

## **Louis Massignon and Mariam Baouardy (Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified) A Palestinian Saint for Our Time**

by Dorothy C. Buck

In his letters to members of the Badaliya prayer community Louis Massignon (1883-1962) often mentions a young Melkite Carmelite nun known as “The Little Arab”. Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified lived from 1846 to 1878. She died at the age of 33 in the Carmelite Monastery in Bethlehem. On November 13, 1983 she was beatified, the first step in the process of officially being named a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

The Badaliya prayer group was established in 1934 in Cairo, Egypt and was dedicated to praying and working toward what Massignon called “serene peace” between Christians and Muslims. At the time there were violent conflicts in many parts of the world as there are today. The Badaliya was praying for peace in North Africa, specifically in Algeria and Egypt, and Massignon was particularly concerned about the religious and political tensions in the Holy Land. He was very much affected by Gandhi who was a witness to the effectiveness of non-violent resistance in the struggle for independence in India. Massignon believed with his whole heart in the efficacy of prayer, non-violence, mutual respect and understanding as the means to “serene peace”. His approach to life, and, therefore, to relationships between peoples, was first and foremost as a devout believer in God. It was that relationship that informed his vision of fraternal love and respect for others. His was a mystical path leading to true reconciliation.

In his letters Massignon refers to Mariam Baouardy as the “ little Arab

Carmelite of Bethlehem” and saw her future beatification as a mission and means to assuring the safety of Holy places. She was one of those compassionate holy women, often referred to as victim-souls who were called by God to substitute themselves for others by taking on their woundedness and pain that they may be protected. This litany of women, which included Joan of Arc, were Massignon’s saintly heroines for God. Born in the 19th century, the little Arab was one of them. The word “*badaliya*” in Arabic means ‘substitution’ and Massignon was inviting its dedicated Christian members to offer themselves in this spirit as they found more and more ways to enter into compassionate relationship with their Muslim neighbors, coming to know them and their spiritual tradition by sharing life with them.

Massignon’s appreciation for the little Arab Carmelite can be more clearly understood in light of his own spiritual journey. From the moment in Baghdad in 1908 that led to his profound experience of religious conversion, his first anguished prayer to God was in Arabic. Although he returned to the Roman Catholic faith of his childhood, his many years of association with the Arab world as an Islamic Studies and Sociology professor at the Collège de France in Paris and as a member of the Arab Academy in Cairo contributed to his greatest desire, which was to be able to worship in the Arabic language. Massignon spoke privately to Pope Pius XII in 1949 in order to inform the Holy See about the conflictual

situation in Palestine and the difficulties arising around the Holy places. In a gesture of solidarity with the Arab world and Islam, Massignon received permission from the pope to transfer to the Greek Melkite Rite. The liturgical language for the Mass used in this Rite is Arabic, like that used by all Muslims in their worship. One year later Massignon was ordained as a Melkite priest in order to celebrate Mass privately every day in Arabic, uniting himself in spirit still further with both his Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters in the Middle East. To him this spiritual unity expressed the true spirit of the Badaliya movement.

Mariam Baouardy was born in a small village in Galilee, Palestine on January 5, 1846. Although her parents were both born in Palestine her ancestors came from Damascus in Syria and were members of the Melkite Greek Catholic Rite. Mariam's mother gave birth to 12 boys, none of whom survived past infancy. In their sadness at their losses the couple went to Bethlehem and prayed to the Virgin Mary at the shrine at the Grotto of the Nativity of Jesus for a healthy girl child. When Mariam was born they named her after the Virgin Mother in gratitude. Two years later Mariam's brother, Boulos, or Paul, was born. When Mariam was not yet 3 years old both her parents died. Paul was taken to an aunt in Tarshiha where his mother was raised and Mariam went to live with her father's brother in Ibillin, in the hills of Galilee. As was the custom at the time in Palestine, Arab girls were expected to learn about household tasks in preparation for being married by the age of 12, so Mariam was not sent to school. She did not learn to read or write.

When Mariam entered religious life she looked back on her childhood experiences and remembered playing in the garden with some birds that were given to her in a cage. In her enthusiasm she tried to give them a bath and they drowned. At the moment when she was sadly preparing to bury them she heard a voice, "Everything finishes in this way, but if you will give me your heart I will be yours forever". From then on her religious call was already being formed. By the time her uncle moved the family to Alexandria, Egypt when she was 12 years old she had chosen to identify with the Virgin Mary, for whom she was named, and remain a virgin herself. Her heart belonged to Jesus. A year later when her uncle told her that he had arranged a marriage for her as was the custom among Christians and Muslims in Palestine and Egypt at the time, Mariam refused. She wanted to remain a virgin. Not even the Greek Melkite Bishop could persuade her to change her mind. Her uncle's response was to punish her by treating her like hired help, giving her the heaviest work.

Several months later Mariam hoped to find her brother who she had not seen since their parents died so many years before. She had a letter written to Boulos asking him to come to Alexandria. On September 7, 1858 a former Muslim employee of her uncle's was travelling to Galilee and she asked him to deliver the letter. Hearing about her painful experience with her family he became irate and suggested that she become a Muslim to solve her difficulties. Her firm refusal caused the young man to feel rejected and his anger led him to draw his sword and slash her neck. Thinking he had killed her he threw her body

into an empty alley. Mariam was 13 years old and the story of her survival was a miracle. She remembered a woman dressing her wounds and caring for her in a grotto, then leaving her with the Franciscan Friars at the Church of St. Catherine. Later in her life when she recalled this incident she was convinced that it was the Virgin Mary who saved her.

Mariam was intent on finding her brother and took a job as a domestic in a local household until she found a way to take a boat to Jaffa and then a boat bound for Haifa that landed in Beirut due to a storm. She continued to work as a domestic for 10 more months when she was hired by a Syrian family who had immigrated to Marseilles. She worked for the Naggiar family in France for the next two years until she was 18. Mariam's confessor was the Vicar of St. Nicolas Church and he suggested that she now enter religious life as a postulant with the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, an active community of Sisters. There were other young women from Lebanon and Palestine there which helped her to feel at home. It was during her two years as a postulant that Mariam began to be called "the little Arab".

Mother Honorine Piques was the mistress of novices when Mariam came to the convent. During her postulancy Mariam had significant spiritual experiences that were called "ecstatic". Many have described these experiences as a mystical phenomenon in which a person is so caught up in their experience of the divine that they fall into a state of ecstasy. Some, like the Italian Saint Francis in the 13th century and the 19th century German, Catherine Emmerich as well as the little Arab, Mariam, received the

"stigmata", wounds in their hands or feet or side like those of the suffering Christ during the crucifixion. Mother Honorine realized that Mariam was an unusual postulant for this convent and protected her through Mariam's vow of obedience by setting limits on her ecstatic experiences to avoid her obvious gifts being too noticeable to the other sisters. She also wrote down all that Mariam told her of her childhood experiences which were filled with signs of the Holy Spirit at work.

When Mother Honorine became ill she was replaced as novice mistress by Mother Veronica. Sr. Veronica had been a Sister of St. Joseph for 18 years and was waiting for permission to enter a contemplative Carmelite Monastery at Pau. She too took the little Arab's experiences seriously but asked that the stigmata not be repeated. When the community voted whether to accept Mariam into the novitiate after her 2 years as a postulant the sisters were divided. Some felt her spiritual gifts were too extraordinary for an active Order. Such unique souls needed the protection of a less visible cloistered contemplative community. Mariam's case was refused. However at this time, Mother Veronica received her permission from Rome to transfer to the Carmel at Pau. She wrote to the Prioress there to see if Mariam could go with her to Carmel.

Mariam began her new life as a Carmelite lay sister and when she entered the novitiate was given the name, Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified. Carmelites have a special devotion to the ancient Jewish prophet Elijah as do the Muslims. When she was a child Mariam could see the famous Mount Carmel from her native village in Galilee. It was on

Mount Carmel that Elijah showed that the prophets of Baal were idolators thereby calling the people back to Israel's one God of Abraham. Mariam remembered the sounds and images of the villagers who were a vibrant mix of Jews, Catholics, Muslims and even Druse as they gathered for joyous celebrations on the mountain. The tradition in Carmel of honoring the prophet Elijah reminded Mariam of her beloved Galilee. She was now 21 years old.

Mariam continued to have ecstatic experiences that she herself could hardly explain and yet retained the charm and candor of a young child. One of the traditions in Carmel is writing and reciting poems, psalms and hymns that were sometimes shared with the community in evening recreation. Many of Mariam's poems came to her in the midst of ecstasies. They were expressions of love, a profound and intense love for God. Moved by the Holy Spirit in her life experience, her devotion to the Spirit led her to heights of poetic expression.

Mariam's religious call was to a hidden life grounded in her sense of personal humility and a willingness to submit herself in total obedience to the Prioress of the Carmelite community. Yet her extraordinary mystical gifts, that included the stigmata, ecstatic states, prophetic visions, levitations and bilocations can only be explained by her burning devotion to the Holy Spirit and her total submission to her God. Mariam's devotion to the Holy Spirit was not common in her time. And yet her spiritual journey seemed to be guided by the Spirit in unprecedented ways. Inspired by having received a special prayer to the Holy Spirit during one of her ecstatic experiences, she was convinced that devotion to the Spirit,

who was known as the Paraclete, was needed by the whole Church. She even sent a petition to Pope Pius IX to adopt this devotion. No one knows what the pope thought of this at the time, but 20 years later Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical about devotion to the Paraclete.

We would like to understand these extreme examples of mystical experience today as explainable phenomena but they remain a mystery that Mariam's short life leaves us as a remarkable legacy. When a Carmelite missionary proposed the establishment of a new Carmel in Mangalore, India, Mariam was one of the first to offer to go there. The journey turned out to be so difficult for them that some of the original nine sisters, including the intended Prioress for the new foundation, died en route. Eventually more sisters were sent from Pau and the new Carmel of Mangalore was established.

Mariam had been a "choir sister" in Pau which means that she did not do as much manual work as the "lay sisters". As a "choir sister" she participated in the daily recitation of the Divine Office, prayers that were offered four times a day. Mariam preferred the role of the lay sisters, perhaps because the challenge of learning to read was too difficult for her, especially since her native language was Arabic and not French, but it is also possible that her natural sense of humility caused her to feel more comfortable doing manual work even in the extreme way that she once was made to do by her uncle. In Mangalore she received her wish to return to being a lay sister.

Shortly after making her vows in Mangalore however, Mariam began to experience extreme spiritual trials and internal

struggles. The sisters tormented her and it seemed that she was meant to suffer as she found herself struggling with the desire to run away and to be disobedient to her superiors, temptations that she understood as coming from Satan. Finally she was sent back to Pau in November of 1872. She was sure that "all was willed by Jesus". In fact, it all seemed to be related to another of her revelations. She was convinced that God wanted her to establish a Carmel in Bethlehem and this was the reason she had to return to France from India.

No one supported her in this new adventure but Mariam persisted, which in itself was a sign that this was the authentic will of God. She had always been obedient to the will of her superiors and a true example of humility. Neither her superiors in the Carmelite Order nor anyone in Rome wanted to approve the foundation of a Carmel in Bethlehem. Through her spiritual advisor Mariam met a wealthy young woman from an aristocratic family in Pau named Berthe Dartigaux who agreed to give her financial support. The two women became friends and Mariam thought of Berthe as a "little sister". In order to receive the permission from Rome for the new foundation the self-effacing child-like Mariam became an extraordinary activist. She approached every avenue to support her vision, from the bishops to the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Just when it seemed that all of her efforts had failed, approval was granted and in 1875 Mariam finally returned to her beloved Palestine with Berthe and seven Carmelite sisters.

Now the small group of Carmelites had to find a place to build their monastery. One day Mariam saw a flock of pigeons descend onto a hillside to the west of

Bethlehem and she knew that this was where they should build their house. Her revelations in prayer allowed her to draw the plans for the monastery in the form of the biblical tower of David, thus the Carmel in Bethlehem was built in a circle, like the inside of a tower. Because she could speak Arabic Mariam oversaw the workmen, who were a mix of Muslims and Orthodox Christians, negotiating difficulties as they arose. In 14 months the sisters moved into their new home in Bethlehem. The year was 1877.

However, Mariam had not yet completed her role as foundress of Carmelite monasteries in the Holy Land. She convinced the Patriarch of Jerusalem that there should be another Carmel in Nazareth and the property for it was purchased overlooking the grotto of the Annunciation. Mariam would not live to see its final completion in 1910. In August of 1878 she broke her left arm when she fell while carrying water to the workmen in Bethlehem. It was clear that her health had been compromised for quite some time and now her arm would not heal but rather swelled with gangrene. She knew she was dying. Through her suffering she renewed her vow as a victim for the Church and for her adopted country France. She went to her God on August 26, 1878 at the age of 33.

By the time Mariam returned to Palestine her reputation had preceded her. She was known as an extraordinary mystic who had suffered the stigmata, had daily ecstatic experiences during which she often sang poetic verses and received many gifts of prophecy, and as a simple Palestinian girl who God transformed into a foundress of monasteries and a future saint. Her thoughts and teachings

during these ecstatic experiences were full of practical advice and remarkably wise for a simple, illiterate young woman. Today in Marseilles, at the convent of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, known as the Capelette, we can see her name listed as one of many famous visitors. She had come there to pray on her way back to Bethlehem. In Alexandria, in the grotto where she was brought to safety by 'a beautiful woman in blue', there is a crypt in her honor. In the small Palestinian town of Ibillin, her birthplace, the Mariam Baouardy Center was built with a kindergarten, library and gathering space. In this town she is called a saint.

However, Mariam, the Little Arab, Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified, thought of herself as " nothing", "a little nobody", and desired only to suffer the pain of her intense love of God, which led her to see God's love everywhere. It also allowed her to suffer when she realized with compassion how many tend to take the great gift of God's creation for granted. Out of her prayer she taught the sisters in her community that when they loved one another they were loving God and that when they served their neighbors they were serving God too. When asked about her experiences of ecstasy she described them as suddenly "falling asleep" in the midst of the most common everyday tasks. She said, "I feel as though my heart is open; as though there is a wound in it; and when I have certain ideas and impressions of God which move me, it feels like someone touched the wound in my heart, and I fall in weakness, I lose myself". (p.10 www.Katolik.nu)

It is no wonder that the Patriarch of Jerusalem felt so compelled to open her cause

for beatification in the Church in 1919. Louis Massignon saw her as a witness of all the themes that formed the foundation of his own spirituality: substitutionary love for others, compassion and hospitality. He wrote, "We understand the other by mentally substituting ourselves for the other, by entering into the place inhabited by the other, by mirroring the structure of thought of the other in ourselves". As a Greek Melkite Arab Christian, Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified stands as a sign of God's blessing and hope for the people of the Middle East that she represents so well. For Massignon, Mariam, the Little Arab, lived the authentic spirit of his Badaliya prayer movement, as a sign of reconciliation and of peace between peoples of all spiritual traditions.

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