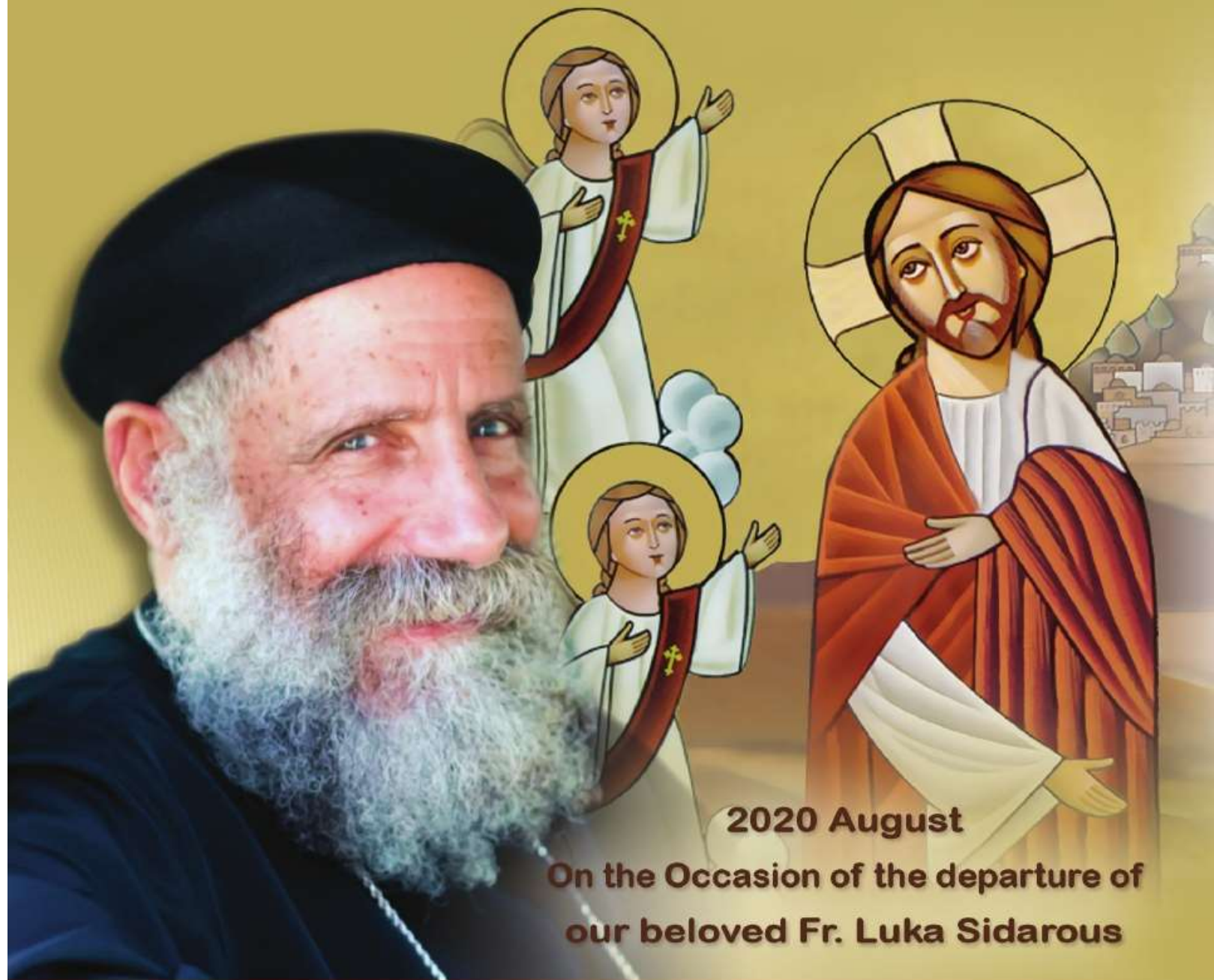


*The Saintly Priest
His Departure From The World*

According to St. Jacob of Serugh



2020 August

**On the Occasion of the departure of
our beloved Fr. Luka Sidarous**

**Prepared by
Fr. Tadros Yacoub Malaty**

The Saintly Priest
& His Departure from The World

According to

St. Jacob of Serugh

Along with some short comments by the early Church
Fathers

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St. George – Sporting, Alexandria

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit
One God Amen.

The aim of this book is not to merely publish to St. Jacob of Serugh's writings but to reveal his way of thinking and his practical spiritual experience. Many scholars like, Fr. Paul Bedian. Dr. Behnam Sony, Fr. Paul Feghaly and St. Meletius Barnaba, have already published his writings in Arabic. Thus, I have used their publications as the main source for the saints' quotations as well as the manuscripts in our Coptic monasteries and old churches.

Translated By:

Monica Mitri
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1

The Story of Two Homilies on the Departure of a Saintly Priest

What you hold in your hands are two homilies written or orally preached by St. Jacob of Serugh on the occasion of the departure of one of his beloved priests (or bishop). The first is included among St. Jacob's other homilies, while the other was published by Fr. Paul Bedjan alongside the saint's other homilies but without a number, signifying his doubts about whether this homily was rightly written by St. Jacob. or his spiritual father and teacher, St. Ephrem the Syrian. For this reason, Fr. Behnam Sony did not translate it or publish it within his own critical edition of St. Jacob's homilies. It was only Fr. Paul Feghaly who translated it from Syriac and published it.

St. Jacob of Serugh and St. Ephrem were both skilled at writing homilies ("memre") and poems in Syriac, and their spirit and thought shine are quite similar. Thus, whether the second homily referenced here belongs to one or the other of them, it certainly harmonizes quite well with the first one, and this is why I included both of them together when speaking of "*The Priest and His Departure From the World.*"

You will notice the following in both homilies:

1- The author was not concerned with narrating events or with the history of the departed priest. **He did not even mention the priest's name,** his clerical rank- be he a priest or a bishop – and neither was he concerned with this specific person or his personal relationship with him., His aim is to reveal the priest's role – indeed the role of all church members– in the life of the struggling church, on her way to heaven where she will meet her Bridegroom face to face.

2- The priest - who enjoys numerous gifts and talents intended for the work of God's kingdom - should always bear in mind the time when his soul will depart his body and his flesh will repose among the dead in the grave. And if our Lord Christ Himself, the Lord of Glory whose flesh was incorruptible, shared in our death, was buried in the tomb and was counted among the dead in order to bestow on humans the glory of His resurrection, then certainly **we should not be troubled when a priest dies and is buried.**

3- The death of the priest **can never extinguish his love for his people**, the Lord's flock, and he will never cease to pray for them as he stands in the presence of the Lord Himself.

4- The death of the saintly priest is **only an addition to the church's heavenly treasure**, for it attracts the hearts of the faithful to heaven, their eternal home.

5- In presenting more than one dialogue between the departed priest, his brothers the priests, and his beloved congregation, he reveals the deep feeling of **true unity between the strugglers and the departed in Christ Jesus**.

6- Both homilies help us to discover our **true heavenly citizenship in the heavenly Christ**. Therefore, we should not be troubled if the world ignores or resists us, for we are sojourners and foreigners, walking on an enjoyable journey amid tribulations. We are passing over the sea of this world towards the heavenly, glorious harbor.

7- The author urges us to have a living faith, for he stresses the importance of spiritual conduct that befits the children of God, as members of the body of Christ. For this reason, they do not stop struggling with the help of the abundance of God's grace.

2

The Saintly Priest & His Departure

In this homily (“*memro*”), St. Jacob bids farewell to a saintly priest, who is on his way to the grave, and whose soul has departed to Paradise to share in the heavenly life with all the saints, even as his flesh turns to dust.

In Homily 70, “On the Consolation of the Priests”, the tender feelings of St. Jacob of Serugh are revealed to us when he learns of the departure of one of the priests (or bishops). They are overflowing with profound spirituality and joyful Biblical thinking, expressed in his unique poetical style.

This homily reveals St. Jacob’s view on the priesthood. Similar to many church Fathers, his aim is not to flaunt the authority of the priesthood, but to reveal the priest’s important role and the Lord’s gift to him, so that the priest can live in strength, hope, confidence, and humility, not attributing accomplishments to himself, and not becoming lazy or slothful either.

Help me to raise my voice and sing with joyful hymns!

The homily starts with a prayer presented by the heavenly High-Priest, our Lord Jesus, the Lord of sacrifices and the sacrifice at the same time. He is both the divine Priest and the sacrifice that all generations longed for, and He is the One who accepts the prayers and offerings.

Our Saviour is the Lord of Lords who makes us an icon for Himself. He is the King of Kings who transforms His faithful to spiritual kings and a heavenly High-Priest who offers priests to God, His Father, as St. John the Theologian says, “has made us kings and priests to His God and Father.” (Revelations 1:6) Christ chose for Himself apostles and disciples to carry out their mystical and pastoral duties, and with and in whom He works for the salvation of all humanity, through His precious blood and the work of the Holy Spirit according to the Father’s pleasure.

As he introduces his homily on the death of the priests, he asks the heavenly High Priest to grant him strength. As we realize the importance of the priest’s role, we too praise and thank God with the praise of love, in the fear of God and we glorify Him for the richness of His gifts and the work of His great grace.

❖ O You the great among the priests, the High-Priest, and the Lord of sacrifices, help me to speak of the gift of Your divinity.

O You the life-giver, the revealer of mysteries to all simple people, reveal to me Your mysteries, that I may reveal it to the needy. Words,

mind and tongue, they are all from You. So, help me raise my voice and sing with melodious hymns.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Who can be clothed in fire, but arises and serves the flame?

In his homily, the saint thinks of the priest as someone who fashions a sculpture or draws an icon of God through his care and love for humanity. The saint aims, in all his writings, to present God for everyone, so they could experience God's love and care, and he feels his unworthiness to speak of God's incomprehensible mysteries.

In its essence, priesthood is an extension of the apostolic evangelical, mystical and liturgical work through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, whom Christ sent from the Father.

God grants priests the gift of the Holy Spirit, who deifies them as the saint says, meaning that they partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Thus, all that they present is accomplished through the work of the Holy Trinity.

It is befitting for the priest to possess a fiery heart, working with the Holy Spirit who descended upon the Church on the day of Pentecost in the likeness of fiery tongues. The fiery Spirit, that works in the priests of God, sanctifies them from the world's impurities, and transforms them to be like the seraphim – the heavenly, fiery chariot that carries God!

St. John Chrysostom tells us of his view of priesthood:

“For the priestly office is indeed discharged on earth, but it ranks among heavenly ordinances. It is the ministry of angels. Wherefore the consecrated priest ought to be as pure as if he were standing in the heavens themselves in the midst of those powers. Priesthood was highly esteemed in the Old Testament, but if anyone should examine the things which belong to the New Testament, he will find that they are meaningless. Here, the Lord offers Himself as a sacrifice. Oh! What a marvel! What love of God to man! He who sits on high with the Father is at that hour held in the hands of all and gives Himself to those who are willing to embrace and grasp Him (through the Eucharist).

Picture Elijah and the vast multitude standing around him, and the sacrifice laid upon the altar of stones, and all the rest of the people hushed into a deep silence while the prophet alone offers up prayer: then the sudden rush of fire from Heaven upon the sacrifice. There stands the priest, not bringing down fire from Heaven, but the Holy Spirit: and he makes prolonged supplication, not

that some flame sent down from on high may consume the offerings, but that grace descending on the sacrifice may thereby enlighten the souls of all, and render them more refulgent than silver purified by fire.”¹

*“They have received an authority which **God has not given to angels or archangels**. For it has not been said to them, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:18) They who rule on earth have indeed authority to bind, but only the body: whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of his servants [as long as it agrees with the will of God].”²*

“What purity befits this, who calls on to the descent of the Holy Spirit on the holy sacrifice, as the angles hover around the altar!”³

❖ I will attempt to speak of priesthood as best I can, so enlighten my mind that I may fashion the statue of Your glory.

Love compels me to reveal its news to all who will listen, about the mystery and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The mystery is great and glorious, and You, O Lord, know its mysteries and glories.

Wonder overtook me when I meditated on the service of the apostles and the saying of the Lord to the twelve.

If I do not go away, the Helper will not come (Jn 16:7), and when He comes, He shall teach you all the truth (Jn 14:26).

He breathed on them (Jn 20:22), filled them with the Holy Spirit, and they all become holy and full of mysteries.

Who can be a priest in the mysteries of the Son and serve the glorious things like God?

Who is pure and without hypocrisy in front of God, that He may be clothed in fire, and arise and serve the flame?

Who is this earthly being, inflamed by Your divinity, and able to touch that incomprehensible flame?

Who has been purified from the world’s impurities and placed in the high and glorious rank of priest?

¹*Sacerdotio*, Book 3: 4 ff. *De* ¹

² *De Sacerdotio*, Book, 5: 10.

³*Ibid* 5: 6.

If one were even a fiery seraphim, he could not be a priest who offers the perfect sacrifices of the apostles.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Departure of the Sainly Priest

Beholding the priest who had died, St. Jacob stands in wonder! He had received from God the rank of priesthood, the highest rank of all, and had become akin to an angel from heaven, and now his spirit has departed his flesh, and the body has been placed in a grave, where it will return to the dust.

- ❖ This [priesthood] is greater than the earthly and heavenly [ones]. It is more righteous, more glorious, and purer than all creatures.

This what the heavenly ones yearned to see and yet Death became his enemy, slandered and hurled him into the ground.

Death threw him [the priest] in the pit and the hateful grave, although he had been higher than all heavenly [ones].

And that which was greater than all heavenly ranks

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Death of Moses the Prophet & The Death of the Sainly Priest

St. Jacob of Serugh wonders: why doesn't God honor priests' in the New Testament like He honored Moses when He buried him?

He replies, it is because our Lord Jesus Christ made himself equal to the sinners when He died and was buried in a tomb. Therefore, although He grants priests numerous blessings, yet He does not differentiate them from the rest of people in their death.

It was said on the death of Moses: "*And He buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor; but no one knows his grave to this day.*" (Deuteronomy 34:6). The Lord buried him, perhaps angels dug his grave and buried him. Moses was not buried with his fathers, but in the land of Moab, in an unknown place.

Riparius, a priest of Aquitaine wrote to St. Jerome concerning Vigilantius who resisted honouring saints' relics and their feasts' vigils, as he considered that relics to be a source of defilement. St. Jerome replied by giving several examples from both the Old and New Testaments about honouring the bodies of those departed in the Lord. In his letter he wrote [I am asking Vigilantius:

Are the relics of St. Peter and St. Paul unclean? Was the body of Moses unclean, of which it was mentioned – according to the correct Hebrew text – that the Lord Himself buried?]

❖ Let us ask the chosen Moses and the steward of the divine mysteries, and he will disclose the unknown to us.

He is the prophet, priest and teacher of the future mysteries, and God hid his grave from all people (Deuteronomy 34:6).

He is the one full of beauty, and yet despised and casted away. He is a priest who serves all the mysteries, and yet he dies like all humans.

This holy one was taken up the mountain in secret and was hid by the divine mystery.

Why doesn't the same thing happen to the priest, who dies in the same fashion as all mankind?

The mystery of the Apostle's service is greater than Aaron's priesthood, the servant of the ancient matters.

St. Paul who the Hebrew and Pharisee, prefers to join the service of the Apostles.

Although worthy of dying more honorably than all, what can one say about his priesthood? For God made him similar in his death to sinners.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Weakness of the body by death, does not abolish the privileges of the living faith and the blessings of Priesthood

All men of God, in both the Old and New Testament, choose to walk the narrow path and they feel that death is not far from them. Rather, it accompanies them throughout the way, and they do not fear it. They sing with King David: "*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.*" (Psalm 116:15). Nothing in the world is equivalent in value to a saint's soul in the eyes of God, because the death of the saints is precious and honoured in the eyes of the Lord.

St. Cyprian says: [*Let no one think of death, but of immortality; nor of temporary punishment, but of eternal glory; since it is written, "precious is the death of His saints."*¹]

¹ Epistle 80: 1.

St. Athanasius the Apostolic says: [*Those who died for the world and resented its matters, received an honourable death as, “it is precious in the sight of the Lord, the death of His saints”*¹]

Aponius says, [*The aroma of paradise spreads by the perfume of the death of the martyrs. It is a wonderful amazing fragrance, that offers great praise to the Lord, King of heaven, and all the heavenly multitudes, as the prophet says, “precious in the sight of the Lord, the death of His saints” (Psalm 116:15)*]².

When we see a priest bringing the fragrance of Christ in his life and service, we are engulfed by the fragrance of the heavenly High Priest, and we glorify the work of His Holy Spirit. And so, we participate in St. Jacob of Serugh’s feelings when he glorified the Lord in the death of this priest in his homily. St. Jacob emphasizes that:

- This departed priest, was chosen by God ever since he was in his mother’s womb.
- Although the priest’s submitted to death, the Holy Spirit has granted him to be clothed in the power of spirit and righteousness.
- He rested in silence on his deathbed, he who used to invoke the Holy spirit to sanctify the offerings.
- He used to pray for the descent of the Holy Spirit and be heard from the heavenly Holy of Holies, and how his body is being carried to the grave
- He used to entreat the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of repentant sinner, and his body is now being put away.
- He used to carry the keys of the open heavens, and now death has crept up to him
- He used to present the wisdom of the life-giving God, and how he is hosted by the dead among the tombs.

¹ *Paschal letters, 7: 3.*

² *Exhortation of Song of Songs 7: 49 (written on 405-415 AD).*

- He was the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and now he is buried in the ground,
- He was in the presence of God all the days of his sojourn on earth, and now he has become companion to the dead
- He used to fill the church with his heart-felt praises, and now he is incapable of speech,
- He used to invite believers to the joy of the Spirit, and now they weep and mourn over him,

St. Jacob of Serugh, looks at the body of the priest, and remembers his good deeds from before his departure, so he remarks:

- ❖ He who is now reposed is chosen by God ever since he was in his mother's womb¹ (Jeremiah 1:5) for His service.
He is the one who called upon the Holy Spirit to descend upon offerings.

He is the one exalted by the raising of his hands, as he serves the Son's Body on the banquet of life

He is the one who prayed for the Holy Spirit to descend and was heard from the Holy of Holies.

He is the one who gave (through the Lord), the forgiveness of sins for people.

He is the one who carried the keys to heaven (Mathew 16:19)

He is the one whose words bound and loosened, heaven and earth.

He is the one who offered the wisdom of life to people.

He is the one who was the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. (John 14:32)

He is the one whose love and prayers the Lord heard.

He is the one, the mediator of Divinity, who interpreted and taught the hidden mysteries of God.

He is the one who accepted humiliation, slander and face spitting, for the hope of faith in the Son of God.

He is the one who believed in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three hypostasis and one essence.

¹ St. John Chrysostom says, "The priest has been entrusted with the whole world and has become a father to all."

He is the one who served the holies and the offerings.
He is the one who participated in the church of the firstborn with his glories.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Sainly Priest Meets Him, Who Sits on the Throne

After St. Jacob of Serugh's wonder at the death of the priest who was given the talents to work in the field of God, he ascends with the priest to meet with Him who sits on the throne.

After he had presented the picture of the dead body going down the grave, he presents the spirit ascending quickly to meet her Creator and Saviour.

He stands in amazement and wonder, seeing in front of him a dead body laid in the grave, and the spirit soaring to heaven, going to stand in the presence of the King of Kings and the heavenly High-Priest. He sees the priest among other priests and members of the congregation who had departed before him, joining a joyful procession, presenting their living faith as profitable talents to the Lord on a heavenly glorious banquet.

The priest did not lose what he enjoyed during his service of the Lord but became more glorious and magnificent. He appears as a lord, a king or a chief. His time on earth has ended and now he enters what is beyond time and generations. He receives along side all faithful believers, grandeur above all that of the rulers and kings of this world.

St. Macarius envisions the faithful believers, passing over from the world, saying: *[Even so those Christians, to whom it has been granted to gain in this life the heavenly raiment, have that raiment dwelling in their souls ; and when it is foreordained of God that this creation should be dissolved, and that heaven and earth should pass away, then the heavenly raiment, which here and now had clothed and glorified their souls, and which they had possessed in their hearts, that same shall assuredly enrobe with glory their naked bodies also, which rise from the tombs, the bodies which awake in that day, even with the invisible heavenly gift and raiment which Christians receive even now¹.]*

❖ What does St. Jacob say when he talks about priesthood? And how does he draw a picture of its glories?

I was taken by amazement and wonder by this rule: the priest dies,

¹ Homily 32:2

and the servant of the holies is laid in a grave.

Silence is a must, when mysteries are hidden from people, and the Lord of all creation, commands the Act of God.

He has life, death and glory. All authorities and presidency are in His hands. He commands the dead and spreads His authority on the living, He has the height, the depth, and authority over them.

This is a hidden mystery, higher than all creatures, we see it in the mirror of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord then sits facing the priests, who sanctified Him, and give them the kingdom of heaven.

There the Lord of Holies transfigures, and the banquet of life, together with all the ranks of the high priests, priests and all the congregation.

There faith is required of each of them, and each one presents his faith on the banquet table.

It is a crown fit for kings, priests and everyone, and they lay in His Hands, the good deeds and faith (James 2:14).

Our priest accepted the gifts of the holies from God (Mathew 25:14-30), he traded, completed and presented his silver on the table. The time has come for the priest to depart to his Creator, and so death arrived only in obedience to God.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Christ Welcomes You, My Father the Priest

When Jacob was in tribulation, fleeing from his brother Esau, without father, mother or any other support, he saw a ladder, set up on the earth and its top reached to heaven, and the Lord stood above it, as if He was welcoming him. (Genesis 28:12). Now, St. Jacob of Serugh sees the Lord waiting at the gates of heaven, for the saintly priest who traded with the talents, He gave him. He assures him how, even though he has departed earth and its altar, he will now serve on the right hand of his Lord Jesus Christ and be abundantly rewarded.

❖ Depart in peace, O beloved and virtuous priest, for the heavenly banquet of life has been prepared for you.

Depart, O saintly one, you have served the mysteries of the house of God, and the Lord awaits you at the gate of heaven. (Luke 11:9)

Depart in peace and joy to the bridal chamber of light, for there the holy altar which you served awaits you.

Depart, arise and accept that right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9)

presented to you in the spiritual holies full of light.

Depart, stand and serve on the right hand of Jesus, your Lord, for He will remember you when He distributes His holy gifts.

Depart in peace and reassurance, O you full of wisdom, for the Son of God will award you according to your deeds.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Stretch Out Your Hands and Bless us all!

As Christ joyfully awaits his faithful priest and gives him to serve Him in Paradise, this urges the priest to serve all humanity even more than before. Indeed, the priest's departure from the world to heaven never extinguishes his love for people, nor does it diminish his longing for the salvation of the world, but rather motivates him to pray even more earnestly for them.

In his response to Vigilantius, who denied the importance of praying for the departed, **St. Jerome**, basing his response on the verse, "A living dog is better than a dead lion" (Ecclesiastes 9:4), says, "*If the Apostles and martyrs, while still in the body, can pray for others, when they ought still to be anxious for themselves, how much more must they do so when once they have won their crowns, overcome, and triumphed? A single man, Moses, wins pardon from God for six hundred thousand armed men; and in Acts 7:59-60, Stephen, the follower of his Lord and the first Christian martyr, entreats pardon for his persecutors; and when once they have entered on their life with Christ, shall they have less power than before? The Apostle Paul (Acts 27:37) says that two hundred and seventy-six souls were given to him in the ship; and when, after his dissolution, he has begun to be with Christ, must he shut his mouth, and be unable to say a word for those who throughout the whole world have believed in his Gospel? Shall Vigilantius the living dog be better than Paul the dead lion?... The truth is that the saints are not called dead but are said to be asleep.*"

The saint asks him to pray and bless the elderly, the youth, the children, and even the infants who are still in their mothers' wombs, as well to bless the priests.

He entreats him, as he is in heaven, to ask his congregation to remember him in their prayers, for their mutual relationship cannot be broken by death.

- ❖ O blessed one, stretch out your hands and bless us all, for they are sorrowing over your departure.

Stretch out your hands, O blessed priest! Bless your children, for they share in your prayers and service.

Stand on the pulpit, and let us hear your beautiful words, for your

sheep long to listen to your words and learn from you.

Raise your voice as you always do, and bless them, for they look to you to receive all blessings.

O good shepherd, call your sheep to your spring and let them drink, for it is dear to them.

Give peace to your church, the mother of your sheep. Give peace to the holy altar which you served.

Bless these children of Baptism, whom you sealed with the ineffaceable seal of the house of God.

Bless the elderly, who have reached their old age in dignity. Sanctify the youth, whom you raised in wisdom.

And the children, youth, and infants to whom the church has given birth, may your prayers keep them from tribulation.

With your prayers, bless the congregation that honours you, that the peace of the Lord may surround them from now and forever.

Open your blessed lips and give peace to all righteous priests and beloved brethren, the children of your service.

Exhort them, warn them, and confirm them that they may remain steadfast in the Orthodox faith, as they walk in this world.

Plead with them to remember you in liturgies, that your memorial may remain alive in them as they serve the Holies to the Lord.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Sainly Priest Bids Farewell to His Fellow Priests:

St. Jacob of Serugh envisages the feelings of the saintly priest towards his fellow priests as he departs from this world. In humility, he asks them not to forget him in their prayers and exhorts them not to become idle in their service to God's people.

- ❖ Abide in peace, my fellow priests, and remember me in your prayers in the holy house of God.

When you offer incense to the Lord in the Holy of Holies, remember my poor soul that the Lord may comfort me on the day of His transfiguration.

My brethren, do not forget the fellowship of love, that our brotherhood may continue in the everlasting kingdom.

My brethren, remember that the Son of God became our brother, and when He departed, He left peace to all His servants.

St. Jacob of Serugh

A Joint Farewell between the Priest, his brothers the priests, and the Congregation:

St. Jacob concludes his homily with a joint farewell. The congregation asks the priest to depart, that he may enjoy being in the fellowship of all the saints and apostles who departed to Paradise beforehand. And the priest, in turn, exhorts them to live in the Lord's peace and prays that non-believers may join them in the faith. Finally, he asks the Lord of glory to have pity on His church in His second coming and his glorious transfiguration on the clouds.

- ❖ O blessed priest, give us peace and depart in peace, and may the Lord count you as one of His apostles.

May the peace of the Lord be with you, O you who abided in Him all your life, and may He keep all the snares of the enemy away from you.

May the peace of the church and the peace of your congregation be abundant and may her children rejoice in the faith.

O Son of God, You who are the Way full of Life, have pity on Your church on the day of Your transfiguration. Glory be to you!

St. Jacob of Serugh

3

A Farewell Speech

This homily was published by Fr. Paul Bedjan with other homilies by St. Jacob of Serugh, but Fr. Paul did not attribute it to him.

This homily complements the ideas introduced in the first homily. Here the author, be it St Ephrem or St. Jacob of Serugh, imagines a priest on his way to death who converses in the spirit of true love with continuous repentance to the last breath, asking for the prayers of his beloved ones in joyful hope

The Last Moments:

What does a priest think about during his last moments on Earth?

1. A saintly priest often speaks of eternal life with longing; he yearns for that eternal inheritance and heavenly glory because he awaits that which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived. For that he considers himself going to a hidden dwelling.
2. His spirit longs for the swift release to that dwelling.
3. Even in his last moments, regardless of the state he is in, he wishes to be honest in his pastoral ministry and worship and never ceases to apply his talents.

❖ My brethren, I see that my days are numbered, and my time has fled,
And those who will guide me have come like tireless hunters.
I know now that I am leaving, and my time to leave is here.
I go from my dwelling to another, hidden one.

I have considered expressing this covenant of pain with words, and
sending forth befitting words and aid with my pen,
From the heritage of God, that which men inherit from God
And from what I had, from the talents I was given, to give and divide
to each person what is theirs.
Before the Giver judges me on the talents given into my hands, I will
have traded all I can to help souls.
The time of harvest has come, and thus I am carried like grapes.

Pray for me that I may not be like the Tares:

When the pure priest feels his time as a sojourner is coming to an end, his zeal to use the talents that God has given him, for the salvation of every soul, multiplies. This pushes him all the more to attain his own salvation.

The wise priest fears that he has earned honour only because of his priesthood, being called “wheat”, but upon his death, will be found to be a “tare” (Matthew 13).

Here, he is counted as “good grapes” watered by the dew of vainglory, but in its depth, it is “wild grapes.” (Isaiah 5: 1-7).

He fears that the heavenly Bridegroom might come and finds him like the foolish virgins, with no oil in his lamp (Matt. 3:25), or that the heavenly wedding comes, and he finds himself wearing filthy clothes, while many of his congregation wear glimmering clothes of light (Matt. 22: 1-14).

The time of harvest might come, and he finds himself carrying no holy fruit.

It was not only St. Jacob of Serugh who stood alone as priest and then bishop on watchful guard over his salvation, but many Church Fathers who received the priesthood also followed the same path. Thus, it comes as no surprise that St. John Chrysostom the archbishop says, “It is of great wonder if a bishop receives salvation!” He does not mean to judge other bishops, but to guard his own salvation from sloth and licentiousness. St. John of Dalyatha (John Saba/The Elder) says that he fears his priestly garments might be giving him praise that endangers his humility.

- ❖ I say to my beloved, and to all who know me, pray from me as though I am in pain!
I fear that I may be a tare, when I am seen as wheat,
That I may be a wild cluster of grapes, after I have been watered as good grapes,
That my lamp may not burn out, for it lacks oil
That I may not be clothed in filthy garments among a group engulfed in light (Matthew 22: 11-14).
Here I am leaving this temporal place without return,
I will not see you anymore, as Job said in his tribulation (Job 2:8),
Everyone goes down to the place of the dead shall never return to his house. (Job 7:10).
Nor shall his place know him anymore, and from his slumber there is no awakening.

The heavens and the earth pass away, then the dead awakens from their silent bed of the abyss, where their bodies lie down and rest.

The departed merchant wonders when he will return to his home and the farmer that plants awaits the time of harvest.

I know, my brethren, that until the second coming, the spirit does not return to its body, neither is it decorated with its organs.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Do not Weep for Me but Pray for Me!

In the conversation that St. Jacob of Serugh imagines between the pure, wise, and loving priest and his congregation, he offers the priest and the congregation, some practical advice:

1. Without ignoring the pain of loss, the saint, in place of the departed priest, asks his congregation to not be consumed in these pains and to guard their salvation and their faithfulness in their struggle. As St. Paul says, *“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”* (1 Thess. 4:13). St. Basil the Great writes to the Church of Parnassos (north of Cappadocia) reassuring them that the apostle did not cancel our emotions towards the departed with his words but warned us of giving in to the sadness. He says, “I do not mean that we should be insensible to the loss we have suffered, but that we should not succumb to our sorrow¹.”
2. It is befitting for the believer, whether they may be a priest or a member of the congregation, that as long as we are in the body that we admit our weaknesses so that we may repent daily in front of God.
3. Do not wish for a long life in this world.

We should not be surprised when St. Augustine calls children who have departed in their young age “blessed”, for they were not burdened by sin which we struggle with in our daily lives.

St. John Chrysostom, in a speech addressing someone who had lost his son, says, “Whenever you seek your son, search for him where the King is and

¹ Ep 62

where the angels are. Do not seek him in the tomb on earth so that you are not found crawling on the ground when he is in the highest.”

Also, St. Cyprian of Carthage says, “When Enoch pleased God, he departed... *“And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.”* (Genesis 5:24) Therefore, if one pleases God, they become worthy of departure from the plague of tribulations of this world. The Holy Spirit also teaches us, through Solomon, that those who please God are taken early so that they are not blemished by their stay in the world with its plague, saying, *“There was once a man pleasing to God and loved by Him, And while living among sinners he was taken up. He was caught up lest evil change his understanding or deceit deceive his soul...”* (Wisdom 4:10-11).

4. What consumes the mind of the priest in his last moments is that he lived and continues to live his last breath as a disciple to his fathers, learning from them everyday, that he may grow in everything according to the will of God. St. Ambrose says that the bishop needs to learn everyday like everyone else and that there is no teacher who does not need to learn other than God.

 5. Along with his need for the prayers of the priests and congregation because of his weaknesses, he is careful and watchful that he does not mix Orthodox teachings with incorrect ones, nor confuse the wheat with the tares, nor wrong the Holy Trinity by word or deed. He invites the whole church in its faith, worship, deeds and emotions to hold fast to the Holy Trinity, responsive to the divine work in them.

 6. St. Jacob of Serugh then concludes with the invitation for all to not forget him in their prayers after his departure so the Lord Christ would forgive his sins and that there would no mention of them in the Second Coming.
- ❖ Do not weep for my departure, for I am saved of my weaknesses.
Great is the grace that the sinner enjoys, that he weeps over the days of his life that his losses (sins) may not increase, and nor does he indulge in the earthly winnings.
How great is the hour of death that separates brothers from each other, a loved one from his beloved, and a father from his sons,
A shepherd from his congregation, and disciples from their teacher!

I was a disciple prostrating to all my fathers and mothers.
Pray for me... for I am lacking in everything but have not confused my shortcomings with the truth,
Neither did I plant the tares in the faith, nor did I put the defiled in the ministry of Christ the King.

I did not doubt the work of the Holy Trinity,
Neither did I think blasphemously of His salvific work,
I did not ask the Father without faith, nor did I blaspheme the Son in my mind,
Nor did my empty thoughts despair of the Holy Spirit.
For I, with great fear, am careful of questioning them,
And I worship befittingly the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I ask you, my brethren, and all who are in the God who separated me,
I diligently ask you to remember me in your prayers,
Pray and ask of our God to have mercy upon me when He comes,
And to forgive me, with His compassion, for the sins that I have committed.

St. Jacob of Serugh

The Church bids farewell to her departed priest!

The church's priests and congregation bid farewell to the saintly priest. Even though they feel the grief of loss, they see an unseen procession that earnestly awaits him to welcome him. They see him coming to join them, and he becomes a member in the praising chorus in heaven.

The church bids him farewell, for even though he will be separated from her in the flesh, he will join the victorious church in heaven and the heavenly chorus.

As his people behold his feet which used to enter God's house, they feel the grief of losing him, but joy fills their hearts when they see him rejoicing with the spiritual hosts in heaven.

It would seem that his departure is a loss, but in reality, it is an addition to the church's heavenly treasure. His prayers and supplications spring from his love towards them. They can never be extinguished by death and will become a fortress that surrounds them, protecting them from evil and from the snares

of the devil.

Finally, they glorify the Holy Trinity at all times, for at the right time they too will be raised at the right hand of the Lord on the day of His coming. They look to the Saviour who stretches out His hands, longing to grant them the heavenly inheritance through His mercy. Although He is the judge, He does not judge them for they are in continual repentance.

❖ Our brother, depart. Do not grieve because death has separated you from us.

For the Lord who took you from us will make you dwell with the righteous in the light.

Your brothers who have already fallen asleep behold you in their procession.

They await you in their ranks, that you may join them and praise along with them.

Your mouth that was silenced in your service in our midst, sings praises and is not still.

Your praising hymns mixes with the spiritual service.

The tunes of your vocal praise that is gone from our ranks is now among the heavenly orchestra.

Here it is, mingled with the fiery congregation

Your feet that have stopped going to your Lord's house, who has separated us from you

Here they are, dancing joyfully in the eternal home

The day you were separated from us made us both joyful and mournful. We mourn because of our separation but rejoice because you are with the spiritual ones.

In the paradise of light, you are enjoying in the eternal kingdom.

Here you are mingling with the saints, in a place beyond all desperation

When we realized you are not with us, we clothed ourselves in pain and mourning

But when we thought of you in heaven, we greatly rejoiced

We all offer prayer to God, Lord of us all, that you may enter into the
place of perfume
That you may be a weapon and a fortress to keep us from evil day and
night,
Preparing us for a good end and for the angel of peace,
Granting us, through your prayers, forgiveness of sins and iniquities,
Raising us on His right hand on the day of His coming,
Rescuing us from the fire prepared for us for our sins,
That we may not be judged, for we confess that we are sinners.

May His mercy be upon the readers (of this homily) and the listeners,
the alive and dead
May the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be exalted at
all times.
Amen and Amen.

St. Jacob of Serugh

Contents

1 The Story of Two Homilies on the Departure of a Saintly Priest.....	4
You will notice the following in both homilies:	4
2 The Saintly Priest & His Departure.....	6
Help me to raise my voice and sing with joyful hymns!.....	6
Who can be clothed in fire, but arises and serves the flame?.....	7
The Departure of the Saintly Priest	9
The Death of Moses the Prophet & The Death of the Saintly Priest.....	9
Weakness of the body by death, does not abolish the privileges of the living faith and the blessings of Priesthood	10
The Saintly Priest Meets Him, Who Sits on the Throne	13
Christ Welcomes You, My Father the Priest.....	14
Stretch Out Your Hands and Bless us all!	15
The Saintly Priest Bids Farewell to His Fellow Priests:	16
A Joint Farewell between the Priest, his brothers the priests, and the Congregation:.....	17
3 A Farewell Speech.....	18
The Last Moments:.....	18
Pray for me that I may not be like the Tares:	19
Do not Weep for Me but Pray for Me!	20

*The Saintry Priest
His Departure
From The World*



The church's priests and congregation bid farewell to
the saintly priest

Even though they feel the grief of loss, they see an unseen procession that earnestly awaits him to welcome him. They see him coming to join them, and he becomes a member in the praising chorus in heaven.

We should not be troubled when a priest dies and is buried. The death of the priest can never extinguish his love for his people, the Lord's flock, and he will never cease to pray for them as he stands in the presence of the Lord Himself. The death of the saintly priest is only an addition to the church's heavenly treasure, for it attracts the hearts of the faithful to heaven, their eternal home.

It would seem that his departure is a loss, but in reality, it is an addition to the church's heavenly treasure. His prayers and supplications spring from his love towards them. They can never be extinguished by death and will become a fortress that surrounds them, protecting them from evil and from the snares of the devil.