

"The Little Arab" by Doris C. Neger Reprinted from Sophia, Volume 31, Number 1, Jan. - Feb. 2001

Who was she? And what is her relevance to all of us in the year 2001? Here is a synopsis of her short life here on earth.

Mariam Baouardy was a child of Galilee, Palestine. Her family originated in Damascus, Syria. They were Christians of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Rite, descendants of the Archeparchy of Antioch, the place where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. The Baouardy lived in the hill country of upper Galilee. Her father, Giries (George) Baouardy, came from Horfesch, Palestine; her mother, Mariam Shahine, came from Tarshiha, Palestine. Both villages were populated by Druse, Sunni Muslims, and Christians' Arabs. They were folk of very modest means. Mariam bore her husband 12 sons; none survived their infancy to the great sorrow of their parents.

Mariam, devoted to the Virgin Mary, prayed for a daughter. She prevailed upon her husband to travel to Bethlehem and there to beseech the Mother of God for a girl-child. They did so. At the Grotto of the Nativity of Jesus they poured out their request in prayer. They then returned to Galilee and their home in Ibillin. On January 5, 1846, the eve of the Epiphany, an infant daughter was born. Ten days later in the local Melkite Church she received Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. She was named after the Virgin and called, Mariam.

Two years later a baby boy was born. He was named Boulos (Paul). The tiny family had a short time together. Both mother and father died within a few days of each other. Giries' last words, while looking at a picture of Saint Joseph were: "Great Saint, here is my child. The Blessed Virgin Mary is her mother. Please look after her, be her father." A maternal aunt from Tarshiha took tiny Paul into her home; Mariam was adopted by a paternal uncle in Ibillin.

Ibillin has scenery of incomparable beauty. From the rocky peak which dominates the village, the whole of upper Galilee is viewed. The small Galilean, Mariam, would recall these sights with great nostalgia throughout her short life. To the north, the lofty mountain chain, the frontier of Lebanon could be seen. On the northeast was mighty Jebel Shaykh, the Sheikh of the Mountains as the Arabs call it, snow-capped yearlong. In the east waves of hills slope down gently downward to Lake Galilee, also named Tiberias; on the south the opulent Plain of Esdralon stretches outward till meeting Mount Carmel. Northwest beyond the sand dunes sparkles the blue Mediterranean.

Mariam dwelled in the comfortable home of her uncle receiving all proper care and attention. One incident from the time of her childhood revealed significant insight into her forming character. It clearly indicated the direction of her life to come. It took place in her uncle's orchard amidst the apricot, peach and pecan trees. She kept a small cage filled with small birds, a gift given to her. One day she desired to give them a bath. Her child-like well-intentioned efforts caused their death from drowning. Their death broke her small heart. Grief-stricken she began to bury them when deep inside she heard

a clear voice, "This is how everything passes. If you will give me your heart, I shall always remain with you."

When Mariam was eight years old her uncle left Palestine with the entire family and settled in Alexandria, Egypt. She was not to see her beloved Ibillin till shortly before her death in 1878.

According to oriental custom, Mariam, then age 13, was promised in marriage. The wedding was arranged without the bride-to-be's consultation or consent. This was a common custom among Middle Eastern Christians as well as Muslims. Mariam's reaction was one of shock and deep sadness. The night before the wedding ceremony was sleepless. She was not prepared at all for the life of a married woman. She prayed earnestly that night for guidance and solace. In her heart's depths she again heard a familiar voice, "Everything passes! If you wish to give me your heart, I will remain with you." Mariam knew it was her master's voice, the one, the only spouse she would have - Jesus. The remainder of the night was spent in deep prayer before the icon of the Virgin Mother of Jesus; she then heard the words, "Mariam, I am with you; follow the inspiration I shall give you. I will help you.

Her adoptive uncle reacted with wild rage when he saw that Mariam would not marry, but would remain a virgin. He tried outburst of rage, screams, hits and slaps. Nothing would change her determination. He then resorted to treating her as a hired domestic, giving her the most difficult kitchen tasks and subjecting her to a position lower than his hired help.

Mariam sank into a deep sense of desolation and desperation. She turned to her younger brother, Boulos. She wrote a letter to her brother inviting him to come and see her in Alexandria. In her isolation from her uncle's family she turned to a Muslim domestic to have him deliver her letter to Nazareth. The young man encouraged Mariam to reveal her personal troubles. He became outraged at her uncle's treatment of her and played upon the mind and feelings of the young girl. He introduced conversion to Islam as a remedy to Mariam's problems. His words and actions focused young Mariam directly upon her Christianity. Her realization of the young man's true intentions stiffened her will. She denied his advances and loudly proclaimed her faith in the Church of Jesus. "Muslim, no, never! I am a daughter of the Catholic Apostolic Church, and I hope by the grace of God to persevere until death in my religion, which is the only true one.

Her so-called protector, furious at being rejected by this little Christian became violent. Eyes flashing with hatred he lost control and kicked her to the floor. He then drew his sword and slashed her throat. Thinking her dead he dumped her bloody body in a nearby dark alley. It was 8 September 1858. What followed was a strange and beautifully moving story, told years later by Mariam to her Mistress of Novices at Marseilles, France. "A nun dressed in blue picked me up and stitched my throat wound. This happened in a grotto somewhere. I found myself in heaven with the Blessed Virgin, the angels and the saints. They treated me with great, kindness. In their company were

my parents. I saw the brilliant throne of the Most Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ in His humanity. There was no sun, no lamp, but everything was bright with light. Someone spoke to me. They said that I was a virgin, but that my book was not finished. When my wound was healed I had to leave the grotto and the Lady took me to the Church of St. Catherine served by the Franciscan Friars. I went to confess. When I left, the Lady in Blue had disappeared.” Years later when in ecstasy, on September 8, 1874, the feast of our Lady’s nativity, Sr. Mary said, “On this same day in 1858, I was with my Mother (Mary) and I consecrated my life to her. Someone had cut my throat and the next day Mother Mary took care of me.”

Mariam never saw her uncle again. She supported herself by working as a domestic. An Arab Christian family, the Najjar, hired her to work for them. After two years she was directed by her confessor to the Sisters of St. Joseph. With several postulants from Lebanon and Palestine, she stayed with the Sisters. Soon her health declined and mystical phenomena began. It was disturbing to the congregation. They became upset over her supernatural actions and aura and would not permit her to enter the novitiate. Her Mistress of Novices, Mother Veronica, took her to the Carmelite convent of Pau where both gained admission. Mariam entered Carmel at age 21 as a lay sister. After two months she entered the cloister to begin her novitiate. She took the name of Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified.

Little Mariam Baouardy, now known as Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified, was professed on 21 November 1871 as a Carmelite Religious. Prior to that action she was subjected to severe supernatural adversities. One of the most terrible was diabolic possession for a period of 40 days. She persevered in her simple child-like faith in God the Son and His Holy Mother Mary. Her rewards were those reserved for the most privileged of humans. She was fixed with the stigmata of her crucified Savior, experienced levitations, transverberations of the heart, knowledge of hearts, prophecies, possession by the Good Angel, and facial radiance. Again and again she would say, “Everything passes here on earth. What are we? Nothing but dust, nothingness, and God is so great, so beautiful, so lovable and He is not loved.”

Sister Mariam of Jesus Crucified had an intense devotion to the Holy Spirit, Possessor of the Truth without error or division. Through the Melkite Patriarch Gregory II Sayour, she sent a message to Pope Pius IX that the Church, even in seminaries, is neglecting true devotion to the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. Her prayer to that great Unknown was: “Holy Spirit, inspire me. Love of God consume me. Along the true road, lead me. Mary, my good mother, look down upon me. With Jesus, bless me. From all evil, all illusion, all danger, preserve me.” This simple prayer has gone around the world.

Sister Mariam was instrumental in the founding of a missionary Carmel in Mangalore, India, in 1871, and in Bethlehem of Palestine. Also she was the inspiration for the establishment of the Congregation of the Betharram Priests of the Sacred Heart.

On 5 January 1878, Sister Mariam entered her 33rd year of life. One day in August she fell while working in the convent injuring herself severely. Gangrene set in

quickly and spread the infection to her respiratory tract. She never recovered from this trauma. On 26 August 1878, she suffered a life-threatening suffocation attack. She died soon after murmuring, “My Jesus, mercy.” It was ten minutes past five in the morning.

Her tomb is engraved with this inscription:

“Here in the peace of the Lord reposes Sister Mary of Jesus Crucified, professed religious of the white veil. A soul of singular graces, she was conspicuous for her humility, her obedience and her charity. Jesus, the sole love of her heart called her to Himself in the 33rd year of her age and the 12th year of her religious life at Bethlehem, 26 August 1878.”

She is still known today as “Al Qiddisa” (The holy one) in Ibillin, Palestine. On 13 November 1983, Pope John Paul II beatified her in solemn ceremony at Vatican City. She is scheduled for formal canonization this year placing her among the Saints in formal proclamation.

The “Little Arab”, a living lesson of the virtues of humility and the love of God, His son Jesus and His Mother Mary, is a special inspiration to those who pursue the Truth as present in the Holy Spirit of God . . . And she was one of us, a Melkite Catholic and a Carmelite.

*PS — In his preface Reverend Amedee Brunot, SCJ, the author of the book “Mariam The Little Arab” writes: how can we fail to see that this child of Galilee and of the Eastern Church has a special message for those of her race and her rite? Accordingly how could anyone have ever maintained that the sap of sanctity no longer flows in the veins of the Churches of the East, that this land of anchorites and cenobites, of lauras and monasteries no longer produces flowers and fruits of grace? The Lebanese Charbel Makhoul and the Galilean Mariam Baouardy are the indisputable answer to these pessimistic judgments. The divine power has always been pleased in these biblical lands to effect at times national resurrections, at other times individual prodigies; once more it is assuring to these peoples a subject of noble pride and a motive of hope.*

*What is more astonishing than the trajectory of a saint? What a greater message of hope could there be today in the troubled Near East than to tell the Palestinians: here is a young girl of your race, your language and of one of your most honored rites?”*

*(Doris C. Neger, OCDS, writes from Mineola, NY)*