Abuna Yaaqub

Blessed Jacques of Ghazir

Beirut – Lebanon, 22 June 2008

Circular Letter n.02
Prot. N. 00455/08
To all the brothers and sisters of the Order

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am happy to communicate to you that the our Order again has reason to rejoice and to thank the Lord for the gift of holiness, specifically a holiness born and grown in a land particulary tormented today: Lebanon.

On 22 June 2008, in Beirut, Abuna Jacques of Ghazir will be proclaimed Blessed. The new Blessed did much to alleviate the sufferings of the poor of his time. We look to him with trust to obtain from the Lord reconciliation and peace for the world and for Lebanon.

Who was Abuna Jacques? For many of us, his name may mean little or nothing. But in his own country he is recognised as a giant in charity. The "Great builder", the "Apostle of the Cross", the "Saint Vincent de Paul of Lebanon", the "New Cottolengo", the "New Don Bosco" – these are titles that the Lebanese – both Christian and Muslim – have used to identify him, to pray to him, to acknowledge his humanity and his holiness.

On 1 February 1875 Jacques was born to Boutros Haddad and Shams Haddad in Ghazir on the outskirts of Beirut. He was the third of eight children. The Maronite Christian family was one of deep faith. The holiness of his mother had an especially decisive influence over him. It fostered in him a strong attitude of generosity towards God and towards people. Baptised in the Marionite Church in Ghazir on 21 February 1875, he received the name Khalil. He was confirmed 9 February 1881. He attended primary school 1885-1891 in his home town. He received his secondary education in two religious colleges in Beirut. At the age of 16 he emigrated to Alexandria in Egypt. There he was struck by the negative example of a priest and by the moving testimony of the death of a Capuchin friar. The young Khalil, at the age of 19, decided to embrace the consecrated life among the Capuchin Friars.

He returned to Lebanon in 1894 to confide in his father his decision and so begin the novitiate in the Convent of Saint Anthony of Padua not far from his village. Although opposed to the idea at first, his father finally could not but say 'yes.' In the novitiate, as was the practice at the time, Khalil received a new name. From that time forward he will be called Brother Jacques of Ghazir, in memory of the Franciscan saint, James of the Marches. All the friars admired him for his self-denial, piety, charity and obedience, as well as his sense of humour that he never failed to use as an instrument of peace.

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>
> *Abuna Yaaqub*

When Brother Jacques completed his studies, the Apostolic Delegate, Mons. Duval, ordained him priest in the chapel of the Apostolic Vicariate in Beirut.

His superiors entrusted him with the financial management of five friaries in Beirut and in the mountains. This task obliged him to deal with administrative matters and to travel many roads. In his Memoirs he tells how he was attacked, beaten and threatened with death dozens of times. Miraculously, though, he recalls, the Cross of Jesus always saved him.

In 1905 he was appointed director of the schools conducted by the Capuchin Friars in Lebanon and introduced some important innovations. His ideal was not to have large schools with many students, but small schools and classes with fewer students. By 1910 there were 230 schools with 7,500 students.

Abuna Jacques also revealed a great ability to organise pilgrimages, processions, celebrations and, in particular, First Holy Communions. He used to say, "Sow hosts, reap Saints."

His specific charism was preaching. He prepared his sermons at night in front of the Blessed Sacrament. We have more than eight thousand pages of Abuna Jacques' writings. He preached in Syria, Iraq and Palestine. In Beirut he founded the Franciscan Third Order, which later spread throughout Lebanon. He will have the joy of going to Lourdes, Assisi and Rome where he met Pope Saint Pius X. Aware of the importance of the press, he founded the monthly magazine "The Friend of the Family."

Due to the outbreak of World War I, the French Capuchins left Lebanon in 1914. The Mission was entrusted to Abuna Jacques. He carried out the task to his utmost and dedicated himself with courage and skill. New duties did not stop him from working with the Tertiaries, from distributing bread to the hungry, or from burying the dead abandoned on the streets. Providence watched over him! Many times he escaped arrest, prison and even the executioner.

When he had spent all his energy and all the money and did not have even a few cents for the tabernacle lamp, he decided to return the keys of the Mission to the Apostolic Delegate. He was exhausted, but Providence still had something in store for Abuna Jacques: the Great War came to an end and the Turkish army left the country.

With the war over the French Capuchins returned and continued the work that had been interrupted. The opening of institutes to house children and young women became Abuna Jacques' new field of action.

In his heart, however, he harboured a dream to erect a giant Cross on the top of a hill in Lebanon. He wanted to make it not only a meeting place for Tertiaries, but above all, a place of prayer for all those fallen in war and for the Lebanese who had left their land. With the help of Providence, the dream was realised on the hill of Jall-Eddib. The hill went from being known as the hill of djinns – the hill of fate - to become the hill of the Cross. Another Cross will be erected at Dier El-Qamar in the Chouf, a region of mixed religions.

Providence had in store still more things for Abuna Jacques to do. He was called to hear the confession of a sick priest in a public hospital. Something struck

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him. Apart from the priest's pitiful state due to poor medical help, the priest never had the opportunity to celebrate Holy Mass during his stay in the hospital. Abuna Jacques did not think twice and took him to Our Lady of the Sea. There, within a short period, other ill priests also arrived.

Providence needs strong arms, but more so generous and maternal hearts to take up the daily, tiring works of Mercy. However, the idea to found a Congregation unsettled him. Some Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Lons-le-Saunier helped him to form young girls and finally in 1930 he founded the Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Cross of Lebanon. Sister Marie Zougheib was to be his first collaborator and co-founder of the Congregation.

In the statutes of the new Congregation, Abuna Jacques insists above all that the following works of mercy never be neglected: hospital care for sick priests or for priests who cannot exercise their ministry because of advanced age; care of the disabled, the blind, the crippled, the mentally handicapped, the abandoned, the terminally ill; the education and care of orphans. He adds, "When it is necessary, it is possible dedicate ourselves to the school apostolate in an area where a house of the Sisters already exists and where there is no other Congregation dedicated to education."

Abuna Jacques' love for suffering humanity characterised the course of his entire life. He founded Saint Francis' school at Jall-Eddib (1919) today known as "Val Père Jacques" at Bkennaya (1979); the Hospital at Dier El-Qamar (1933) for handicapped girls; the Convent of Our Lady of the Well at Bkennaya (1941), including the General House, the postulancy, the novitiate and the guest house for spiritual retreats for priests, religious sisters and prayer groups; the Hospital of Our Lady at Antélias (1946) for the chronically ill and the elderly; also, Saint Joseph's Hospital at Dora (1948) located in a populated quarter; the school of the Sisters of Cross at Brummana (1950) that welcomes orphan children or victims of material or moral poverty; the Hospice of Christ the King at Zouk-Mosbeh (1950) situated on a hill overlooking the coast road to Byblos, and surmounted by a twelve metre high statue of Christ the King. Providence, Abuna Jacques' companion of the road, never abandoned him and is still an everyday guest among his sisters.

In 1951 the Hospital of the Cross was dedicated exclusively to the care of mental illness. Today it is the largest psychiatric complex in the Middle East, with a university and academic centre, and with more than 1000 patients, 54% of whom are non-Christian. The Hospital of the Cross welcomes patients from any religion with the spirit of mercy that distinguishes the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Cross of Lebanon: "We are like the spring that never asks the thirsty person: 'First tell me which country you are from, otherwise I will not let you drink.'"

A giant in charity recognised by both religious and civil authorities Abuna Jacques never had any other purpose in life except "to love God and to love man, the image of the Crucified."

Age and illness impacted on the strength of this athlete of Christ, especially his heart, which Abuna Jacques offered so many times to the Lord: "Lord, you want my heart. Here it is, along with my intelligence, my will and my entire self."

At dawn on Saturday 26 June 1954 he said, "Today is my last day!" and he died at 3 p.m. The radio, the press, his friends, the bells in the villages – they all announced his death. Thousands flocked to the Friary of the Cross to weep, to pray, to receive a blessing from the one who now lives in the Eternal.

In these words the Apostolic Nuncio summarised the life of Abuna Jacques: "He was the greatest man that Lebanon has given to our times." President Naccache, in the name of the President of the Republic, Camille Chamoun, pinned on Abunas Jacques' chest the Gold Medal of the Cedar, First Class, a sign of gratitude for all the good Abunas Jacques had done. The body was placed in the tomb of the new Calvary Chapel.

Because of the fame of his holiness both in life and death, the process of beatification was

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initiated. This process concluded with the signature of the Decree, 17 December 2007, on the part of Pope Benedict XVI. On 22 June 2008 we will have the joy of taking part in his Beatification in Beirut.

Abuna Jacques of Ghazir is one of those Capuchin figures who, in the footsteps of the Seraphic Abuna Saint Francis, knew how to let himself be touched by the suffering of his people and show them mercy. He let himself be challenged by the pressing needs of his time and responded concretely with faith, involving himself with all his strength and without sparing himself.

He loved his people and applied all his organising skills to find the most suitable solutions, solutions that might last and endure well into the future.

Last year I had the opportunity to visit some of the houses he wanted and are now managed by the Congregation of Sisters he founded. They are institutions that welcome elderly priests, the psychiatrically ill, the abandoned elderly, and young people with handicaps. There I could see, that apart from adequate health care, the human dignity of these people is respected and assured. It is evident that a work with such a broad field of activity cannot have been realised without the collaboration of others equally moved by the need that Abuna Jacques identified. The Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Cross of Lebanon was born from the love that Abuna Jacques had for the neediest of people, and at the same time it is the response of women who have embraced the proposal God made through Abuna Jacques.

Only a strong and decisive character could achieve what he did. In fact, he did not shun the difficult challenges and sacrifices connected with them. It was his custom to say, "Anyone who seeks heaven but without suffering is like someone who wants to buy goods without paying." This saying was also his, "Prayer without trust is like a letter in ones pocket. It never reaches it destination" – as if to say that activities of this magnitude, with his countless foundations, cannot be initiated without a profound attitude of faith.

The entire Order, particularly the brothers of the General Vice-Province of the Near East, as well as the Franciscan Sisters of the Cross of Lebanon, can rejoice at this time of celebration. This Beatification honours us and urges us to live our consecration with particular attention for the poor and marginalised. Let us do this, mindful of what our Constitutions say, *"Let us willingly live our fraternal life next to the poor, sharing their difficulties and their humble condition"* (Const. 12,3).

Rome, 9 June 2008

Br. Mauro Jöhri
General Minister OFMCap

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