

# Maronite Monks of Adoration

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## Another Approach

A young Maronite from Lebanon once said to me, “You know, the way to bring the Muslims to Christ is through the Blessed Mother.” He went on to tell me from his own experience in Lebanon that Muslims love Mary. They visit her shrines with devotion and show their respect to her whenever a procession in her honor passes by them. Through the years I have often reflected on this and wondered, is this the hope of Islam?

Not too long ago, another Maronite told me the story of an elderly Muslim man who set out on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Beschouat in Lebanon. However, since the way was crowded and the journey too difficult, the man could not continue but had to turn back. Nonetheless, he prayed to the Blessed Mary right there on the road and asked of her a special favor. When he reached home, he found that his request had been granted.

Again, while reading a little about the history of Islam, I was amazed to learn that Mohammed had a daughter named Fatima. I wondered whether there was a connection between this Fatima and the one about which Catholics know so well (the place in Portugal where Our Lady appeared to three shepherd children in 1917)?

Then recently, I came across one of Bishop Fulton Sheen’s books, *The World’s First Love: Mary, Mother of God* (reprinted by Ignatius Press in 1996). Chapter 17 is entitled, “Mary and the Moslems.” This work not only confirmed my thinking that Mary is the hope of Islam, but also

gave me more to ponder in the great mystery of God’s Providence.

Writing in 1952, Bishop Sheen had the foresight to say: “At the present time, the hatred of the Moslem countries against the West is becoming a hatred against Christianity itself. Although the statesmen have not yet taken it into account, there is still grave danger that the temporal power of Islam may return and, with it, the menace that it may shake off a West that has ceased to be Christian and affirm itself as a great anti-Christian world power.” (p. 201)

However, he goes on to say quite confidently: “It is our firm belief that the fears some entertain concerning the Moslems are not to be realized, but that Islam, instead, will eventually be converted to Christianity—and in a way that even some of our missionaries never suspect. It is our belief that this will happen not through the direct teaching of Christianity but through a summoning of the Moslems to a veneration of the Mother of God.” (p. 201) He then gives reasons for this great hope of his.

First of all, he mentions that the Koran teaches not only reverence for Mary but also many of the truths of Mary. The Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth are taught in the Koran. The Annunciation, Visitation, and Nativity are present. Angels surround her and proclaim, “Oh, Mary, God has chosen you and purified you, and elected you above all the women of the earth.” (p. 202)



Mary, then, is given a high place of honor in the Islamic religion. Bishop Sheen notes that even Fatima, the daughter of Mohammed, does not enjoy the honor bestowed on Mary. He quotes Fatima herself as saying, "I surpass all the women, except Mary," and Mohammed as saying after the death of Fatima, "Thou shalt be the most blessed of all the women in Paradise, after Mary." (p. 203)

Mention of Mohammed's daughter, Fatima, leads Bishop Sheen to present the second reason for his great hope. Why, he asks, did the Blessed Mother appear in a little, out-of-the-way place named Fatima, such that henceforth she would be called "Our Lady of Fatima"? He says: "Since nothing ever happens out of Heaven except with a finesse of all details, I believe that the Blessed Virgin chose to be known as 'Our Lady of Fatima' as a pledge and a sign of hope to the Moslem people and as an assurance that they, who show her so much respect, will one day accept her Divine Son, too." (p. 203)

He then goes on to tell the story of how Fatima, Portugal, received its name. When the last Muslim leader was leaving Portugal after the reconquest, his daughter, who was named Fatima after the daughter of Mohammed, decided to stay behind since she was in love with a young Catholic man. She herself became Catholic, and her new husband renamed his town "Fatima" after his much beloved wife. Thus, we can see a connection between the Fatima of the Marian apparitions and Islam. (p. 203)

Likewise, Bishop Sheen testifies that Muslims in Africa, India, and elsewhere (like Nepal) have given an "enthusiastic reception" to the pilgrim statue of Our Lady of Fatima as it traveled through their regions. He notes that even conversions to Christianity have occurred in Mozambique thanks to the presence of the pilgrim statue of Our Lady of Fatima. (p. 203, see also p. 190)

Summing up, Bishop Sheen says: "Missionaries in the future will, more and more, see that their apostolate among the Moslems will be successful in the measure that they preach Our Lady of Fatima. Mary is the advent of Christ, bringing Christ to the people before Christ Himself is born. In any apologetic endeavor, it is always best to start with that which people already accept. Because the Moslems have a devotion to Mary, our missionaries should be satisfied merely to expand and develop that devotion, with the full realization that Our Blessed Lady will carry the Moslems the rest of the way to her Divine Son. She is forever a "traitor" in the sense that she will not accept any devotion for herself, but will always bring anyone who is devoted to her to her Divine Son. As those who lose devotion to her lose belief in the Divinity of Christ, so those who intensify devotion to her gradually acquire that belief." (p. 204)

After noting that missionaries in Africa have already succeeded through their great works of charity in making friends with Muslims, he proposes: "It now remains to use another approach, namely, that of taking the forty-first chapter of the Koran and showing them that it was taken out of the Gospel of Luke, that Mary could not be, even in their own eyes, the most blessed of all the women of Heaven if she had not also borne one Who was the Savior of the World. If Judith and Esther of the Old Testament were prefigures of Mary, then it may very well be that Fatima herself [daughter of Mohammed] was a postfigure of Mary! The Moslems should be prepared to acknowledge that, if Fatima must give way in honor to the Blessed Mother, it is because she is different from all the other mothers of the world and that without Christ she would be nothing." (p. 204)

Is Bishop Sheen being too simplistic, too idealistic, too unrealistic? On the one hand, his grand rhetorical style may very well be glossing over some very serious difficulties which a friend of mine, who knows Muslim belief, tradition, and

life rather well, pointed out to me. Hence, due caution and further consideration are in order here. On the other hand, Bishop Sheen does bring us hope by proposing a positive way of approaching Islam and by reminding us emphatically of the power of divine grace, especially as coming from the hand of Mary, the Mother of God and the Mother of all the Living.

Today, the Muslims are more of an immediate concern to us than they were in 1952. What is the answer? Ultimately, it is spiritual. We are a materially minded people who can conceive only of material answers for our problems, but we need another approach. We need to look to Heaven for help; something we are not really good at doing. Moreover, we need to look to Mary.

The primary message of Our Lady of Fatima is personal conversion: the call to turn away from our sins and to turn back to God. Yet, also Our Holy Mother asked us to pray and to sacrifice for the conversion of others. Fatima is not past history; it is history in the making. Our Lady of Fatima is still at work and I believe, and firmly hope, with Bishop Fulton Sheen that she still has a few more surprises in store for us. It is up to us to cooperate with her as her loving children. Often it only takes a little nudge on our part to set someone off in the right direction and from there grace can take them the rest of the way.

*Our Lady of Fatima, come to our assistance!*

