

St. Charbel: Eucharistic Flame of Love

St. Charbel Makhoul, a Lebanese Maronite monk, is renowned for his life of profound devotion and the miracles attributed to his intercession, inspiring Catholics globally. His feast day is celebrated on the third Sunday of July in the Maronite Liturgical calendar, while the Roman Catholic Church commemorates him on July 24. St. Charbel's legacy of faith, humility, and spiritual power continues to draw believers to a deeper relationship with God, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries.

The Life of St. Charbel

Born Yousef Antoun Makhoul on May 8, 1828, in the village of Bkaakafra in North Lebanon, St. Charbel grew up in a devout Christian family. From an early age, he was drawn to the ascetic life, often withdrawing to a nearby grotto to pray and meditate. His piety was so evident that villagers nicknamed him "the saint."

In 1851, Yousef joined the Lebanese Maronite Order, taking the name Charbel. After completing his theological studies under teachers including St. Neematallah Hardini, he was ordained a priest on July 23, 1859. For 16 years, he lived as a monk in the monastery of Annaya.

Seeking even greater solitude, St. Charbel requested to become a hermit. On February 15, 1875, he entered the hermitage of Saints Peter and Paul, where he spent the remaining 23 years of his life in prayer, worship, and manual labor.

St. Charbel passed away on Christmas Eve, 1898. Months after his burial, a mysterious light emanated from his tomb. When his body was exhumed, it was found to be incorrupt and exuding blood and water. News of this miracle spread, and many sought his intercession, leading to numerous reported healings.

St. Charbel was beatified on January 5, 1965, by Pope Paul VI and canonized by the same Pope on October 9, 1977. His legacy of holiness continues to touch lives around the world.

The Wisdom of St. Charbel

St. Charbel was known for his few, but profound words, embodying the wisdom of Proverbs 10:19, "*When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.*" His sayings reveal a man of deep humility (James 4:10,

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you"), unwavering obedience (1 Samuel 15:22, *"To obey is better than sacrifice"*), intense devotion to God (Deuteronomy 6:5, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."*), and detachment from worldly ties (Matthew 6:19-20, *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven"*).

St. Charbel's spiritual journey was profoundly shaped by various elements of Catholic tradition and practice. Based on the book of "St. Charbel Makhoul of Lebanon" (ISBN-10: 2762303141, ISBN-13: 978-2762303148), it is said that during his novitiate, Charbel read the book "The Imitation of Christ" very prayerfully and applied it in his life. This spiritual classic, written by Thomas à Kempis in the 15th century, emphasizes the interior life and withdrawal from the world. Its teachings on humility, purity of heart, and the imitation of Christ's life deeply resonated with Charbel.

Charbel's spiritual formation was enriched by this text, which complemented his deep-rooted foundation in Scripture. His spirituality drew from multiple sources, with the Bible serving as the cornerstone of his faith. Charbel's deep immersion in the Bible, particularly the Gospels, shaped his understanding of Christ's life and teachings. He embodied the words of Psalm 119:105, *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,"* allowing the Scriptures to guide his every step.

The liturgy of the Maronite Church played a crucial role in Charbel's spiritual life. The rich symbolism, simple and faithful prayers, and profound mysticism of the Divine Liturgy (Qurbano) nourished his soul daily. The Syriac language, with its poetic and deeply theological expressions, resonated deeply with Charbel's contemplative spirit. Through his devout participation in the liturgy, Charbel entered into the mysteries of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. For him, as for all Eastern Christians of his time, the liturgy was truly the heart of spiritual life, the means by which heaven and earth were united, and the faithful were drawn into the very life of the Trinity. In many ways, St. Charbel's deep liturgical life exemplified what the Second Vatican Council would later articulate in Sacrosanctum Concilium, describing the liturgy as *"the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows."* While St. Charbel lived long before this document was written, his life bears witness to these timeless truths about the centrality of liturgy in Christian life.

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, particularly through the Rosary, was another cornerstone of Charbel's spirituality. The Rosary served as a means of contemplating the mysteries of Christ's life through Mary's eyes, fostering a deep Marian devotion that complemented his Christocentric spirituality.

Perhaps most significantly, Charbel's spiritual life was anchored in Eucharistic adoration. He spent long hours in silent contemplation before the Blessed Sacrament, a practice deeply rooted in the traditions of Eastern monasticism. For Charbel, these periods of

adoration were a source of profound spiritual nourishment and a tangible expression of his intense love for Christ. His unwavering devotion to the Eucharist was so profound that it seemed to anticipate the words that St. John Paul II would speak nearly a century later in his apostolic letter "Dominicae Cenae" (February 24, 1980): "*The Church and the world have a great need for Eucharistic worship. Jesus awaits us in this sacrament of love.*" This practice of extended Eucharistic adoration fueled Charbel's intense love for Christ and his desire for union with God, serving as a timeless example of the power of Eucharistic devotion that the Church continues to emphasize to this day.

These various elements - Scripture, liturgy, Marian devotion, and Eucharistic adoration - along with his study of spiritual classics like "The Imitation of Christ," formed the rich tapestry of Charbel's spiritual life. This profound spiritual foundation made it natural for him to embrace the rigorous sacrifices and severe penances that would characterize his later years. His immersion in these spiritual practices cultivated a deep longing for union with God, preparing him for the ascetic life he would lead as a hermit. As we will see later in this article, the mortifications and self-denial that might seem extreme to many were, for Charbel, a natural outflow of his intense spiritual life and his desire to imitate Christ in all things.

Let us explore his most memorable quotes:

As a young man tending to his cow, Charbel demonstrated his priorities: "Now, my cow, rest so I can finish my prayer. The priority is always to God." This simple statement encapsulates his lifelong dedication to prayer, echoing the words of Colossians 4:2, "*Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.*" It also reflects the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:33, "*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*"

His commitment to the monastic life was absolute, even in the face of familial ties. When his mother came to visit him during his novitiate, he said to her from behind the door, without seeing each other: "If God wills, one day we shall see each other in heaven." This poignant moment illustrates his complete dedication to his vocation.

St. Charbel's devotion to the Virgin Mary was evident in his advice to villagers seeking guidance for their salvation: "If you wish to be saved easily, have a special devotion to the Virgin Mary. She is capable of saving those who have a true devotion to her."

His commitment to the monastic life was unwavering. When invited to visit his village after ordination, he replied, "A monk who goes to his village and returns to the monastery would almost need to go through the novitiate again to become a monk anew." This showcases his understanding of the need for continuous spiritual discipline.

St. Charbel's humility shines through in many of his interactions. When asked if he

avored novices from his village, he stated, "No. I don't favor them inwardly or outwardly. All brothers are equal to me." This reflects Christ's teaching of loving all equally.

His obedience was legendary. Once, when the superior jokingly said they'd throw him in the oven for fuel, Charbel knelt and said, "May God empower me to obey." This response left the superior in awe of Charbel's deep reverence for the monastic vow of obedience.

St. Charbel's detachment from worldly possessions was evident in his handling of money. When offered a Mass stipend, he extended his hand, took it, and kept his hand extended until another monk arrived, saying, "Take these." He avoided touching money, giving himself totally to God through the monastic vow of poverty.

His spiritual insight was remarkable. Once, when sent to pray over a sick person, he knelt to pray halfway through the journey and told his companion: "The sick person has died. There's no need to continue my journey with you." This demonstrates his deep connection with the spiritual realm.

St. Charbel's compassion extended even to animals. When scolded for allowing foxes to eat from the monastery's vineyard, he simply replied, "I found them hungry. I let them eat a few grapes." This shows his gentle nature and care for all God's creatures.

His detachment from worldly concerns is beautifully illustrated in his response to a question about his journey. Instead of giving worldly details, he replied: "I went from here going and came from here coming." This shows his focus on the spiritual rather than the material aspects of life.

When his niece asked him to leave her his share of the family inheritance after his brother's death, Charbel said: "My brother died this year? I died when I left Bekaa Kafra. The dead neither inherit nor bequeath." This powerful statement underscores his complete renunciation of worldly possessions and ties.

St. Charbel's profound wisdom, encapsulated in his words "Do not worry about this life and the world, rather focus on eternity," was vividly reflected in his own life choices. He embraced a hermitic existence, withdrawing from worldly pursuits to devote himself entirely to prayer and contemplation. This unwavering focus on the Eucharist adoration allowed him to cultivate a deep spiritual connection, inspiring countless individuals to reevaluate their priorities and seek a higher purpose beyond material concerns.

His love for the Eucharist was paramount. In his final moments, struck by illness during Mass, he repeated, "Abo d'qushto" (Father of Truth), referring to the Eucharistic prayer. Even in death, his thoughts were on the holy sacrifice of the Mass. This prayer, which St. Charbel recited daily during the celebration of the Eucharist, beautifully encapsulates his

deep reverence for this sacrament:

"Father of Truth, behold Your Son, a sacrifice pleasing to You. Accept this offering of Him who died for me; behold His blood shed on Golgotha for my salvation. It pleads for me. For His sake, accept my offering. Many are my sins, but greater is Your mercy. When placed on a scale, Your mercy prevails over the weight of the mountains known only to You. Consider the sin and consider the atonement; the atonement is greater and exceeds the sin. Your beloved Son sustained the nails and the lance because of my sins so in His sufferings You are satisfied and I live."

This prayer reflects St. Charbel's profound understanding of God's mercy, the significance of Christ's sacrifice, and the transformative power of the Eucharist. It serves as a testament to his lifelong dedication to God and his role as a conduit of divine grace.

St. Charbel's life teaches us the power of simplicity, obedience, and unwavering faith. His words, though few, carry the weight of a life lived in complete devotion to God.

A Prayer to St. Charbel

Let us conclude with this beautiful prayer from the Maronite liturgy for the feast day of St. Charbel:

*"O Christ Our Lord,
You have called Father Charbel to follow your footsteps in the light of
your hidden life and your offering on the Cross.
You have carried him up to You when he died the night of your birth here
on earth.
Like this You have marked the History with the great and deep
resemblance between your Birth on Earth with us, and the birth of
Charbel with You in Heaven.*

*You willed, O Lord, that between your life and the life of
Charbel there will be many resemblances and similarities:*

*Like You, Charbel was born in a village like Bethlehem, from
two pious and virtuous parents.
Like You, Charbel lived from the work of his hands, in
BeqaaKafra and in the Monastery.
Like You, Charbel went to the wilderness into a life of solitude,*

*to fast, to pray, to be tempted and to win over all temptations.
Like You, Charbel carried his cross, the cross of the monastic
and ascetic hard life, and bore the pains from wearing rough goat
coat, and wires of sticky metal under his monastic habit.*

*Like You, Charbel offered himself every day at Mass to the
Heavenly Father.*

*Like You, Charbel was taken down from the "Golgotha of his
high hermitage of Annaya" and was buried wrapped in his
religious habit as in a shroud.*

*Like You, as the blood and water which flowed down from your
side which was pierced with the lance, so Charbel's body flowed
with water and blood.*

*Like You, as your Tomb shined with the Light of Glory,
so did the tomb of Charbel shine with a glorious light.*

*Like You, and through You Charbel healed the sick, and people
flocked to him in great numbers from every place on the planet
to his wondrous tomb.*

*Like You, when Peter the Head of the apostles proclaimed your
Good News on the day of Pentecost to the world, so did the pope
as your Vicar, and the Successor of Peter declare Charbel a
"blessed" during the time of the New Pentecost, at the
conclusion of the Second Council of Vatican, the largest
gathering for Christianity in the History of the Church.*

*For this O Lord, we now sing, with the sweet perfume of this
incense, the prayer which was the sign of the unity between Charbel's life
and your life, that he used to repeat every day during the celebration of
the Holy Sacrifice, at the Mass saying:*

*"You have united O Lord, your Divinity with our humanity,
and our humanity with your Divinity.
Your Life with our mortality, and our mortality with your Life.
You have assumed what is ours, and You have given us what is yours.
For the Life and Salvation of our souls
To You Be Glory Forever."*

Amen.