

Pastoral Letter n°2

from Bishop Marc

A large, weathered Celtic cross stands prominently in the foreground. The cross is made of dark stone and features intricate carvings, including a central circular motif and decorative patterns on its arms. Behind the cross is a stone building with several arched windows, each containing a grid of panes. The building's masonry is composed of various shades of brown and tan stones. The overall scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

"If the center is stable,
*the building will
withstand all storms "*

PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP MARC

Publication of *Éditions Hol Levenez*



CELTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

Holy Presence Monastery

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Book cover: Celtic Cross of St John in front of Iona Abbey

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*« Be the solid core of a wheel around
which everything must turn...
and so whatever may happen in the periphery,
if the center is stable,
the building will withstand all storms. »*
(Saint Mael of Holy Presence)

Beloved brothers and sisters,

The restoration of the Celtic Orthodox Church potentially took place in Damascus in 1866. It will therefore celebrate its 168th anniversary in this year 2024, on June 15. It seems essential to me to recall the beginnings of the history of the revival of our Church. We will see that we are still in the prophetic line of Bishop Jules Ferrette who was the instrument of God for the restoration of the Celtic Orthodox Church.

Bishop Thomas-Marie Ludgen, a Belgian bishop of our Church, who was once the bishop of Saint Tugdual when he was a priest, wrote a brief summary of the history of the restoration of the Celtic Orthodox Church in a small brochure⁽¹⁾ of which here are some excerpts that I will indicate between quotation marks.

“Towards the middle of the last century⁽²⁾ within the Syriac Orthodox Church, Bishop Julius of Emesa, whose official title was Peter the Humble, was responsible for the external affairs of the Patriarchate of Antioch. He had been named “universal metropolitan” or “mafrian”. This prelate had conceived the idea of a movement for the reunion of Christianity, centered on the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and this project received the approval of the patriarch, His Beatitude Mohoran Ignatius-James II. Despite various attempts, this project

was doomed to failure. Peter the Humble is better known in history as Ignatius-Peter IV of Antioch, because it was subsequently under this name that he ascended the seat of the Patriarchate of Antioch.”

“On June 2, 1866, Peter the Humble consecrated a French Dominican priest, Jules Ferrette under the name of Mar Jules to whom was assigned the see of Iona in Great Britain with a view to the restoration of the ancient Celtic Church.”

“Father Ferrette had, for a long time, devoted himself to the ideal of the union of the Churches; but, hampered by Rome at a time when the ecumenism of the Vatican was far from its current stage, he had placed itself under the jurisdiction of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, or Syrian Patriarchate. He was therefore named delegate of the patriarchate and sent to Western Europe to carry out his beautiful projects there.

As far as Western Europe and Britain in particular were concerned, the plan was to restore the ancient Celtic Church under its own patriarchate(3), in communion with but independent of Antioch. In a letter dated August 18, 1866 addressed to the general secretary of the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity, the Bishop of Iona wrote: *I am looking for men with experience in the ministry, to help me and examine with me the means of once again offering to so many disorganized Western Christian communities valid sacraments and an indisputable apostolic succession, so that their bishops, archbishops and patriarchs can one day, on an equal footing, sit with their brothers of the Eastern and Latin Church at the ecumenical council which will pronounce the end of the schism. They will not be asked to subscribe to any faith other than that which the Holy Spirit teaches us in the scriptures, for which the martyrs died, and which the ecumenical councils have sanctioned. I will never ask them to hate or despise the Mother*

Church by which they have been prepared for the service of the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Western Orthodox Church.”

“The text of this letter was published in the Anglican periodical the Church Monitor on September 15, 1866 (p.109). Later, on April 28, 1922, (p. 445), the Church Times, heir to the aforementioned periodical, published another magnificent article on the person, mission and work of Bishop Jules Ferrette: *This prelate, who received the grace of the priesthood of a Roman cardinal and the gift of the episcopate of an ecumenical metropolitan of the holy Eastern Church, was appointed bishop of an island famous from the ecclesiastical point of view, where the light of the Gospel shone one day with particular brilliance. It is part of Bishop Ferrette's intentions, we learn, to activate the great enterprise of promoting Intercommunion between the East and the West. Thus a work will be attempted which should have been accomplished long ago.*”

“Around 1870, Bishop Ferrette made the acquaintance of a learned Anglican clergyman, the Reverend Richard Williams Morgan, who had long been studying the glorious past of the Celtic Church and dreaming of its restoration. He had written numerous works, two of which were republished again in 1922 and 1923, notably, *The Blessed Paul in Brittany and History of Brittany from the Flood to the Year 700*. This clergyman had brought together a group of people sharing his views.”

“The meeting between the latter and Reverend Morgan was providential; As the conversation continued between Bishop Ferrette and Morgan, it soon became clear that Bishop Ferrette's mission to restore orthodoxy to the West and the pan-Celtic ideal of Morgan and his followers were logically complementary to each other. They therefore entered the path of achievements and in 1874, the mission of Bishop Ferrette found its fulfillment in the re-establishment of the ancient Celtic Church.”

“Bishop Ferrette baptized, confirmed, conditionally ordained Richard Williams Morgan, and with the consent of the Patriarch of Antioch consecrated him bishop and enthroned him under the name of Mar (3) Pelage, as archbishop of Caerleon-upon-Usk (4) thus becoming the first patriarch of the restored autocephalous Church, with jurisdiction over Britain and Western Europe.

It was under the pontificate of Mar Pelage that several Anglican bishops notably Bishop F. G. Lee and J. T. Secombe, who had obtained valid orders in what was called "The order of Corporate reunion" (5), joined the Church with their followers.”

“In 1885, Bishop Leon Chechemian, titular bishop of Malatya in the Uniate Armenian Church, arrived in England. He had been a victim of Turkish persecution and fled to Great Britain where he continued his ministry among the Armenian colony of the United Armenian Catholic Church (6) which eventually separated from Rome on August 15, 1889. Upon his arrival, Bishop Chechemian had made the acquaintance of Mar Pelage and eventually intercommunion was achieved between the ancient Celtic Church and the United Armenian Catholic Church.”

After the death of Mar Pelage, at the age of 75, on August 22, 1889, his successors in the patriarchal seat were:

- ♦ Mar Théophile (Charles Isaac Stenvens) - † 1917.
- ♦ Mar Jacques I (Dr Martin) - † 1919.
- ♦ Mar André (André-Charles-Albert MacLaglen)
who resigned in 1922 for health reasons - † 1930.

Mar André is described as a “Man of inexhaustible charity who successively founded: *The Gordon Memorial Day infant crèche*; *The Bootshine Brigade at Shaftesbury Memorial* for homeless, abandoned, deaf, mute and crippled children, *the Danish Kitchen* for free soup

and finally, *The St. Andrew's Mission*. He had sought out most of the independent bishops and had contacted each, individually, with a view to bringing about union with them and examining the possibility of grouping them all under the Celtic Patriarchate, either on the basis of total membership, or by affiliation. It was a failure. Everyone will prefer to remain king in their little castle, choosing the swarm of small, tiny groups rather than the formation of a strong autocephaly under a canonically constituted patriarchy which had 50 years of history behind it. Eventually he was forced to abandon his efforts due to the approaching ravages of disease.”

- ♦ Mar Jacques II (Herbert-Jacques Monzani-Heard) succeeded him but he also resigned for health reasons in 1945 - † 1947.

In the spirit of Mar André: “Knowing that faith without works is dead, Mar Jacques founded a religious and chivalrous order called the *Order of Saint James*, dedicated to works of charity and piety, and which did excellent work among the poor and needy. He had managed to secure help from restaurateurs, who had agreed to grant substantial discounts to members of the order who wished to pay for the meals of the poor people they sent there.”

“Towards the end of 1929, Mar Jacques became aware that an attempt had already been made to establish the apostolic succession of Bishop Joseph-René Vilatte (7) in Great Britain, through an organization called the *Order of Antioch*, founded in the United States by Bishop Lloyd, primate of the American Catholic Church, who had been consecrated in 1915 by Bishop Villatte, and who succeeded him in 1920.”

“Also in 1930, another rite arising from the apostolic succession of Bishop Villatte was established in England when the African Orthodox Church of this same rite established Bishop Frédéric-Charles-Louis Harrington as primate of the British Orthodox Catholic Church.

He met Mar Jacques in 1938 and the two prelates tried to work together to achieve the unification of their Churches. Meritorious work, but which suffered another failure.”

“The turn of events proved materially disastrous for both James and the Church. The house in Ilford (Essex) occupied by the patriarch was completely destroyed by bombing during German air raids and there was a loss of valuable documents and archives. Mar Jacques then found himself plunged into the tragic material situation implied by the loss of all these possessions. The work of the Church itself found itself cruelly tested; evacuations, deaths, destruction, dispersion of parishes, changes of addresses, etc. caused the permanent loss of many members of the Church.”

“Mar Jacques considered it necessary to bring together in council the different branches of the Celtic Church resulting from the two apostolic successions and thus the council of London was convened, which was held on October 7, 1943. The various Churches decided to assemble again on March 18, 1944, during a Celtic Church synod. Finally, by an act passed on March 23, 1944 at noon, the various Churches present decided to unite with the Celtic Church. It was decided to give it a general name with a more universal scope, that of “Apostolic Catholic Church”, and to have it presided over by the patriarch exercising the functions of Catholicos, head of the Western Catholicate, while the patriarchate would henceforth be attached to the ancient seat of Glastonbury. Mar Jacques resigned as patriarch.”

- ♦ Mar Georgius I (Hugues-Georges de Willmot-Newman) - † 1979 was elected to succeed Mar Jacques.

“This memorable ceremony took place on April 10, 1944, in Saint Andrew's Cathedral in London {...} In continuation of the policy of Catholic reunion of Churches inaugurated by Bishop Ferrette and continued by the first patriarchs of the Celtic Catholic Church, Mar

Georgius strove to achieve new unions and, in 1946, he obtained the support of the Old Catholic community of America.” When he died in 1979, his nephew took over.

- ♦ Mar Seraphim (William Henry Hugo Newman-Norton).

The Church was then called the “Glastonbury Patriarchate”. In 1994, Mar Seraphim left the Glastonbury Patriarchate to enter the Coptic Orthodox Church with its clergy. He was consecrated metropolitan of the British Isles. The former British Eparchy became an English-speaking Coptic diocese under the name British Orthodox Church. This unilateral decision, taken without consulting the synod of bishops, was not followed by the French eparchy. There were then only two eparchies in the patriarchate. That of the United States and Belgium no longer existed.

- ♦ Bishop Mael (Paul de Fournier de Brescia) succeeded him in 1994 - † 2014.

Seeing that the French eparchy had remained faithful to the long history of the Church of its fathers, and because Bishop Mael was much loved, a large part of the British clergy returned under his jurisdiction. Bishop Mael took the title of primate and abandoned the title of Mar which is that of the Syriac Orthodox bishops. It was under his leadership that the Celtic Orthodox Church finally became the Church we know today and he made Holy Presence Monastery the spiritual and missionary center of the entire Church.

In 1977, Bishop Mael brought to the Church the ecclesial and monastic structure that it lacked. In 2002, he restored the rite that the Church had lost since the 9th Century using the discoveries and studies of learned liturgical researchers. Thus, quite naturally the Sainte-Présence monastery, the Sainte-Clotilde of California monastery and the Notre-Dame-du-Signe parish form the center of

the entire Celtic Orthodox Church in the very spirit and form of the Christian communities of the ancient Celtic Church. He died on July 20, 2014, the feast of the Prophet Elijah.

- ♦ Bishop Marc (Jean-Claude-Roger Scheerens), your servant, succeeded him on October 5, 2014 on the solemnity of Saint Francis of Assisi.

As we saw above, Bishop Jules Ferrette, pushed by the Holy Spirit, wanted to restore to the Church of England an authentic apostolic lineage, in order to contribute to the end of the division of the Churches. His ecumenical project was hotly contested but, providentially, he met the Reverend Richard Morgan. The consecration of Mar Pélage in 1874 thus marked the real beginning of the rebirth of our Church.

At that time, the Celtic Orthodox Church was still far from having recovered its rite and its great ascetic and spiritual tradition. God knows that men need time and favorable circumstances that will allow the awakening of a Church that has been asleep for 650 years. The real end of the sovereignty of our Church can be considered to date from the day when the perpetual fire, which burned at the monastery founded by Saint Brigit in Kildare in Ireland, was extinguished in the year 1220. It was a symbol of the presence divine, of the spirit and of the great Celtic tradition which existed since time immemorial. The extinction of this flame marked the break with the ancestral roots of the Celtic Orthodox Church.

Let us remember that our Church is an apostolic foundation of Saint Joseph of Arimathea, disciple of Christ to whom he offered his tomb for his burial. Even today, the site of the great Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset, England, bears witness to this foundation. Another disciple of Christ, Saint Aristobulus also came to Britain to join him in the year 63.

As we saw in Bishop Ludgen's summary, our Church has experienced slow development, with periods of near survival. It had an authentic apostolic lineage, but it lacked three pillars which make up the authenticity and life of a local Church: its rite, its monasticism and a solid ecclesial structure with theological training and a community life guided by a rule of life and prayer.

It was not until 1955, in other words 89 years after the consecration of Jules Ferrette, that a holy hermit like our father Tugdual restored the spirituality of our fathers to the Celtic Church. His numerous meditations forcefully express the Absolute of the Love of God in Christ, in opposition to what he called relativities, in the name of which the Churches nourish their canonical divisions, even if they share the same faith.

Each mission of our Church, in a new country, must be centered on a monastic community and a parish whose influence must unite all the other parishes of the eparchy (9). It is the model of all Christian missions, such as that of the Sainte-Présence monastery and the Notre-Dame-du-Signe parish which have become the center of the entire Celtic Orthodox Church.

In Switzerland, Bishop Nicolas, is dynamically developing his mission on the same model of a monastery and a parish at the center of his eparchy.

In Great Britain and Scotland, such a structure does not yet exist, but the proximity to France makes it possible to initially meet the needs of the eparchy and the establishment of a local clergy. But in any case, the autonomy of this eparchy will only be possible when a monastic and spiritual center is well established there.

In the United States, at Tom's Brook in Virginia, Bishop Paul laid the foundations of a monastic and spiritual center for all of America.

The goal of his mission was to establish a monastery and a parish modeled on the Sainte-Preseance monastery. Bishop Paul was a spiritual father to many people whom he guided and comforted. His influence attracted members of the clergy from various Churches who came to meet him in his monastery. He was keen to develop a local Celtic Orthodox Church, but the American eparchy remained in its embryonic stage in the absence of a well-established ecclesial structure.

The only living parish in his eparchy was that of Tom's Brook, although it remained modest in the number of its faithful. Bishop Paul received people for their spiritual direction. He taught a small group that met regularly around him and the Eucharistic Liturgy. An unfinished chapel was under construction. The center that Bishop Paul wanted was slowly emerging like a seed germinating secretly in the ground.

He did not have time to carry out all his projects, but his work remains alive in the minds of his faithful. His monastery is regularly visited and preserved. His tomb is the object of pilgrimage.

The destiny of Bishop Paul is similar to that of Saint Tugdual. Founder of the Celtic Orthodox Church in France, Saint Tugdual did not have a disciple to succeed him during his lifetime. But he had predicted the revival of his work and this is how Bishop Mael with two other monks took over the mission ten years later. I was one of these two monks. Bishop Paul anticipated that the hermitage of Tom's Brook would follow the same path. We had spoken about it several times and he was convinced that a successor would come and continue his work when the time came.

He knew that building a local church takes a lot of time and energy and that welcoming clergy from other churches was problematic. Their integration into the ethos, liturgical tradition and spiritual unity

of another Church is difficult. There are exceptions, and Bishop Paul was one with those of a few others, who were able to integrate into our Church, but they are infrequent. It is nevertheless easier to incorporate oneself into a strong and powerfully hierarchical ecclesial structure than to join a local Church that is just emerging where everything remains to be done.

It is for this reason that it is essential to clearly discern the will of God in welcoming a new member of the clergy from another Church and, if we receive him, to take the time to good integration in connection with the headquarters of the Celtic Orthodox Church in France.

It is above all the training of the clergy of our communities which will allow the development of our Church. Our clergy in France receive good theological, ecclesial and spiritual training in a community setting. For the faithful as well, we provide regular teachings and organize spiritual retreats. Gradually, we are developing tools for the circulation of information and teachings, in order to maintain a deep link between the different ecclesial communities and the primatial seat.

The history of our Church for 168 years demonstrates that it is difficult to build a Church without having solid foundations. Saint Tugdual and Bishop Mael(10) form the rock on which we can build our Church. They opened a path for us that clearly defines the particularities of the Celtic Orthodox Church. Thanks to its two founders, a long period of uncertainty came to an end, finally offering the possibilities of accomplishing the divine plan entrusted to the humble Celtic Orthodox Church.

I wrote at the beginning of this letter that we were still in the prophetic line of Bishop Jules Ferrette and his successors who wanted to work for the unity of the Church. Successive failures and

the disintegration of painfully constructed alliances are the mark of the past of our Church until Saint Tugdual. However, we must not despise the work of our predecessors and their painful efforts to bring together and unify scattered Churches. The idea was generous, and perhaps it was necessary to go through all this, but it was unrealizable. The indispensable spiritual depth and essential asceticism of a saint Tugdual and a holy primate like Bishop Mael were missing to fulfill this prophecy. It is in the mystery of the Cross, the Tomb of the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit that the internal unity of a Church and of the Churches among themselves will be realized. Seeking alliances without a true life in Christ according to the teaching of our fathers will always be doomed to failure. Wanting to evangelize a world increasingly distanced from divine laws without true and holy love in Christ will not be effective.

The Word of the Lord is clear: *“This is my command: love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than he who lays down his life for those he loves”* (Jn 15:12). By adding *“As I have loved you”* to the biblical precept, He clearly shows the way to follow. How to let go of your life? He speaks of pride which prevents us from giving ourselves to God, in other words: our own will.

Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov († 1867), a Russian monk, said this: “To follow Christ, let us first renounce our reason and our own will. The reason and will of fallen nature are totally damaged by sin; they are entirely incompatible with reason and divine will. Only he who has renounced his own reason will be capable of approaching divine reason; only he who has renounced his own will will be able to accomplish the will of God.”

In his discourse on perfect joy, Saint Francis of Assisi teaches what renunciation of one's own will is: "Above all the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit that Christ grants to his friends, there is that of

conquering oneself, and willingly for the love of Christ to bear sorrows, insults, disgraces and inconveniences; for in all other gifts of God we cannot boast, since they come not from us, but from God.” This is so little understood today, the way of the Beatitudes taught by our Lord Jesus Himself.

The Orthodox Church is still the guardian of the sacred deposit of the spiritual treasure of the faith of our holy fathers, especially in the prayer work of the Hesychast tradition. Because life in Christ is a work of purification, so that *the hidden man of the heart may be revealed* (1Pe 3:4), in other words the person within us made in the image and likeness of God. Orthodox theology without the work of prayer is nothing.

Bishop Mael said:

“Take careful care to keep pure the sacred deposit⁽¹¹⁾ entrusted to you. It is not given to you for yourself alone, but to be poured out in abundance to all those around you and to all who come to you as beggars. If they ask you for bread, give it to them, but above all they will thirst for love. Are you sure you have enough in your hearts to freely distribute it? I do not promise you ease or consideration, but an abundance of inner joy that will be proportional to the gift of yourself. Materially, some days you will have nothing to give, but give anyway. Above all, may your love never dry up. It is the only fountain capable of quenching the thirst of a dying world.”

By way of conclusion, I share with you a divine vision that Bishop Mael received in January 1973, in a prayer:

“I was shown an immense golden Cup in which a Heart of light pulsed and radiated all around in intense rays. Around the Cup, there was humanity in a circle. One in ten people looked at the Pulsating Heart and its rays caused illumination in them. The others turned their backs and minded their own business. They did not

receive the rays and therefore could not radiate in turn. Is one in ten people strong enough to carry the weight of the other nine? If yes, humanity can live, otherwise, it will perish!"

This vision recalls the Holy Grail of the Round Table novels or the Sacred Heart of the Roman Catholic tradition. May the Holy Spirit enlighten us and lead us towards the illumination of the rays of the absolute Love of God of which Jesus is the dispenser.

May the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, strengthen your hearts. May the Most Holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, protect you.

I embrace you in Christ our peace and our joy!

✠ Marc, primate of the Celtic Orthodox Church

NOTES

1. The Celtic Catholic Church known as “Apostolic Catholic” (Patriarchate of Glastonbury) Brief history of its origin and restoration.
2. The 19th century
3. Autocephalous jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church
4. Title of bishops of the Syrian Orthodox Church
5. Wales
- 6.. <https://www.orderofcorporatereunion.org>
7. United Armenian Catholic Church
8. Joseph-René Vilatte was born on January 24, 1854 in Paris and died on July 1, 1929 in Versailles (France). Joseph-René Vilatte was elevated to the episcopate on May 25, 1892 in the Notre-Dame de la Bonne Mort Cathedral in Colombo (Ceylon) by Mar Julius I (Antonio Francis Xavier Alvares), under the authority of a bull of Mar Ignatius Peter IV (127th Patriarch of the Succession of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch) dated December 29, 1891.
9. An eparchy (from the Greek ἐπαρχία / eparchía “province, prefecture”) is a territorial diocese governed by a bishop or eparch of a Church
10. Bishop Mael who will be canonized on the solemnity of Saint Francis of Assisi on October 6, 2024.
11. It is about the Orthodox faith lived in saintliness, in other words, a total gift of self in Christ.

