

“Hidden from Men in Glory”: Thomas Merton and St. Charbel Makhlouf

By **Bonnie Thurston**

Anyone who does research knows that one thing leads to another. I had a particularly interesting experience of this working with material on Thomas Merton and Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL. It led from Loretto, KY and Loretto, PA to Lebanon and back, and is, I think, a worthy, if tiny footnote to Merton studies because it reminds us again of how often an early interest of Merton’s reappears later in his life in more mature form. And in this case, it gives me another opportunity to make better known the beauty and faith of the Arab world which is so frequently misrepresented in the West.

The following story was told by Sr. Mary Luke Tobin in her talk “Prayer and Commitment,” given at Nazareth College in Rochester, NY on November 3, 1990, which was transcribed and included in *Hidden in the Same Mystery*. She was speaking about gifts she had gotten for Merton on her travels and specifically about relics:

when I was in Rome at the Vatican Council, one of the persons canonized at that time was a monk named Charbel. Charbel was Lebanese, and he was a hermit. When I heard he was going to be canonized while we were there at Vatican II, I wrote to Merton and said, “Do you want a relic of Charbel, because there is a nun here from Lebanon who can get us one?” And he wrote back immediately, “Of course, I would love one! I am a great relic man myself!”¹

I thought I had heard or read that story before somewhere. And I had. In her introduction to *The Springs of Contemplation*, Jane Marie Richardson’s transcriptions of Merton’s retreats for contemplative prioresses given at Gethsemani in 1967 and 1968 (and facilitated by the Loretto sisters), Sr. Mary Luke writes that Merton took the group to see his hermitage where “he showed us all his little treasures.” She continues, “I remember writing him from Rome, asking if he would like a first-class relic of the newly canonized Lebanese hermit, Charbel. ‘Oh, yes,’ he answered, ‘I’m a great relic man!’”² Merton’s interest in St. Charbel’s relic clearly interested Sr. Mary Luke.

Indeed, Merton must have been “a relic man,” because in personal notes appended to a journal of 1965, after he says he won’t ask for any more books until he reads the ones he has at the hermitage, he makes a list of “*Relics – St. Mary of Carmel Hermitage*.” And there, with St. Theresa [*sic*] of Avila and St. Peter Damian and St. John of the Cross (and six others) is “Charbel Makhlouf – Dec. 24.”³ Even though “third time is the charm,” I might have forgotten St. Charbel. But on a trip to Loretto, PA⁴ I visited the gift shop/bookstore, and there on the holy card rack was a rather terrifying and very bad picture (of the sort Merton warned against) of St. Charbel. Who was St. Charbel?

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Yousef Antoun Makhlof (1828-1898) was apparently the first (I am ready to be corrected) member of the Aramaic Maronite Antiochian Church to be canonized according to the official procedures of the Roman Catholic Church, with which the Maronites are in communion. He was born on May 8, 1828 in the Lebanese mountain village of Biqa-Kafra to Maronite parents, Antoun Zaarour Makhlof and Brigitta Chidiac, and had two sisters and two brothers. Two of his uncles were living in solitude in the hermitage of St. Antonius of Kozhayah. His father died when he was a small child. He was educated in the village school.

In 1851, at age 23, Yousef entered the monastery of Our Lady of Mayfouk. He took the religious name “Charbel” (sometimes transliterated from the Arabic “Sharbel”) in honor of a second-century Antiochean martyr. Following a two-year novitiate, he took monastic vows at St. Maron Monastery in the village of Annaya (north of modern Beirut) in November, 1853. His primary teacher at the seminary of Kifan (1853-56) was Fr. Nimatullah (or “Nehemtallah,” later St. Hardini). Br. Charbel was ordained a priest in Bkerky on July 23, 1859 and lived as a monk in St. Maron Monastery. Although it is unusual in his order, with his superiors’ permission, on February 15, 1875, Fr. Charbel became a hermit and remained in his monastery’s hermitage of Sts. Peter and Paul until his death 23 years later.

The St. Maron Monastery website⁵ recounts the miracle of Charbel’s oil lamp. The monk asked to have his lamp refilled. His attendants, planning to trick him, filled the lamp with water. Watching through a crack in the door, they saw him light it as if it *were* filled with oil. Summoning another monk, the others tried without success to light the lamp and tasted the liquid to be sure it was water. When his lamp was returned to him, Charbel lit it again. The event is said to have influenced his superiors in favor of his request to be a hermit. It was the first of St. Charbel’s miracles.

Charbel was admired for his strict fasts (for years he ate one meal a day) and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. His holiness led people to seek his prayers and blessing. Apparently his face was never seen as he kept his head down when at work or walking. On December 16, 1898 he suffered a stroke, from which he died December 24, Christmas Eve. A severe snowstorm miraculously ended to allow for his burial, and after his death, lights radiated from his tomb. His beatification and canonization were proposed by Pope Pius XI in 1925. Post-mortem miracles were attributed to him in 1927 and 1950 (when his body was exhumed and found completely sound). In 1954 Pope Pius XII signed the decree accepting the proposal for his beatification. On December 5, 1965 Pope Paul VI officiated at the beatification ceremony (when Sr. Mary Luke was in Rome for the Council), and in 1976 Paul VI signed the decree of canonization which took place at the Vatican on October 9, 1977.

Today St. Charbel is perhaps the most beloved of the Maronite saints. He certainly “ranks among Lebanon’s most celebrated religious men.”⁶ When he was canonized, Bishop Francis Zayek, head of the Diocese of St. Maron in the United States, called him “the Perfume of Lebanon.”⁷ An account of St. Sharbel (as the magazine spells it) and pilgrimages to his hermitage and tomb was featured in the July, 2009 issue of *One*, the official publication of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. Pilgrimages have been made on the twenty-second of each month since January 22, 1993 when Nohad El Shami, a Lebanese woman who had suffered a stroke, was visited by Charbel and another monk, healed, and in a dream one week later was asked by the saint to visit his tomb on the twenty-second of each month. As can often be the case with pilgrimage places in the Middle

East,⁸ pilgrimages to St. Charbel's tomb are undertaken by Christians, Jews, Muslims (in the words of one, because "People with good hearts come here" [Raschka 36]) and Hindus.

It isn't difficult to see how Merton might have felt affinity with this fatherless monk who had entered a cenobitic order only to discover he had an anchorite's vocation. As widely read as Merton was generally, and as connected as he was to the events surrounding Vatican II, it isn't surprising that he would have known of Charbel's beatification and would have been happy for a relic. His own 1965 list attests he was "a relic man." But Charbel had first come across Merton's "radar screen" not in the mid-1960s but as early as the spring of 1951.

Merton's journal entry of April 11, 1951 records, "For two years I have been a hermit and have not appreciated the fact, or lived as one. . . . Father Barnabas Mary wrote me about Father Charbel who lived as a hermit in Syria. He was a Maronite. Everyone forgot about him. He died. Fifty years later his body was discovered incorrupt and in a short time he worked over six hundred miracles. He is my new companion." The entry concludes, "Great help from the prayers of the Carmelites, the relics of St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa, and St. Thomas Aquinas."⁹

Fr. Barnabas Mary Ahern was a Passionist priest, a well-known author and Bible translator, who wrote Merton 26 letters between 1950 and 1956.¹⁰ Fr. Barnabas Mary closes his February 27, 1951 letter to Merton, "Today God is putting before us many saints whose life [*sic*] was deeply hidden with Christ – even to the point of eremitical solitude." He lists as examples St. Nicholas of Flue, St. Anna Maria of Jesus Paredes, "and now the Lebanonese [*sic*] hermit, Father Charbel."¹¹ Merton must have asked for more information, which Fr. Barnabas Mary included in a long letter dated March 26, 1951. His brief biography alludes to Charbel's "life of penance and prayer," his retirement to a hermitage, and the some 600 miracles reported "especially among the Jews and Moslems." Fr. Barnabas Mary reveals why Charbel had recently come to public attention. "Just last year the Abbot of the monastery was awakened at night and told to go to the old hermit's tomb. Blood was oozing from the body; it was in a perfect state of preservation." The letter concludes with a discussion of solitude and the issue of hermits in the Trappist order. Apparently Fr. Barnabas Mary thought Merton might find the biography of St. Charbel helpful in his own situation. St. Charbel had lived a cenobitic rule for more than a dozen years. At this point Merton had for a decade.

St. Charbel's story did appeal to Merton; his next journal entry, April 22, 1951 (*ES* 455-56), is addressed to "Father Charbel" and to "God, my God." Merton reflects on the hidden-ness of monks and hermits. Merton begins "O April, we are coming to your end. You, Father Charbel, hidden from men in glory, because of you, perhaps this Journal is coming to an end." Here is Merton's familiar and never realized aspiration to stop writing. Merton makes an implicit comparison between himself and Charbel, both of whom sink into the daily round, the landscape and monastic anonymity. "Famous but unknown, tired and powerful, a man without virtue and without prayer, impotent, hungry, at peace, unable to speak, looking at the valley." Merton reflects on his current situation in light of his "retreat in the guesthouse, ten years ago." All of it is somehow tied to the barn: "the glorious barn. . . . This barn cannot be known. It is Mount Lebanon, where Father Charbel saw the sun and moon."

The entry is imagistic and poetic. Something about what he learned of Fr. Charbel touched Merton deeply, so deeply that his further reflection is more than usually fragmentary and allusive.

It speaks of his growth in monastic life and his uneasiness with his role as a writer: “What happens after that? Do you put down, ‘The rest is silence,’ and close the book, and sell it to the public?” This is tied in Merton’s mind to St. Charbel, although the logical connection is hard to follow. However, the event was so important to him that when he prepared the journals of 1946 to 1952 for publication as *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton included both “Charbel” entries almost unedited.¹²

Two years later St. Charbel reappears in Merton’s correspondence with Dorothy G. Wayman, a social worker and journalist who wrote a column for *The Boston Globe*. She was engaged in a prison ministry for which the monks at Gethsemani prayed. Seven letters between 1949 and 1953 are extant.¹³ On March 30, 1953 Mrs. Wayman closes a letter to Merton by referring to *The Sign of Jonas*:

One other thing in SIGN OF JONAS I would speak of – the Hermit of Lebanon, Father Sharbel. I know Father Eid, author of the book of which I enclose a review. Fr. Eid lives in Massachusetts, not far from Boston and there are many Lebanonites [sic] living here. I wrote a “popular” article for the secular newspapers in Boston about the Hermit; I own Fr. Eid’s book. If you do not own the book, I will very gladly send it for the library at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

The book in question is Fr. Joseph Eid’s *The Hermit of Lebanon, Father Sharbel: A First Essay on the Servant of God*,¹⁴ first published in 1952 in Fall River, MA where, since June, 1927, its author had been priest of St. Anthony of the Desert Maronite Church.¹⁵ Merton responds to Mrs. Wayman with a three-cent postcard postmarked April 8, 1953, “I would be delighted to have the book on Fr. Charbel.” On April 10, Mrs. Wayman notes, “I am mailing the small book about Father Sharbel. As it was already autographed to me by Father Eid, the author, I have re-inscribed it for Our Lady of Gethsemani’s keeping.” She refers Merton to a particular passage in the book about a miracle “which, if verified, will be introduced in the cause for beatification.” On May 15, 1953 Gethsemani’s Abbot James Fox writes to “Miss Wayman” thanking her for the book. So Merton had available a full, if hagiographical, biography of St. Charbel.

Finally, the Thomas Merton Center has just over a page of Merton’s handwritten notes on Charbel. Unfortunately, the notes are undated, but must have been made some time after February, 1950. They include a very brief biographical sketch of the “1st oriental confessor formally beatified” (with a marginal note “is this absolutely correct?”) and some anecdotes about Charbel which apparently appealed to Merton. One is about the unsuitability of a hermit to be superior of an order. Another reports Charbel’s refusal to make announcements at Mass. These anecdotes made me wonder if Merton were presenting Charbel to the scholastics of whom he had been made master in 1951. Merton notes that the hermit sometimes worked in the monastery vineyard or visited the sick or heard confessions. His notes close “25 Feb. 1950 . . . liquid flowing from tomb makes exhumation necessary.” This is the event Fr. Barnabas Mary alluded to in his March 26, 1951 letter to Merton. It was apparently this phenomenon and the subsequent opening of the tomb and finding Charbel’s body intact that led to renewed interest in and eventual canonization of the hermit and to Sr. Mary Luke’s offer to procure for Merton a first-class relic.

St. Charbel, nineteenth-century Lebanese Maronite hermit and saint, appears in Merton’s correspondence and journals in the early 1950s and in undated study notes. When at the end of 1965 his friend Sr. Mary Luke Tobin offers him a relic of the soon-to-be-beatified St. Charbel,

Merton is eager to have one, in part because he was “a relic man,” and in part, I suspect, because this particular saint had been important to him, marked a mysterious milestone for him, at the end of his first decade of monastic life. Merton apparently felt some private affinity with Charbel and was anxious for more information about the saint’s life because it illumined aspects of his own monastic profession.

Does this tiny footnote on Merton have any significance for the larger picture or for our understanding of Merton? I think it might. First, it clearly underscores two themes in Merton’s own monastic development. It provided him with another example of a man who was led to a cenobite community and later discovered a hermit’s vocation. And it highlights Merton’s ongoing struggle with writing (certainly a form of speech) and silence. Merton experienced a genuine and very human tension between his desires for the fame of a writer and the anonymity of a monk. It seems he genuinely wanted both, and the tension between the two conflicting desires was central to the conversion of life to which he was called as a Trappist.

Second, Merton’s interest in St. Charbel foreshadows two of his mature theological concerns. St. Charbel incarnated for Merton the Middle East and the Arab world in which he later took such great interest. “Arab,” of course, does not equal “Muslim.” Merton’s interest in St. Charbel, like his interest in Camus¹⁶ and his correspondence with Herbert Mason and Louis Massignon¹⁷ (which Sidney Griffith has so masterfully explained to us¹⁸) make it clear that his knowledge of the area was wide and deep. Some of that interest is undoubtedly rooted in Merton’s French origins, because, of course, the Lebanon and North Africa fell under the European influence of the French – with very mixed results.

Certainly St. Charbel prefigures Merton’s engagement with Orthodox thought, an interest first examined by Donald Allchin¹⁹ (of blessed memory), then by his student Rowan Williams,²⁰ and most recently by Christopher Pramuk in *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*.²¹ But Merton’s concern was not just with Greek Fathers like Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas or modern Orthodox theologians like Sergius Bulgakov, Paul Evdokimov and Vladimir Soloviev. His friendship with this (to us) obscure nineteenth-century Lebanese hermit-saint represents the softer side of Merton’s engagement with the world of the Christian East. Perhaps it even reflects, albeit in a glass darkly, Merton’s interfaith interests more generally since St. Charbel appeals and offers favors not only to Christians, but to Jews and Muslims as well.

Finally, beyond the fact that I have a personal commitment to sharing the beauty of Arab culture and piety which are seldom extolled after the early years of this century, Merton’s affinity for St. Charbel reminds me of the very practical spiritual truth of the reality of spiritual friendship across time or out of time. Christians living now can have lively and sustaining relationships with the saints who came before us. They are interested in us and, to the degree we are open to them, appear in various ways to help our journey. Apparently through the Passionist priest, Fr. Barnabas Ahern, St. Charbel arrived to encourage Merton at a critical juncture in his monastic life and “returned” as it were 14 years later through another friend, Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, SL. How mysterious and wonderful is the great cloud of witnesses, the complex web of saints into which we are invited by an extraordinary and surprising God.

1. Mary Luke Tobin, SL, "Prayer and Commitment in Thomas Merton," in *Hidden in the Same Mystery: Thomas Merton and Loretto*, Bonnie Thurston, general editor, Mary Swain, SL, Loretto Editor (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010) 67.
2. Mary Luke Tobin, SL, "Introduction," Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) ix. The relic itself is now housed at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
3. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Dagg (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 333.
4. Like Loretto, KY, Loretto, PA is an extraordinary place with an extraordinary Catholic heritage. It is the home of missionary priest Fr. Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin, an early community of Sisters of Mercy, the Shrine of Our Lady of the Alleghenies, the Basilica of St. Michael the Archangel, Mt. Assisi Monastery of the Franciscans, TOR, whose glorious garden boasts a shrine to Our Lady of Fatima, and the Carmel of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. (I'm a pilgrim person myself!)
5. www.saintcharbel-annaya.com/stcharbel.
6. Marilyn Raschka, "A Saint without Borders," *One* 35.4 (July 2009) 30; subsequent references will be cited as "Raschka" parenthetically in the text.
7. American Catholic website: "Saint of the Day: St. Sharbel Makhlof" (July 24) (www.americancatholic.org/Features/Saints/Saint.aspx?id=1928).
8. I can attest that Muslims visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem as well as the "Milk Grotto," a small shrine near a town where Mary is reputed to have stopped to nurse Jesus on the Flight to Egypt.
9. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 455; subsequent references will be cited as "ES" parenthetically in the text.
10. See John P. Collins, "A Passionist Friendship: Barnabas Ahern and Thomas Merton," *The Merton Seasonal* 34.2 (Summer 2009) 17-29.
11. Fr. Ahern's letters to Merton are housed in archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY. I am very grateful to Mark Meade for providing me access to them.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 325-27.
13. The Merton-Wayman correspondence is preserved at Boston College: the typed letters by Dorothy Wayman to Merton (3 items), 1949-1953, Box 2, Folder 8, Thomas Merton Collection, MS 1986-063, John J. Burns Library, Boston College and the postcard signed by Merton to Dorothy Wayman (1 item), 8 April 1953, Box 2, folder 7, Thomas Merton Collection, MS 1986-063, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. The materials were kindly provided to me by Mark Meade of the Thomas Merton Center.
14. Joseph Eid, *The Hermit of Lebanon Father Sharbel: A First Essay on the Servant of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1955).
15. Information about Fr. Joseph Eid is available on the church's web site. He arrived in June, 1927 and led the parish through his death on October 23, 1970. The Church has a St. Sharbel Chapel and parish center named for the saint. Eid's book was popular enough for the paperback to go into a third edition.
16. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 181-301.
17. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 261-81.
18. Sidney H. Griffith, "Merton, Massignon, and the Challenge of Islam," Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999) 51-78.
19. A. M. Allchin, "The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton and the Eastern Fathers," and "Our Lives, a Powerful Pentecost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity," in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003) 103-20, 121-40.
20. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011).
21. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).