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SAINTS AND SCHOLARS OF CHRISTIAN ANTIOCH

RTE: Father Elia, we often hear of “the Greek Fathers,” and “the early Church Fathers,” but with the exception of obvious names, like Ephrem the Syrian, Isaac the Syriac, and St. John Damascene, we generally have only vague notions of who actually belonged to the Antiochian patrimony. Can you recount some of the most well-known saints?

MONK ELIA: There were thousands of saints who originated from Antioch. For example, of the apostles and disciples: Sts. Peter and Paul the Apostles, the founders and patron saints of the Patriarchal See of Antioch; St. Quartos the Apostle, one of the Seventy, the founder and patron of the Archdiocese of Beirut; St. John Mark the Evangelist, the founder and patron of the Archdiocese of Byblos; and St. Sila or Silouan the Apostle, one of the Seventy, the founder and patron saint of the Archdiocese of Botrys.

We also have St. Ignatius the Theophoros, St. Peter’s disciple, who wrote the *Seven Letters to the Churches*, and according to tradition was the child who was held on the Lord’s knee.

From L to R: St. Ephrem, St. Thekla, St. Isaac, St. John Damascene.

There is also St. John Chrysostom, St. John of Damascus, Sts. Romanos and Cosmas the Melodists, St. Maximos the Confessor from southern Syria, Sts. Sergius and Bacchus, St. Andrew of Damascus (Bishop of Crete), St. Sophronios (Patriarch of Jerusalem), and Sts. Peter and John of Damascus. Cyprus remained attached to Antioch until the 3rd Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431); St. Barnabas the Apostle who assisted St. Paul, was also from that island, and, of course, Sts. Spiridon and Epiphanius.

Among the women saints we have St. Thekla the first woman martyr and St. Nona the Apostle to the Georgians in the 4th century; Georgia remained attached to Antioch until the 10th century. Sts. Marana, Kyra, and Domnina the ascetics, mentioned by Theodoret of Cyrhus in his *“History of the Monks”* in the 5th century, along with other great ascetics, like Sts. Maron, Aphrahat, Simeon and Daniel the Stylites.

Of special interest to the West is that few bishops of Rome, before the schism, were originally from Syria. St. Margaret of Antioch, a 3rd century martyr, was venerated in Britain for hundreds of years and still has very many churches dedicated to her in England and Scotland. St. Theodore of Tarsus was the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 7th century and was instrumental in organizing the Church in England.

We also have contemporary saints such as St. Joseph of Damascus who played an important role in revivifying the Church and also took part in the modern translation of the Bible into Arabic. He was martyred on July 10, 1860, and canonized by the Antiochian Synod in 1993. Also, St. Raphael Hawawini, a Syrian who became the Bishop of Brooklyn (+1915) and who was canonised in the United States in 2000. There are other contemporary martyrs as well, such as Father Nicolas Khashi and Father Habib Khashi, a father and son, who died in Syria.

Other collected material on new righteous has been offered to the Holy Synod for possible canonization. For example, during the First World War, Patriarch Gregorios IV was given the title “Father of the Poor” because he sold many things belonging to the patriarchate to buy wheat and flour for the hungry, both Christian and Muslim. He was so loved that, when he died, there was a fight between the Christians and Muslims over who would bury him. The Muslims insisted on reading prayers and doing a service over him, and only then would they let the Christians take his body for a Christian burial. His life has been collected and we are awaiting a decision by the Holy Synod.

The Antiochian patrimony is a very rich one, and a great treasury of grace for the entire world. ✚