

The Life of the HIEROMARTYR HABEEB KHESHY

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The glorious Hieromartyr Habeeb was born in the city of Damascus Syria, in the year 1894, the first of eight children born to Priest Nicholas Khesy, the hieromartyr of Mersine. He was raised in a Christ-loving home where he was nurtured in the faith with prayers, fasting and spiritual reading, and was educated from the Horologion, the Psalter and the Lives of the Saints.

He completed his formal elementary and secondary education in the schools of 'Ain-Toura in the Lebanon, and in 1914 he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the American University of Beirut. In addition to his love for theology, the Lives of the martyrs, and Byzantine music, Habeeb was also very interested in the historical and archeological sites of the Church in the Middle East. He devoted much time to the study of this subject and undertook the documentation of many sites.

Some time between his graduation from university and the outbreak of World War I, Habeeb's family moved to the Mediterranean seacoast city of Mersine in Cilicia (in what is now south central Turkey), within the Archdiocese of Tarsus and Adana, where his father was assigned responsibilities as parish priest, a position he filled with distinction until he gloriously ended his life as a hieromartyr during a violent persecution of Christians.

Following his father's martyrdom the Khesy family fled Turkey and settled in Port Saïd, Egypt, where, in 1922, Habeeb married a pious young woman, Wadi'a Touma, the daughter of Orthodox Christian immigrants from to Egypt from Syria. Between the years 1922 and 1924 Habeeb was employed in Port Saïd as an accountant and translator for a foreign oil and trading company. In 1924 the firm transferred him to its branch in Beirut.

Habeeb remained with that company until 1931, when, finally heeding the call of Christ which had burned in his heart since childhood, he submitted his resignation, returned to Damascus, the city of his birth, and, fell at the feet of the newly-enthroned Patriarch Alexander III (Tahan) and professed his desire to follow in the footsteps of his father by serving the Church in the holy priesthood. While his wife Wadi'a was at first opposed to her husband's ordination, she experienced a change of heart and in 1932 Habeeb was ordained to the diaconate and subsequently to the priesthood by His Beatitude at Damascus' Patriarchal Cathedral of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos (al-Mariamiyeh). Following his ordination, Father Habeeb served the Cathedral parish. Then, beginning in 1935, he often traveled to Port Saïd and Cairo, but in 1943 permanently settled in Damascus and served the Cathedral and smaller towns and villages within the Archdiocese of Damascus.

On July 16, 1948, while he was making a retreat at a place of solitude in the village of 'Aarnah near Mount Hermon on the border between Syria and Lebanon, Father Habeeb left the village early in the morning and went to an nearby isolated hillside where he could meditate, pray, read and enjoy the natural beauty of the surrounding countryside. Suddenly he was set upon by a group of smugglers, who captured him and, because he was a Christian priest, mocked him and his Faith, and severely beat him with such barbarous ferocity that it resulted in Father Habeeb's death.

Husband and Father

Father Habeeb and Khouriya Wadi'a were the parents of two daughters and three sons: Juliette, Marçel, Fadwa, Nicholas and Salem. Salem, the youngest, was born during his father's first year of priesthood. When Salem was three years old, the Kheshy's second youngest child, Nicholas, died at age five; this was during the period when Father Habeeb was often away from home and his family, ministering to immigrants from Syria and Lebanon living in Port Saçd. When he learned of his son Nicholas' death, Father Habeeb returned to Damascus. When he entered his home he consoled his wife, saying, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord!" Khouriya Wadi'a was a faithful and humble woman, known among all for her generous, loving and compassionate spirit. While she was rarely seen sitting and stealing a few moments for herself, when she did she was never without the Holy Bible or her prayer book in her hands. It is said that Father Habeeb was attracted to her because he recognized in her a great love for the Lord. She was his partner in times of sorrow and strain, a co-sufferer with him in times of tragedy, and the trusted custodian of his secrets. Father Habeeb shared all of his problems with her and sought her advice and counsel in most things; he even confided to her the content of his personal rule of prayer.

Although she, at first, objected to his ordination, Wadi'a's reasoning had not to do with any lack of love for Christ or His Church, but was motivated by concern for their family's economic well-being. At the time when the topic of ordination was first discussed, Wadi'a was the wife of a successful, favored and highly respected accountant with a secure and well-paying position, while she saw priests and their families living in very desperate financial situations. Her husband, refraining from forcibly imposing his will on her, for he was always gentle and sympathetic in dealing with her, left her to God and waited one year. At some point during that year Wadi'a had a dream that changed her mind.

The content of the dream is as follows: Wadi'a saw a soldier -- who seemed to resemble the Archangel Gabriel as he is depicted on his icon. The soldier came toward her, looked at her and pointed first to a tap from which water was gushing forth. He then pointed to a second tap from which water was slowly, even barely, dripping, and said to her, "From now on you must be satisfied with little!" When she awoke Wadi'a said "That soldier was the Archangel sent to me from God!" From that moment she submitted to the will of God, consented to her husband's ordination and prepared herself to accept with a joyful and thankful heart whatever would come upon her family.

Father Habeeb was fair to his family and his ministry, making a balance between his family's needs and his pastoral obligations. His daily schedule was generally well arranged. Like every father, he dined regularly with his family except in times of necessity. He was firm but gentle in implementing the Church's discipline concerning fasts and prayers. He enjoyed excursions with his family and he had a sense of humor.

Priest of the Most High

Since his youngest days Father Habeeb aspired to the high calling of the sacred priesthood and prayed to be worthy to follow his father's steps into martyrdom. There is not much information known of his pastoral work, but what was known is that he loved his parish, cared for his parishioners continuously and zealously following in his Master's steps. He was best known, loved and admired as a man of fervent prayer, a pious and devout liturgist, and a selfless lover of the poor.

The people witnessed that Father Habeeb was transfigured many times during the Divine Liturgy. On occasion he was even seen to be lifted in the air as he stood praying before the holy table or the icons. After his martyrdom that his wife Wadi'a said 'that he had revealed such things to her in confidence many times.'

The poor were his best friends. The wealthy faithful ones who loved God, helped him generously to assist the needy, and were confident that their gifts would always reach the most needy. But all this created many troubles for him, especially from jealous clergyman, who criticized him saying, "The people pay him more than us." while his answer was always "If this is what the people give me, what does that have to do with me?" An Egyptian man who knew him personally, one day answered spontaneously a question about the limits of Father Habeeb's generosity to the poor, saying, "It is crazy how he disperses his money to the poor!"

His family said that a needy woman once knocked on his door, and she begged for food for her family. Looking into the kitchen, Father Habeeb saw on the stove a pot filled with cabbage rolls that his wife had prepared for the family's dinner later that evening. He immediately and without any hesitation picked up the pot and gave it to the needy woman, along with his blessings and good wishes that she be granted a double portion of health.

But as is usual with men like Father Habeeb, most of his charitable deeds were done in secret and known to only a very few. Among those which are known, the most famous is perhaps the story of the "Jibbee" (exorasson, the priest's full-sleeved, long, black robe). His brother Youssef once sent Father Habeeb a new jibbee from Egypt. Having business at the Patriarchate, Father Habeeb put it on and went on his way along "the street called Straight." Arriving at the Patriarchate, Father Habeeb was ushered in to greet the Patriarch. After blessing Father Habeeb, the Patriarch commented, saying, "What a beautiful new jibbee you are wearing, Abouna. May it be blessed!" He answered, "And may God bless you as well, Master! My brother sent it to me as a gift from Egypt." "And what, may I ask, have you done with your old jibbee?" inquired the Patriarch. "It is at home, Master." "Fine. Later today I will send to your home an elderly priest from Houran. If you would be so kind, please give your old jibbee to him as he and his congregation are very poor." Father Habeeb placed his hand over his heart and politely bowed his head, saying "As you desire, Master." Later that evening, the elderly priest from Houran arrived at the home of Father Habeeb. Father, who was wearing his old jibbee, joyfully welcomed him, gave him the seat of honor in his living room, served him coffee and sweets with his own hands and presented to him a beautifully and neatly wrapped package. When the priest unwrapped the gift he found the new jibbee from Egypt!

It is also known that Father Habeeb would frequently to borrow money from the rich, saying that he had some personal need. But in fact, he would take the money and quietly lend it to his poor parishioners who, for lack of funds, were unable to wed their daughters. He was especially quick to do this when he discovered that a girl from his congregation was being pursued by a Muslim.

Following his martyrdom his family found a notebook in which he had listed names of those from whom he had borrowed money and the amount of his debt to them. When his family sought to pay these debts, they discovered that all of this money had been gifted to him to help the poor. But still he counted them as his debts which he would repay.

Character and Virtue

Father Habeeb was pure, honest, straight, and ever-faithful to God; he never mistrusted any person. He had a very clear, uncomplicated and great personality. He perceived and read people as if they were an open book in his hand.

He had a slim and bright face, as well as a slim body. His soul carried his body as a burden, desiring to leave it behind to leave it behind and ascend to heaven. He always seemed to be in amazement – even when confronted with the most simple and natural things of God’s creation. There was always love and affection pictured on his face and working through his hands. And when he walked among God’s people and the needy, he always had a gift in his hand, a comforting word in his mouth, and a humble and faithful prayer to offer.

In his kindness he never let anyone down and he never turned anyone away empty handed. The Lord Jesus was always the fullness of his life.

He fought the good fight against all temptations. He loved the ascetic life and reveled in the lives of saintly monastics. He became a true temple to the Holy Spirit. He lived as if wounded by the love of the Lord Jesus and died as such.

Leaving for Martyrdom

Before Father Habeeb left Damascus for the region around Mount Hermon where he would be martyred, something abnormal happened to him and he had informed his wife about it. She later reported that he said, “ Today while I was praying, I felt I was lifted up above the ground more than ever before.” For some reason, at those words her heart burned as if it were on fire. She begged him not to go, since he insisted on going even after those who had promised to accompany him on the journey had backed out. When he refused to reconsider, she closed the door in his face. He started laughing and said “What’s wrong with you today, Khouriya? It is unusual that you would forbid me from going. It’s not the first time that I go to the mountain.” For half an hour she tried to convince him not to go alone, but it was no use. She couldn’t change his mind. All of this transpired in front of his entire family, but he still insisted on leaving. She finally relented, took his blessing and bade him farewell. As he departed she blessed him with the sign of the Cross and commended him to the Mother of God.

A Glorious Witness

All his life Father Habeeb prayed to be found worthy to glorify God through martyrdom as had his father, and God granted him to be His glorious witness on July 16, 1948. While praying that day at a remote spot outside the village of ‘Aarnah, Father Habeeb was attacked by a band of smugglers, who, when they discovered him to be a Christian and a priest at that, mocked him and brutally tortured and beat him for over four hours, breaking every bone in his body. After they satisfied their hunger for torturing and persecuting him, they threw Father Habeeb from a high mountain cliff. Thus did this pious priest become a glorious Hieromartyr of Christ. When his murderers were caught, they tried to defend themselves by saying that they had thought he was an Israeli spy. But during the their trial this allegation were revealed to be a lie and the truth was made clear: they had killed because they knew him to be a Christian and a priest. It is from the official court transcript of the trial -- from the very mouths of his murderers -- that we learn of Father Habeeb’s forbearance, and the precise circumstances of his glorious

end. Even as he was being savagely beaten and kicked for hours on end, Father Habib never stopped preaching the Gospel of love to his torturers, blessing them as they cursed him and his Christ, and asking God to forgive them. In the end one of these men, Ahmed Ali Hassan Abi-Alhassan, was found guilty of Father Habib's murder and was executed by the Syrian government on the morning of the September 25, 1948. The body of Christ's Hieromartyr, the Priest Habib Kheshy, was interred in the St George Cemetery, located to the east of the city wall of Damascus.