

Imagine a rural cemetery in a rather secluded area surrounded by nothing but fields and with no kind of artificial lighting. Suppose you were going past this cemetery one night and you saw a bright light hovering over one of the gravesites. Furthermore, suppose you came back not only the next night but for 45 nights in a row and you saw the same light, always in the same place, always over the same gravesite. What would you think? What would you make of it? Surely you would eventually wonder about the person buried there. Well in fact, this very thing did happen in the late 1800's in Lebanon and people did wonder about the person buried there so...they dug him up. It was Fr Charbel (sometimes spelled with an 'S') Makhoul, who was a priest-monk and later a priest-hermit. Fr Charbel had been buried without even a coffin and after his burial it rained enough to flood the cemetery, which should've facilitated decomposition. Yet when he was exhumed his body was fully intact and even limber. His body also exuded a mixture of blood and sweat and many healings occurred when people touched it. Today Fr Charbel is known, of course, as *Saint* Charbel Makhoul whose memorial was a week ago last Friday (July 24).

These miraculous events, though, are not meant to just amaze us (even though they do) or even to honor St Charbel. They are signs, meant to draw our attention to something our Lord wants to tell us through His son and servant, St Charbel. The first might be simply the lesson of his life. St Charbel was fully and deeply committed to God; he put God first and foremost. When we are kids, we think about what we want to be when we grow up. Do we think: the first and most important thing is to be always united with Jesus? It's necessary to teach kids that the first thing is to become a saint. I hope that these will not just be words but will be put into practice. Very few are called to the exact same life that St Charbel was called to, but we all have that same basic vocation that he exemplified: put God first, become sons or daughters in our Father's Kingdom; everything else can be sacrificed if need be except that; it's the most important thing.

It is so essential to truly raise kids in the faith, instilling in them that God is first, that it is worthwhile to review how to bring this about. It is, first of all, to be taught in both word and deed; our Lord Himself taught, as the Church says, with both word and deed. Let's start with "deeds" – things you do. Making Mass on Sundays and Holy Days non-negotiable is primary. If you are travelling or going on vacation over a weekend, you say: we're not leaving until we figure out how/when/where we're going to get Mass. Forget about what everybody else does or is doing – you're trying to get yourselves and your family to Heaven. If others scoff, all that much better – your sons and daughters will learn to happily endure such things for the Lord. Let your habit be: keeping holy the Lord's day (Sunday), with only occasional exceptions. While getting to Mass is an indispensable part of this, so is withdrawing from other activities and reserving Sunday for rest and added time for prayer and meditation. Putting the Lord first means doing some extra things for Him as well, just as you would for a family member. Get to the Stations of the Cross on Fridays during Lent; try to make it to a weekday Mass once in a while. Maybe most of all, stop by the church, *with your kids* when they're old enough, to pay a little visit to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. They will remember that for the rest of their life. Pray before meals, including when you go out for meals. Maybe try to have a family Rosary at least one night a week. Older kids should remember on their own to take a few moments of silence in the morning and in the evening to raise their minds to the Lord. Speak about the faith at times at home, including moral topics. Before they leave home, kids should know, for example, that living together outside of marriage is not ok and it's not ok with mom & dad either. Have some good Catholic books lying around the house – books for younger kids (picture bibles, picture book of saints, for example) and books for older kids (maybe lives and writings of the saints or even some philosophy books). Put a crucifix in each room of your house and make sure there is some other sacred art as well – a few pictures and/or statues. Make sure your kids are learning the faith objectively, don't just rely on somebody else to teach them; the Church has a responsibility to help with this but parents are the first educators (in the faith) of their children. Do you think you will regret doing this? Absolutely not. You will be thankful to the good and almighty God forever that He gave you the grace to do these things.

So this is the first thing brought out by the life of St Charbel – a great example of making God first, something we have to think about and choose to do. There is more, however. Undoubtedly our Lord wants to draw

attention to St Charbel's devotional life as well. There were 2 "things" that Fr Charbel was especially devoted to: our Holy Mother and the Holy Eucharist / the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Increased Eucharistic devotion is something that our Lord has been exhorting in His Church for at least several centuries now. He who has ears ought to hear. We've mentioned visits to the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass. How about how we receive Holy Communion and how we behave in the church. Is the church really treated as a sacred place? How about trying to maintain a reverent silence in the presence of our Lord. This is part of our worship of God. As these "small" acts of worship fade, so does appreciation of the Holy Eucharist. Such a house is built on sand. Devotion to our Holy Mother also seems to be something that our Lord is insisting on, as evidenced by the numerous apparitions of Mary over the last 2 centuries. Think seriously about that weekly family Rosary.

Fr Charbel was also granted tremendous insight and wisdom. This was recognized when he was still living in community as a monk; his superior did not want to allow him to leave and become a hermit because he wanted him there to answer difficult questions. Wisdom like that of St Charbel is not something that just happens, it's not just "natural," it's something that is granted by God. True wisdom, not worldly wisdom but *true* wisdom, is one of the greatest gifts you can impart to others, especially children and grandchildren. Would you not like to be a source of such wisdom for others? It flows out real virtue and deep, sincere prayer.

Fr Makhlouf's wisdom went well beyond difficult problems at hand, though. St Charbel had a great love of mankind and was given deep insights into modern times. The miraculous things that God wrought after St Charbel's death are undoubtedly meant to draw attention to his writings as well, which recorded some of what he understood. We might first recall, though, the words of another saint – Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope St John Paul II – who said the following on a visit to the U.S.: "We are now standing in the face of the greatest historical confrontation humanity has gone through... We are now facing the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-Church, of the Gospel versus the anti-Gospel... Through your prayers and mine, it is possible to alleviate this tribulation, but it is no longer possible to avert it." Now here is a quote from St Charbel: "The war of the evil one against the Lord is his war against the family, and the war of the Evil One against the family is the core of his war against the Lord. Because the family is the image of God, from the beginning of the creation of this universe, the evil one is focusing on destroying the family, the foundation of God's plan." This is very similar to something Sr Lucia of Fatima said in a letter to Cardinal Caffarra: "Father, a time will come when the decisive battle between the kingdom of Christ and Satan will be over marriage and the family." Isn't the Lord trying to tell us something through His saints? In fact, he's ringing the bell very loudly. He who has ears ought to hear.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*