

Memorial of St. Ephrem, Deacon and Doctor of the Church
Homily of Bishop John Barres
St. Agnes Cathedral
June 9, 2021

Today we celebrate the Memorial of St. Ephrem, a fourth century Deacon and Doctor of the Church. St. Ephrem is known as the “Harp of the Holy Spirit” and teaches us in his life and wide range of theological and mystical writings to follow the notes of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in our own lives.

St. Ephrem’s life is a beautiful commentary on St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

St. Ephrem’s mysticism, missionary spirit and heroic diaconal charity continue to speak to us and inspire us many centuries later.

For instance, in his beautiful encyclical on the Eucharist entitled *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), Pope St. John Paul II quotes the 4th century St. Ephrem to rekindle Eucharistic amazement in the 21st century. St. Ephrem writes: “He called the bread his living body and he filled it with himself and his Spirit...He who eats it with faith, eats Fire and Spirit...Take and eat this, all of you, and eat with it the Holy Spirit. For it is truly my body and whoever eats it will have eternal life.” (17)

In his November 28, 2007 Audience on St. Ephrem, Pope Benedict XVI skillfully summarizes St. Ephrem’s life and ecclesial mission as a fourth century Doctor of the Church:

“St Ephrem the Syrian was born into a Christian family in Nisibis in about 306 A.D. He was Christianity's most important Syriac-speaking representative and uniquely succeeded in reconciling the vocations of theologian and poet. He was educated and grew up beside James, Bishop of Nisibis (303-338), and with him founded the theological school in his city. He was ordained a deacon and was intensely active in local Christian community life until 363, the year when Nisibis fell into Persian hands. Ephrem then emigrated to Edessa, where he continued his activity as a preacher. He died in this city in 373, a victim of the disease he contracted while caring for those infected with the plague. It is not known for certain whether he was

a monk, but we can be sure in any case that he remained a deacon throughout his life and embraced virginity and poverty. Thus, the common and fundamental Christian identity appears in the specificity of his own cultural expression: faith, hope - the hope which makes it possible to live poor and chaste in this world, placing every expectation in the Lord - and lastly, charity, to the point of giving his life through nursing those sick with the plague.

The figure of Ephrem is still absolutely timely for the life of the various Christian Churches. We discover him in the first place as a theologian who reflects poetically, on the basis of Holy Scripture, on the mystery of man's redemption brought about by Christ, the Word of God incarnate. His is a theological reflection expressed in images and symbols taken from nature, daily life and the Bible. Ephrem gives his poetry and liturgical hymns a didactic and catechetical character: they are theological hymns yet at the same time suitable for recitation or liturgical song. On the occasion of liturgical feasts, Ephrem made use of these hymns to spread Church doctrine. Time has proven them to be an extremely effective catechetical instrument for the Christian community...

Ephrem, honored by Christian tradition with the title 'Harp of the Holy Spirit', remained a deacon of the Church throughout his life. It was a crucial and emblematic decision: he was a deacon, a servant, in his liturgical ministry, and more radically, in his love for Christ, whose praises he sang in an unparalleled way, and also in his love for his brethren, whom he introduced with rare skill to the knowledge of divine Revelation."