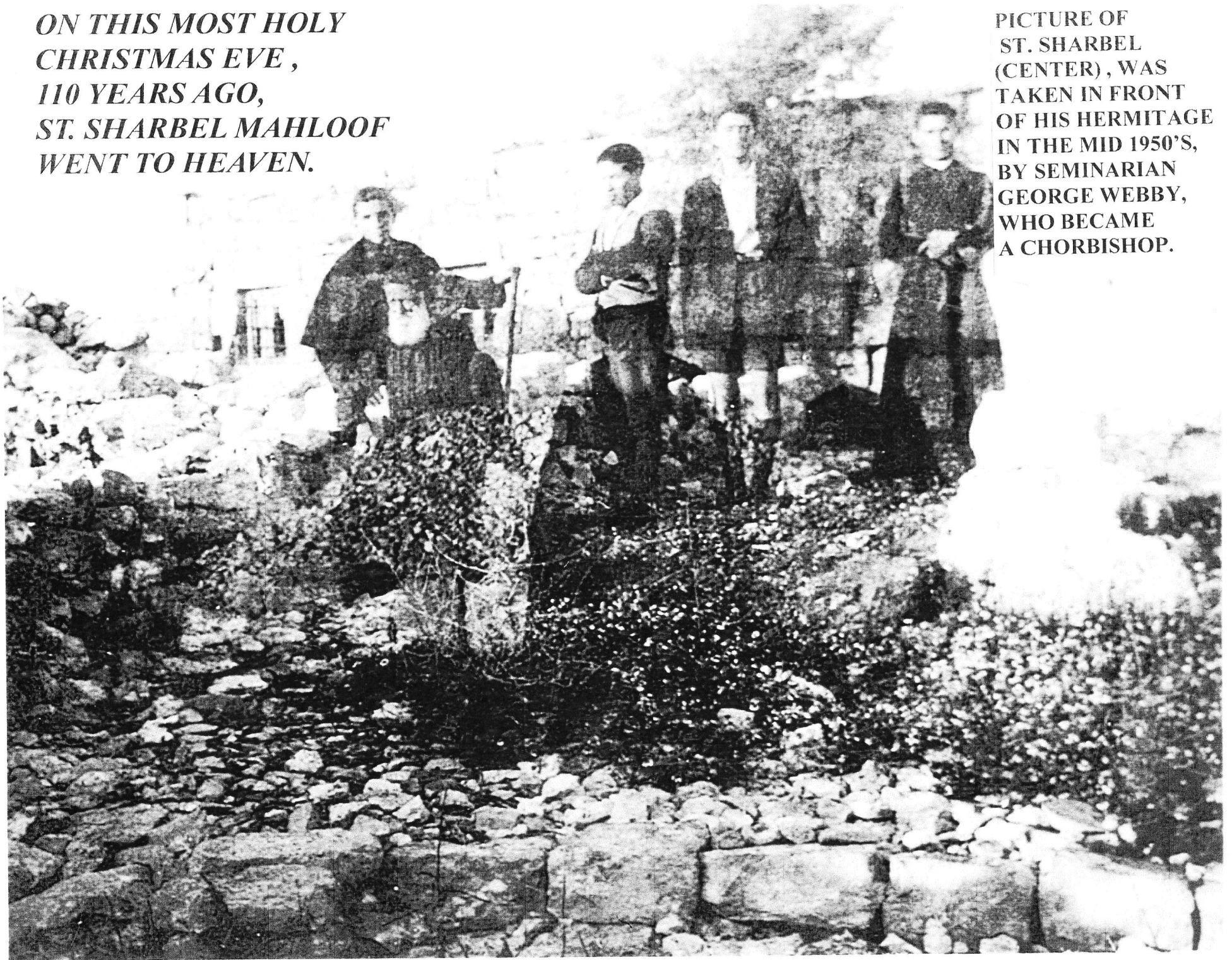


***ON THIS MOST HOLY  
CHRISTMAS EVE ,  
110 YEARS AGO,  
ST. SHARBEL MAHLOOF  
WENT TO HEAVEN.***



**PICTURE OF  
ST. SHARBEL  
(CENTER) , WAS  
TAKEN IN FRONT  
OF HIS HERMITAGE  
IN THE MID 1950'S,  
BY SEMINARIAN  
GEORGE WEBBY,  
WHO BECAME  
A CHORBISHOP.**

## The Life of St. Sharbel Mahlouf

Born in 1828, the youngest of five children, to a poor Maronite family, and baptized as Youseff Antoon Mahlouf, in Bekaa Kafra, (5414 feet above sea level) in Northern Lebanon. He had a beautiful traditional Maronite Christian upbringing, which gave him a passion for prayer, plus being blessed with its rich Liturgical prayers and spirituality, from which he drank deeply, with his love for God and nature. From his early childhood, his life revealed a calling to “bear fruit as the noble Cedar of Lebanon.” He frequented his open-air village school (held under an oak tree) along with the other children, where it was noted he was very religious; in fact, every night, before going to sleep, as was the custom among the majority of the Maronite families at that time, the children, kneeling around the mother, repeated the prayers that she said, while incense was burned on a plate on an altar hung from the wall where Our Lady occupied a central place among the saints.

From a very early age, Youseff had to assist in supporting his family, shepherding their few goats and sheep. But his heart was not in this. He asked the most Holy Virgin, so venerated among the Maronites, to help him become a monk like his two fraternal uncles. It was there, in the serenity and tranquility of nature, he would entrust the little flock to Mary, the Mother of God, and then would go and enjoy spending hours in a natural cave nearby, in prayer and meditation, where he placed an icon of the Blessed Virgin. He continued to grow in age and wisdom (for God and man), all the while hearing a strong interior voice calling him “leave everything and follow Christ to gain everything.”

Despite the affection his mother had for him, as well as the opposition of his paternal uncle, who needed the help of the young man to sustain his family, and the solicitation of a young lady of the neighborhood, In 1851, at the age of 23, he left home and walked several miles to the Monastery of Our Lady of Lebanon (north of Byblos), where he entered as a novice. His mother and family visited him in the Monastery, but he refused to see them and always had the same response, “God wants me entirely for himself. After two years of novitiate, on November 1, 1853, he was sent to St. Maron’s Monastery, in Annaya, where he Professed the solemn Monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, taking the name Sharbel (121 A.D. Antioch Church martyr) . The name Sharbel in Aramaic means “God’s Story”. His primary vocation as a monk was to chant the Divine Office seven times a day in Aramaic. Also, he helped perform the many manual tasks of the Monastery—washing clothes, baking bread, cultivating the land, even being a shoemaker, carpenter, farmer, etc.

From there he was transferred to the Monastery of Kfifan, where he completed his theological studies, being one of the top students. One of his teachers was the now Saint Nehmatallah Kassab Al-Hardini. Sharbel was ordained to the priesthood at Bkerke, the Maronite Patriarchy, on July 23, 1859, after which he was sent back to St. Maron’s Monastery in Annaya, where he performed his priestly ministry and his monastic duties in an edifying way, totally dedicating himself to Christ with an undivided heart, desiring to live in silence before the Nameless One for sixteen years.

For many years there, he longed to become a hermit, but was always refused. He had a habit of spending much of the night in prayer and the Prior, fearing this would effect his life, ordered the young men in charge of the oil, not to give any more to him. So, the next time that St. Sharbel asked for more oil, they pulled a trick on him and gave him only water. Being unaware, Sharbel lit his lantern as usual and began to pray. When the young men saw a light emanating from his cell, they ran to inform the Prior. The Prior immediately investigated and realizing the hand of God in this miraculous event, granted Sharbel permission to enter their nearby hermitage of Sts. Peter & Paul in Feb. 14, 1875, where he followed the traditional ways of saintly hermits, living a solitary life in a spirit of total abandonment to God for 23 years, dividing his time between prayer and work: “Ora et Labora”. According to the Eastern Monastic tradition, the Monastic life attains its peak in a solitary life: “to be alone with the One”.

You see, Community life was considered to be a period of transition or formation for the life of a hermit. This ideal remained very much alive in the Maronite monastic life, which preserves a place of honor for the hermits.

Father Sharbel’s focus as a hermit was to seek to be a new crucified one, consecrating his life to Jesus as he encountered the Son of God through Scripture, the Holy Eucharist and the Blessed Mother. He knew a hermit has to seek to be a new crucified one, a new Paschal Lamb in the Church of Christ. Thus his days were divided between prayers and continual meditations and manual labors on the properties of the Monastery in the neighborhood of the Hermitage. Regulations permitted him to sleep five hours a day and spend the rest of his time in prayer. As St. Sharbel said, “Prayer relaxes the members more efficiently than sleep.” At times, he remained hours on end kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament. His cell was six meters square. Inside he had a mattress of oak leaves, an oil lamp, a wooden plate on a stool, a stone that served as a chair, and books of prayers, particularly, “The Imitation of Christ.”

As a Maronite hermit he ate only one meal a day at 2 PM. It was composed of simple food, usually fresh or cooked vegetables, cereals and olives. He never ate meat or fruit. The Monastery always provided his meals; he drank only water. He used to say “Poverty helps salvation. Frugality strengthens the soul. I want to live with privations ignoring the pleasures and sweets of this world. I want to be the servant of Christ and my brothers.” Thus, the hermit was poorly dressed but with clean clothes, poorly fed but with good health and exposed without defense to the cold and the heat. Deprived of any comfort or human tenderness, he was nevertheless the happiest man in the world because the Lord became his truth, his strength, his riches, his joy and the reason for his life. For this reason, although his face was thin, it was always radiant.

As a hermit, as we said, the Eucharist became the center of his life. He consumed the Bread of Life and was consumed by It. Through prayer and penance, he offered Himself as a sacrifice so that the whole world would return to God. It is in this light, that one sees the importance of the following Maronite Eucharistic prayer in his life: “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....”

It was on December 16, 1898, at eleven o'clock, while Father Sharbel was celebrating his daily Divine Liturgy in the chapel of the Hermitage, when, at the exact moment of the Great Elevation, while he was reciting in Aramaic the above Abo Dqushto prayer, he suffered a stroke which left him paralyzed. He was carried back to his cell where he strived to complete that Prayer. Finally, eight days later, after twenty three years of an exemplary life as a hermit, Saint Sharbel, at the age of 70, also became a pleasing sacrifice and went to His Lord on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1898. He was buried with simplicity in the cemetery of the convent of St. Maron at Annaya among the other deceased monks. After his death, as well as during his life, Father Sharbel was considered a saint. On the day of his burial the superior of the Monastery noted the following in the Log of the Monastery: “Faithful to his vows, exemplary in his obedience, his conduct was considered more angelic than human”. This portrayed a prophecy that would be realized later through the countless hundreds of miracles that have been attributed through the intercession of St. Sharbel. His body remained intact after his death and even perspired. This fascinated the doctors, men of science and the most humble persons. His body began to decay after his beatification on Dec. 5, 1965, at the closing of Vatican II.

Saint Sharbel was canonized in October 9, 1977, by his Holiness Pope Paul VI. Shortly afterwards, Bishop Francis Zayek wrote a pamphlet entitled “A New Star of the East”, saying “St. Sharbel is called the Second Anthony of the Desert, the Perfume of Lebanon.....He is like a Cedar of Lebanon standing in eternal prayer on top of a mountain.”

*O SAINT SHARBEL, PRAY FOR US AND HELP US TO GROW IN HOLINESS!*

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