

While celebrating the Divine Liturgy on December 16, 1898, Fr. Sharbel suffered a stroke (although some monks hypothesize that he was so caught up in prayer that it caused him to lose his faculties). He endured eight days of pain calmly, repeating the prayer he could not finish in the Divine Liturgy: “Father of truth, behold Your Son, the sacrifice in whom You are well pleased. Accept him who died for me...” He would also repeat the names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, as well as Sts. Peter and Paul, the patron saints of the hermitage. He died on Christmas Eve, 1898, and was buried on a very cold and snowy day. Only a few monks were able to attend his burial.

That evening, the abbot wrote in the monastery diary: “What he will accomplish after his death exempts me from itemizing his life’s work. Faithful to his vows, he displayed exemplary obedience. His conduct was more angelic than human.”<sup>1</sup>

People began seeing light around his tomb. After numerous reports including by non-Christians, Church authorities opened it and found Fr. Sharbel’s body incorrupt (not deteriorated), exuding what appeared to be sweat and blood. The Maronite patriarch allowed the body to be transferred to a special coffin on April 15, placed in a new tomb inside the monastery. Pilgrims flocked there, asking his intercession. God granted many physical healings and spiritual blessings. Because of the exuding of sweat and blood, the tomb had to be cleaned frequently.

On July 24, 1927, his body was transferred to a third tomb. Today, only his bones remain, but countless miracles continue to be attributed to his intercession. In less than two years, 139,000 letters from 95 nations had taken their place in the Annaya museum dedicated to him. “Father Sharbel wrote nothing, not one theological or mystical treatise, not even a letter. Like Jesus, he wrote upon the hearts of his gratified listeners.”<sup>1</sup> The largest Shrine outside of his tomb is in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guanajuato in Mexico City, where his spirituality and miracles were introduced by Lebanese immigrants in the early 1900s.

#### Socials with the Saints

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## **St. Sharbel Makhlof** ( شربل مخلوف )

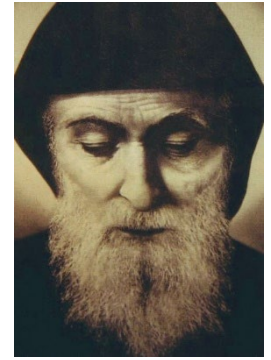
**Born:** May 8, 1828 in Bekaa Kafra, North Lebanon

**Died:** December 24, 1898 in Annaya

**Canonized** by Pope Paul VI on October 9, 1977

**Feast Day:** Roman Calendar - July 24.

Maronite Calendar - 3rd Sunday of July.



**PREFACE:** The Maronite Church is one of the Eastern Catholic Churches which maintains its own hierarchy while remaining in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church & Pope. Its roots were in Syria, before migrating primarily to Lebanon. Maronite Divine Liturgy (Mass) is celebrated in the Syriac language, closely resembling the Aramaic spoken by Jesus Christ. Maronites trace their heritage to St. Maron, born in the 300s A.D. Maronite tradition includes that of ordaining married men.

**BIOGRAPHY:** Born into a family of five children in the village of Bekaa Kafra in North Lebanon, Yousef Zaroun Makhlof lost his father when he was only three years old. As was the custom, the Makhlof children were entrusted to their paternal uncle, Tanius Zaarour Makhlof, a mule driver, as their guardian. Meanwhile, Yousef’s mother remarried a man who later became the local priest. Yousef’s role models, however, were his two maternal uncles who were hermits at the monastery of St. Anthony of Kozhaya in North Lebanon, one of the oldest monasteries in the Qadisha Valley. Yousef would walk four hours from the village to visit his two hermit uncles.

He was drawn to the spiritual life, loved prayer and solitude, and yearned to live like the desert fathers. One of his favorite books was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Yousef used to take the small herd entrusted to his daily care to the prairies, and at a nearby grotto he would kneel in front of an icon of the Virgin Mary. Villagers called him “the Saint.” Tanius Makhlof wasn’t particularly pleased with his nephew’s piety, preferring that Yousef work alongside him in his trade. Further, a young woman had become attracted to Yousef, and his mother wanted them to marry.

However, Yousef followed the call in his heart. In 1851, he arose one morning and left his family and village, traveling to the Monastery of

Our Lady of Ilige, located in Mayfouk at the source of the Madfoun River in the high mountains, built on the site of a former pagan temple. There, he prepared to become a monk. After one year, he went to St. Maron's Monastery in Annaya, where he joined the Lebanese Maronite Order, choosing the name Charbel (Sharbel) after a second-century martyr from Edessa. Sharbel took the monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience on November 1, 1853.

Once he had pronounced his vows, his hair was cut to show his dedication. He was then dressed in the black monastic habit, the angelic cowl (hood), the belt of the Order, the tassel and the habit. Each of these has its own special meaning and is an important symbol in the novitiate's transition to monkhood. The black garb means that the monk has withdrawn from all worldly things. By wearing the habit, the cloth of the poor, the monk proclaims his poverty. The angelic cowl (hood) has its origin in a gift to St. Anthony the Great from an angel. It symbolizes a monk's focus and purity, proclaiming his celibate chastity as a total commitment to the will of God.

He received theological training at St. Cyprian & St. Justina Monastery along with the other seminarians, under the tutelage of Father Nemtallah Kassab El-Hardini, who would later be a canonized saint. Brother Sharbel was ordained a priest in Bkerké, in 1859 at age 31. His homilies became a source of great wisdom and direction.

Here are some of his words:

“Hang on to the Lord's ship and help your brothers hang on with you: At every port you reach, invite people to join you in your journey so you may share the arrival with them; tell them about your ship and Captain and about the shore of light. But, rest assured that it is not what you say that will make people embark on the Lord's ship, but rather it is your love for each other and your love for the Captain and your trust and your belief in Him, and the joy on your faces.”<sup>2</sup>

Father Sharbel still held the example of his uncles in his heart. He was granted permission to pursue his calling as a hermit. At the age of 46, he entered the hermitage of Sts. Peter & Paul in Annaya. There, he lived out the rest of his earthly life.

As a hermit, Fr. Sharbel sang the Divine Office and worked in the

monastic vineyards and olive orchards. He lived prayerfully and practiced intense mortification—behaviors of strong self-discipline and sacrifice. He ate one meal a day, sent to him by the monastery. He was never to eat meat or drink wine. During Lent, he only had vegetables with a little oil. He slept five hours or less per day and observed strict silence. In a case of necessity, he would speak briefly and in subdued tones. He was deeply devoted to the Eucharist, and spent hours in prayer both before and after Divine Liturgy.

“He already seemed to be living in eternity,” testified Father Elias Mihri. One January during a thunderstorm, the Superior Fr. Nehme, narrates; “Father Sharbel was on his knees in the chapel, deep in meditation. In a flash, a bolt of lightning struck the building, opening a breach in the roof. It sliced off a part of the altar and struck out across the floor, setting fire to Sharbel's clothing! He didn't seem to notice and went right on with his devotions. His two companions later fainted from the heavy sulfuric smell left behind by the lightning.”

Father Simon of Ehmej testified to another story with many witnesses: “It was in 1885. A cloud of locusts, completely obscuring the sun, flew over Annaya and the surrounding villages. They were preparing to settle on the crops! Realizing the terrible danger, the Superior ordered the hermit Sharbel to bless some water and take it into the fields to sprinkle on the ground. This is what he did. Every field he was able to enter was saved! The inhabitants of Annaya saw what was happening and ran to the monastery to beg for some of the water. They carried out the same procedure, and their fields were saved. In recognition of this wonderful assistance, one hundred of these peasants later came to the monastery when the harvesting began and freely offered their time to do the reaping in the monastery's fields.”<sup>1</sup>

According to *Three Lights From the East* by Father Mansour Awad, “People weren't able to see his face when he was alive. He always kept his head down in church, at work, or when walking, always looking to the ground. He would lift his eyes only to heaven. When in church, he always faced the altar with his eyes fixed on the tabernacle. However, when he died and was lying face upward, his eyes were closed, still not looking at anyone, exactly as in his lifetime.” This was a way of reminding himself to be humble and focus on God's will.