace in these places and raise funds for the works that the Order promotes to help the local Christian populations.

We, the Maronites, are united with you in prayer in the Holy Spirit; we pray that Your Order remains a stronghold of faith and spiritual and material support for the Holy Land, and especially for the Catholic Christian community, which is a leaven of hope for all the people of the region.

(August 15, 2015)