

THOMAS AND LEONARD OF BAABDAT, CAPUCHIN PRIESTS

ROME, 24 APRIL 2022

PROT. N. 00233/22

MISSIONARIES AND MARTYRS

TO ALL THE FRIARS OF THE ORDER IN THEIR LOCATIONS

Dear Brothers,

May the Lord give you His peace!

«Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church» (Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 9). In the midst of the darkness that our world has been enduring for more than two years, and in the face of an uncertain future, the Lord generously offers us two new blessed: Thomas and Leonard of Baabdat. They come

from a biblical land - certainly - but also from a region of the world that has known only war and persecution. Lebanon, a small country that has already given to the Order Blessed Abouna Yacoub (*Jacob of Ghazir*), Apostle of the Cross, will have the joy of celebrating the beatification of two more Capuchins who were both missionaries and martyrs, this June 4, 2022 in Beirut. Who are these two new Lebanese blessed who come forth to encourage us amid the crises that their country, our Order and the entire world are currently going through?

BIOLOGICAL PROFILE

Géries (*George*) Saleh, the future Br. Thomas, was born on May 3, 1879 in Baabdat, a village in the Lebanese mountains. He was the fifth



in a Maronite family of six children. On November 17, 1881, Youssef (*Joseph*) Oueiss was born in the same village, his surname was later changed to Melki. He was the seventh in a Maronite family of eleven children. Both were baptized and raised in Baabdat when a series of events divided the village. A large number of families in the country, feeling unfairly treated, turned first to the civil authorities, then to the ecclesiastical – but in vain. The group then joined the Protestants for a few months, before being accepted into the Latin Church, following an intervention by the Holy See. The Capuchins came from Beirut in order to receive them, but more importantly to ease tensions. Among these families were those of Géries and Youssef. A few months later, the two young teenagers received the sacrament of Confirmation in the Latin Church on November 19, 1893.

Together with a few companions from Baabdat, the two young people were struck by the example of the Capuchins, who were Italian at the time, and chose to become missionaries like them. They were prepared and then sent to the minor seminary of San Stefano in Istanbul, which belonged to the Apostolic Institute of the East. This institute was created for the formation of missionaries, destined to be sent to the East. While Blessed Abouna Yacoub was completing his novitiate in Ghazir, Lebanon, with the Capuchins of the province of Lyon, these five young men left everything and fearlessly embarked for Istanbul, which they reached on April 28, 1895. In various regions of Turkey, including Istanbul, the persecutions against Christians and especially against the Armenians had already begun in December 1894.

During the four years of their scholastic studies, they were welcomed into the Franciscan Third Order, as was the tradition

in this seminary. Then, on July 2, 1899, they entered the novitiate: Géries received the name of Br. Thomas Aquinas and Youssef that of Br. Leonard of Port Maurice. After their simple profession, they studied philosophy and theology for six years in Boudja, near Smyrna, which was part of the same institute. They were ordained priests on December 4, 1904, while their local fraternity was preparing to celebrate the golden jubilee of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception with great solemnity! They passed the exam to become missionaries on April 23, 1906, and were assigned to the Mission of Mesopotamia, which had then been entrusted to the province of Lyon. They were able to visit Baabdat, their native village, before traveling on to Mardin, Mesopotamia.

5. Father Thomas engaged in a ministry of apologetics towards the Protestants and Syrian Orthodox in Mardin - according to the ecclesiology of the time - in addition to catechesis, preaching, teaching at the school and hearing confessions. Meanwhile, Father Leonard served as the school's director, assisted the Franciscan Third Order, and preached the Word of God with zeal and constancy. The two new missionaries did much good toward the children and young people. Despite some criticism, they were very creative in their ministry: theater, poetry, biblical games, etc.

In October of 1908, for the first time after thirteen years of being together, Father Thomas was separated from his companion Father Leonard, and from that moment on, their paths would remain independent from one another. Fr. Thomas was transferred to Kharput, in Armenia Minor, then to Diarbekir, in Mesopotamia, two years later. He continued fiercely defending the faith, taught catechesis, managed the school there, and served as spiritual assistant to the Third Order. He made

his first and only return to Lebanon when the First World War broke out. Later, in his last letter to his family, he wrote: «Fear affects everyone, you and me. But what is the use of worrying since not even a hair falls from our head without God's willing it?» Then he renewed his faith in God: «My life comes from God. He can take it away whenever He wants.»

Father Leonard meanwhile remained in Mardin, and within the span of four years, saw his health deteriorate. He was forced to rest at Mamuret ul-Aziz, Armenia Minor in 1910, and then a year later in Baabdat, where he stayed for the last time before being assigned to Urfa. At the beginning of the First World War, he returned to Mardin with an Italian missionary, Father Daniele, who was in his eighties. On December 5, 1914, soldiers broke into the Capuchin church, but Father Leonard had time to hide the Blessed Sacrament with the help of an Armenian neighbor. Then, although he was inclined to accompany some Franciscan nuns to a safer city, he decided instead to stay in Mardin solely out of charity towards Father Daniele, who was in no condition to leave. He was ready for anything.

On June 3, 1915, the mass arrests of Christians began: among them were the Armenian Catholic archbishop, Blessed Ignatius Maloyan, and his priests. Then, on June 5, they came for Father Leonard, who was savagely tortured while repeatedly refusing the offers to spare his life if he converted to Islam. During these days of captivity, the prison had become a cathedral of prayers, confessions and mass. On 10 June 1915, Fr Leonard was taken away with 416 companions in the first convoy to Diarbekir. He had the honor of leading the procession. During this trip, the bishop obtained permission from the police commissioner to stop for one last prayer: he

consecrated the bread and had communion distributed. After once again refusing to convert to Islam, they were all massacred and their bodies were thrown into wells and caves.

Meanwhile, Fr. Thomas, together with another brother, was expelled from Diarbekir on December 22, 1914, and found refuge in Urfa. After Easter, a plan began to emerge to exterminate the Christians of Urfa: soldiers, dignitaries and priests of all Christian denominations were massacred. There was an Armenian Catholic priest seeking refuge, which he was only able to find with the Capuchins. The guardian and Father Thomas showed heroic charity by giving him refuge. On September 24, 1916, the Armenian priest was arrested and the monastery searched: among the objects found was a small gun, - so it was claimed - in Father Thomas's room. This weapon would serve as evidence before the court martial for his death sentence. During this time, he asked Jesus in the Host every day to take away the sufferings of the Armenian priest, and to give them to him.

Three months later, he was arrested with his companions and sent, in the mid-winter rain, to appear at Marach. He was brutalized, maltreated, left without food and thrown into festering prisons, to such a degree that, exhausted and powerless, he contracted typhus. When his companions arrived in Marach, they were not permitted to send him a doctor until three days after the request – and alas, it was too late! Thanks to the intervention of a Dutch Franciscan, the last sacraments were administered to him. He died on January 18, 1917, consoling the brothers who were weeping for him: “I am not afraid of death. Why should I be afraid? Isn't it our merciful Father who must judge us? Why do we suffer now, if not for his love?”

A VERY TIMELY MESSAGE

When exploring new ideas for responding to the challenges that our Order must face, we sometimes feel the need to come up with fresh approaches. It may often be a lack of courage that hinders us from pursuing such paths. The lives of Blessed Thomas and Leonard remind me particularly of three current themes in our Capuchin Order: formation, mission and absolute trust in God.

The decrease in the number of friars has prompted us, in many parts of the world, to consider collaborating in formation and sometimes forming a single novitiate. Faced with the same vocation crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, our Order founded the Apostolic Institute of the East, which had its own regulations, language, formators, formation program, etc. The candidates came from different countries (Germany, Armenia, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Turkey, etc.) and were destined to go where there was need. This all can be understood by simply reading through the annual reports in the volumes of our *Analecta*. What was the result? Not only did it bring many brothers to the Order, but it also yielded the fruits of holiness: Blessed Thomas and Leonard and their companion, the Servant of God, Bishop Cyril Zohrabian. They were all proud and happy to belong to this institute.

In my letter to the Order at the beginning of the new sexennium (*Let Us Give Thanks to the Lord!*), I invited «the whole Order to reflect anew on the missionary dimension of our life» (n. 54). This year, the Lord gives us two blessed who were not only martyrs but were also young missionaries. Among the conditions for the admission of young people to the Apostolic Institute of the East, in addition to signs of a religious vocation, was

also the desire to become a missionary. From the very first moment, the missionary aim of the Institute was placed before the young men who entered. Before being accepted into the novitiate, they had to declare their willingness to devote themselves to the foreign missions. Then, the day before their temporary profession, and also before their perpetual profession, they would sign a document in which they would pledge to dedicate themselves to the missions without any pretense of returning to their country. These young people had the courage to leave everything without looking back: families, friends, cultural environment, country, language ... They gave up everything and generously consecrated themselves with their whole heart to the missions, without expecting anything in return and without any claims. All this was clear to them from the very beginning of their journey of discernment and formation. «I am very busy, but also very happy», wrote Leonard to his general minister at the beginning of his life as a missionary. The next day, Thomas wrote: «Divine Mercy has deigned to give us the Mission of Mesopotamia for our own happiness.» There is a joy that shines through in all their letters: the joy of being missionaries despite all the difficulties and persecutions. Blessed Thomas and Leonard urge us to rethink, from the time of initial contact, how to present the Capuchin vocation to our young candidates.

The context in which Blessed Thomas and Leonard lived was no better than ours: the genocide of Christians in Lebanon (1860), in Turkey (1894-1896; 1909; 1915-1916), the Italo-Turkish War for Libya (1911-1912), the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and finally the First World War. During those difficult times, Thomas wrote to his general minister: “We need only to put ourselves in the hands of our merciful God”; “We do not know what is being prepared

for us and what Divine Providence has in store for us. His holy will be done»; “We have faith in Him who said: take courage, I have conquered the world”. Leonard’s attitude was much the same: «May God end this war, the cause of many evils, as soon as possible»; «We are entirely in God’s hands. May his holy will be done.» Their example spurs us to put our absolute trust in God as we endure the difficulties we face in our times, as well as the decreased vocations to our Order in so many areas around the world. Our faith in God is gauged by the extent that we trust in him. As we, in turn, are now plagued with so many difficulties and wars, we repeat with Fr. Thomas: “I have full confidence that the good Lord will not abandon us”.

My dear brothers, the two blessed, Thomas and Leonard, who died *in odium fidei* (in hatred of the faith), during the worst genocide of the twentieth century, are a wonderful example of charity and fraternal self-denial. Amid this persecution, which claimed two million victims, the first sacrificed himself for

an Armenian priest; the second, for a brother. May Blessed Thomas and Blessed Leonard obtain for all the brothers of the Order the missionary zeal that animated them and the heroic charity that pushed them to the total gift of themselves. While continuing to pray for Ukraine, my thoughts go out above all to my brothers in the General Custody of the Middle East, who are present in two countries, Lebanon and Syria, tried by wars as well as economic, political and social crises. May the examples of Blessed Thomas and Blessed Leonard, along with that of Blessed Abouna Yacoub, help these brothers to place themselves entirely in the hands of the Lord; and as Fr. Leonard once wrote, “May God put an end to this state of affairs».

FRATERNALLY,

BR. ROBERTO GENUIN
GENERAL MINISTER OFMCAAP

ROME, 24 APRIL 2022

DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY
FEAST OF ST. FEDELIS OF SIGMARINGEN
PROTOMARTYR FOR THE PROPAGATION
OF THE FAITH