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Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Mar. 23, 2010 NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Rafqa Pietra Choboq Ar-Rayès, [1] (1832-1914), a Lebanese Maronite nun.

Rafqa was born in a village near Bikfaya, Lebanon. Her mother died when she was seven, and four years later, her father sent her to Damascus to work as a servant.

She returned home at the age of fifteen. She was unwilling to marry the relatives her stepmother and her aunt selected for her, and in 1859 she entered the Mariamette convent in Bikfaya. She taught in the order's schools until 1871, when "a crisis in the congregation" caused her to transfer to the Lebanese Maronite Order.

"She spent 26 years in the monastery of St. Simon. She was a role model to the other nuns in her observation of the rules and her devotion to prayer and silence. Her life was full of sacrifice and austerity.

"On the first Sunday of October 1885, she entered the monastery's church and began to pray asking Jesus to permit her to experience some of the sufferings He endured during His Passion. Her prayer was immediately granted: Unbearable pain began in her head and moved to her eyes."

Her suffering continued. In 1897, when the order decided to build the monastery of St. Joseph al Dahr, Rafqa was one of the six nuns sent there.

"In 1899, she lost the sight in her left eye and became paralyzed. . . . She spent the last seven years of her life lying on the bed, only on the right side of her body."

"On the 23rd of March 1914, supplied with the Holy Sacrament, she called upon Jesus, the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, then she rested in peace after a life of prayer, service and years of unbearable pain."

She was canonized in 2001 [2] by Pope John Paul II.

Please click Prayers and Cantatas [1] at the left of the screen. Number 5 on "Folkloric Songs: Songs for Saint Rafqa" is particularly beautiful. Clicking on Mass at the left leads to additional music.

Click here [3] and here [4] for images of St. Rafqa.

For anyone unfamiliar with the Maronite Catholic Church, click here [5] for a list of Maronite churches in U.S. cities and other links to Maronite sites.

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Links:
[1] http://www.strafqa.org/index1.htm

[2] http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20010610_rafqa-choboq_it.html
[3] http://www.santiebeati.it/immagini/?mode=album&album=46725&dispsize=Original
[4] http://www.rafca.org/saint/rafca/photos/
[5] http://www.olov.info/links.htm#churchesusa