MGR. PETROS YOUSIF (4 JULY 1936 – 17 DECEMBER 2015)

FROM KAREMLESH TO PARIS

ALAIN DESREUMAUX SARCELLES, FRANCE

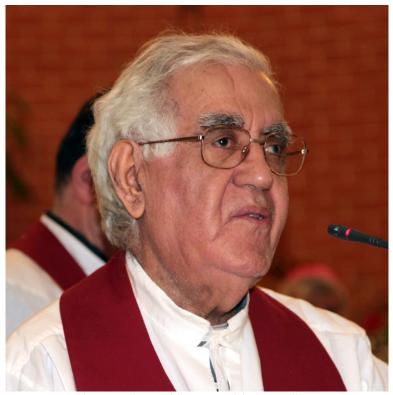


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Last December marked the one year anniversary of the passing of Mgr. Petros Yousif at the age of seventy-nine. Following the tradition of his people, the Syriac community celebrates this annual anniversary, and it seems appropriate for the Hugoye community to join in this renewed commemoration.

Petros Yousif was born in Karemlesh, near Mosul, on 4 July 1936, in a family of four children. His childhood was split between parish life and study, in which he showed his talent from an early age. Considering his entire career, it is fair to say that these two poles of activity dominated his life, fully dedicated to his Church, which he served with his study and his knowledge.

In 1949, at the age of thirteen, he entered the Junior Seminary in Mosul, followed in 1953, at the age of seventeen, by his ecclesiastical studies in the Major Seminary in Rome, where he obtained the licentiate in philosophy at the Urbaniana University with the mention *summa cum laude*. He was ordained a priest in Rome on 22 December 1960.

He continued his studies in Rome and obtained in 1961 the degree in Mariology at the Theological Faculty Marianum, again *summa cum laude*, and one year later, in 1962, the doctor's degree in Liturgical Theology at the Urbaniana University, with the mention *magna cum laude*.

With his scholarly training thus completed in Rome, his pastoral ministry subsequently came to fruition in the two countries where his people needed him: his native country of Iraq, the homeland of the Chaldean heritage, which he never ceased to serve and to make known, and then France, where a great number of his Chaldean brothers and sisters found refuge. Until the end of his life he maintained this double commitment, lived and treasured in light of his Roman education, which he enriched through additional training in Paris. It is truly remarkable how he always worked both as a pastor and as a scholar and teacher.

He carried out the first part of his pastoral ministry in Iraq, first as the priest of the Chaldean Cathedral of Saint Meskinta in Mosul, with additional tasks as the Archbishop's secretary,

between 1963 and 1970, and as the spiritual director of the Chaldean Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Mosul, from 1967 to 1973. At the same time he taught in French at the Major Seminary of St. John in Mosul (run by the Dominican Fathers) courses in liturgy and later in dogmatic theology. In addition, from 1968 to 1970 he taught upper-level French at the University of Mosul.

The last three years of his Iraqi ministry, from 1970 to 1973, he worked as the priest of the new Chaldean parish of Saint Ephrem in Mosul. He was forced to leave Iraq apparently for reasons related to the regime of Saddam Hussein, even though he reacted with utter dismay when the latter was killed in atrocious circumstances.

The second part of his pastoral ministry was dedicated to the Chaldean community in France, particularly in the Paris region where numerous Chaldean families from Turkey and Iraq found a new home.

He first began, however, with a period of substantial university training in Paris. Between 1973 and 1985, when he was the chaplain of the community of Sisters of Our Lady of Sion in Grandbourg (Essone Department) as well as the chaplain and responsible for the training of catechists at the high school of Our Lady of Sion in Évry, he obtained, in 1974, the upper-level certificate for teaching French as a foreign language from the "Institut des professeurs de français à l'étranger" of the "Sorbonne Nouvelle" University in Paris, specializing in French language and civilization. In 1977, after having taken classes for two years as an "auditeur", he was admitted as an "élève titulaire" in the Religious studies program of the "École pratique des hautes études, Ve Section (Sciences religieuses)". At the same time, in 1977, he graduated with a degree in Biblical languages from the "Institut catholique" in Paris, including Aramaic, Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Greek, and Syriac, followed by an upper-level degree in Biblical studies from the same institution in 1978 (with the mention "Très Bien"). Finally, in 1979, he submitted his doctoral dissertation (3e cycle) in Catholic theology at the

Catholic Theological Faculty of Strasbourg (with the mention "Très Bien").

Starting in 1981, Mgr. Yousif devoted himself to teaching in institutions of higher education. In 1981 he was appointed professor of Chaldean liturgy at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, where he taught in Italian and conducted a research seminar. In addition, he was invited to teach summer courses in English, at the Pontifical Institute of Catechesis in New York (1984 and 1985, on the Fathers of the East-Syriac Church) and at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of the Syro-Malabar Christians in Vadavathoor, Kerala (1986, on the Eastern mystagogical catecheses and on the liturgical spirituality of the Church of the East, in particular Narsai).

The second period of his pastoral ministry began in September 1987, when His Beatitude Raphael Bidawid appointed Mgr. Yousif to serve the Chaldean community of France in the capacity as Patriarchal Vicar for the Chaldeans in France, Rector of the Chaldean Mission in France, and parish priest of the church "Notre-Dame de Chaldée" in Paris. He took up residence in the Rue Pajol, near the North station, in a popular neighborhood with many migrant families from various countries of Africa and Asia – a neighborhood which recently has seen a large influx of homeless refugees. Neighboring a Hindu temple for Ganesh as well as a mosque, the Chaldean center includes a large space for the church. Mgr. Yousif himself oversaw the construction of the church "Notre-Dame de Chaldée," making sure that the layout would meet the essential requirements of the Chaldean liturgy, in particular regarding the placement of the Bema. He was very proud of it. The premises also include parish spaces for living, administration, and meetings. Mgr. Yousif established a library devoted to the intellectual and spiritual heritage of the Syriac Churches, with liturgy very well represented. The library aims to be of interest to all the Syriac Churches and has publications in many different languages: Syriac, Sureth, Arabic, Latin, French, Italian, English, and Russian.

Along with the pastoral tasks entrusted to him, Mgr. Yousif pursued his scholarly work in the service of the heritage of the East-Syriac Church and in particular of the Chaldean and Malabar liturgy. His publications are an eloquent testimony to his interest in the Syriac Fathers in general and to the importance he attached to making known in periodicals and encyclopedias the works of numerous authors, mainly authors and saintly figures of the East-Syriac tradition, primarily in order to highlight the significance of the Chaldean spirituality.

Mgr. Yousif's special expertise in the field of liturgy, which developed throughout his life, was put to the service of his Church. Starting in 1981, he was a consulting member of the special liturgical committee of the Roman Congregation for the Oriental Churches. Very appropriately he was appointed a member of the Chaldean liturgical committee in 1991, and later the chairman of the liturgical committee for the Syro-Malabar mass in Syriac. It is in the framework of these activities that he oversaw the publications of liturgical books, the Syro-Malabar Mass (2003 and 2008), the Chaldean Breviary (2007), and the Chaldean Missal (2007). In France he taught liturgy as professor of Eastern liturgies at the Institut catholique in Paris from 1992 to 2000.

In his capacity as pastor, teacher, and scholar, Mgr. Yousif was extremely well qualified to represent the Chaldean Church in the dialogue and consultation with the other Churches. He took part in several sessions of the "Syriac Dialogue," organized by Pro Oriente in Vienna and he participated as an expert member at the Synod of the Chaldean Church in Beirut in 1996 and in Rome in 2005.

The theoretical and practical work of Mgr. Yousif is highly significant. Along with his specialized academic contributions, many of his translations and articles, in Arabic and in French, aim at a much wider audience. In his work on the East-Syriac liturgy, he always wanted to bring together the Chaldean and the Syro-Malabar rites and regularly collaborated with scholars from Kerala. Closely following the stream of scholarship in very detailed bibliographical surveys of the rite of the Church

of the East (1983, 2006 and 2007 in Italian, 1990 in English – of which he was preparing an updated and expanded edition until shortly before his death), the liturgical foci of his research included the Mass (1984, 1993, 1995, 2001, 2006), the Anaphora (1993), the Eucharist (1977, 1980) and the Sacrament of Marriage (1986, 2003). Liturgical research topics obviously were very dear to him, as he returned to them several times, examining them in parallel in the texts of Ephrem: the Virgin Mary (1980, 1982, 1989), Christ (1996) – Christology (1997), the Economy of Salvation (1989), the Blood of Christ (1984, 1989) – and liturgical spirituality (1986, 1989). Already during his first pastoral period in Mosul, he had his heart set on explaining, in local Arabic periodicals, the date of Easter (1965), the Confession (1968), the Chaldean Mass (1970, 1995), the Anaphora of the Apostles (1996 in Japanese).

His dissertation submitted in Strasbourg resulted in the publication of an important volume in the series "Orientalia Christiana Analecta" in 1984, L'eucharistie chez saint Éphrem, which has become a work of reference and of which the title nicely indicates the two major themes of Mgr. Yousif's scholarly engagement: the theological thought of Mar Ephrem, on the one hand, and the liturgy, on the other. Of Mar Ephrem Mgr. Yousif strongly emphasized the theological depth. In addition, in this monograph as well as in two dozen research articles and half a dozen publications for a wider audience he highlighted Ephremian concepts that illuminate our reading of the deacon of Nisibis: his biblical typology and his exegesis (1976, 1980, 1982, 1986, 1988, 1990), the significance of the relationship between symbol and reality (1976, 1989), between Bible and nature (1978), the Christological expression in the liturgy (1977, 1979, 1981, 1987), divine grace and human freewill (1980), the theological controversies and apologetics (1980), history and eschatology (1982, 1984, 1985), the place of reason vs. faith (1983, 1985, 1986), the Virgin Mary (1980, 1982, 1985, 1989, 2005), the Eucharist (1980, 1982), Saint Thomas (1985), and sacrifice (1989).

In his threefold life as pastor, teacher, and scholar, Mgr. Yousif did not spare himself. His health declined. The sad events in Iraq greatly affected him. When in 2008 France welcomed 500 Iraqi refugees, all of those living in shelters in the Paris region came almost every Sunday to "Notre-Dame de Chaldée" and they received assistance in every possible way. Mgr. Yousif gave them much of his time, and he allowed meetings to be held, and later French language courses to be taught, in the building of Rue Pajol. No one was ever sent away without help, and a sister from the community of Our Lady of Sion had to remind him that he needed to take the time to eat and to take rest.

The death of Bishop Raho, whom he knew, and around the same time the death of a young Iraqi priest whom he had tutored in Rome, were very painful to him, but he kept his peace of mind.

The concerns and anxieties of the different communities of Paris, in the suburbs and in the country side, in their diversity of origin and language, and with the complicated problems of their integration into French society, and the resulting internal social and political tensions did not spare him either. It is worth remembering the public homage that was paid to him at his funeral by one of the notables of Sarcelles: "In his capacity as pastor of the Chaldean community of Îlede-France for the last 28 years, he has given himself without reserve. All those who met him have a sweet memory of him. A man of God and a man of peace, who succeeded in keeping harmony and peace in the community. He was humble and unpretentious with people in all stations of life. He was grateful to God for this beautiful community until the last week of his life, when he regularly inquired after his faithful. His last piece of advice was to keep love and peace within this community."

From Karemlesh to Paris, by way of Rome, Mgr. Petros Yousif committed himself to being a servant of the Gospel in abiding faithfulness to the great East-Syriac tradition, which he has honored in his writings, made known in several languages, and celebrated in Iraq and in the West. This rich spiritual

tradition will continue to nourish his Church and to guide it wherever it finds itself in a world that often fails to respect its children.

(Translated from French by L. Van Rompay)

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