

January 2006

# Maronite Monks of Adoration

Most Holy Trinity Monastery ❖ Petersham MA 01366-9725



## The Sealed Letter

Mary appeared to us as a sealed letter  
in which were hidden the mysteries of the Son and his depth.

She gave her body as a clean sheet;  
the Word wrote his essence on it, corporeally.

The Son is the Word and she is the letter, as we said,  
by which forgiveness was sent forth to the whole world.

She was the letter, not because she was sealed after she was  
inscribed,  
but the Divinity sealed her and then wrote on her.

They sealed her and inscribed her; she was also read although  
not being opened,  
because the Father revealed in her, mysteries more sublime  
than usual.

The Word entered and dwelt in her within the guarded seals,  
tokens of virginity in her body but conception in her womb  
which is full of wonder.

With her the Father sent us tidings full of good things,  
and through her, forgiveness to all condemned for their  
bonds of sin.



She was a letter in which the secret of the Father was written  
which by her flesh He revealed to the world that the world  
might be renewed by it.

O letter - it was not a case of it being written and then sealed;  
but it was sealed first and only then written - a great wonder!

For while it was sealed, it was mystically written;  
although not opened it was read clearly.

She became a letter, and what was written on her is the Word;  
when it was read, the earth was enlightened by its tidings.

-Jacob of Serug\*



**O**ur Maronite Syriac tradition is filled with many beautiful hymns and prayers. The use of poetic imagery is very common. One such image is "the sealed letter" which is spoken of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Let us reflect on why Mary would be called "The Sealed Letter"?

First of all, we can ask what is a letter - the ordinary and everyday thing we know from experience? A letter is a material thing (for us, a piece of paper; for the ancients, maybe papyrus or some other material) on which are written words to convey a message from one person to another.

What about a *sealed* letter? Well, in our modern experience we are accustomed to sealing the letter which we have written in an envelope. On the one hand, this protects the letter from damage on its travels through the mail system. On the other hand, it ensures privacy since one must first break open the seal before reading the letter. If we receive our letter already opened, the mail system is going to hear about it!

There is a further aspect though of a sealed letter which is maybe not so well known to us because of our modern method of sealing envelopes. In ancient times the seal was also a means of identification and authorization.

People sealed a letter which they had written with their own personal seal - i.e. some sort of mark uniquely their own - impressed in wax (or other impressionable substance) used to seal the letter. Thus, for example, letters sealed with the king's own seal carried with it the full authority of the king. The message conveyed in the letter was the king's own word.

Now then, what about the Blessed Virgin Mary as "the sealed letter"? We find in the Maronite treasury of ancient Syriac texts for the Divine Office the following strophe from a supplication hymn:

Mary appeared to us like a sealed letter  
In which were hidden the mysteries of the Son  
and His depths.  
She was a letter not written and then sealed,  
But which the Divinity sealed and then wrote.

Mary the Mother of God is a letter from God to mankind - on her was written the Word of God, the Son of God. She is a *sealed* letter in the mystery of her virginity. Unlike sealed letters of common experience which are first written and then sealed, the Blessed Virgin Mary is first sealed, then written. Her virginity is God's own seal indicating that the Holy Thing written within her is God's own Word, His very Son. This is to fulfill what Isaiah prophesied long ago: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel" (Is. 7:14). She is also a sealed letter for her contents are a great mystery - the very depths of the Son of God - not openly published, as it were, for all to read and understand.

Still we can examine the richness of this symbol of Mary by looking at "the sealed letter" as found in the Old Testament of Holy Scripture. For instance, in 1 Kings ch. 21 we find the story of Naboth who refused (as was his right by Jewish law) to sell his patrimonial inheritance to King Ahab. The wicked Queen Jezebel wrote a letter sealed with the king's own seal arranging by means of false charges the condemnation and death of Naboth. In Esther (chapters 3 & 13) the wicked Haman has the slaughter of the Jewish people in the kingdom of Ahasuerus decreed by means of letters sealed with the

king's own seal. Later, however (chapters 8 & 16), through the intervention of Queen Esther, letters sealed with the king's own seal are sent out rescinding the order of genocide and elevating the status of the Jewish people in the kingdom.

What light does this shed on Mary as "The Sealed Letter"? Mary is the sealed letter bearing by divine authority the word - not of condemnation and death - but of life and salvation for all people, for she is the Mother of the Redeemer, Jesus.

We have considered Mary the Mother of God under one of the many titles given her in our Maronite tradition - namely Mary, the Sealed Letter. This presentation in no way claims to be exhaustive - indeed it would be foolish for anyone even to try. The poetic image helps us to approach the mystery. We can never overtake it. ✠



\*Jacob of Serug, a 6th century Bishop, who composed many theological hymns in Syriac, is the source of many of our Maronite liturgical hymns.

Front cover quotations from "On the Mother of God", Mary Hansbury, translator, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1998.