

## Today's Martyrs

### Bishops Boulos al-Yazigi and Yuhanna Ibrahim

Ecumenism is defined as "Movement toward unity or cooperation among the Christian churches". If this is true then the Syrian Civil War has become a great school of ecumenism.

On April 22, 2013, Bishops Boulos al-Yazigi and Yuhanna Ibrahim were abducted by anti-government insurgents near the city of Aleppo. Their story is an ecumenical act of Christian love.



Boulos al-Yazigi (left) and Yuhanna Ibrahim

Syria has hosted a number of Christian churches that descended from the Church of Antioch, which was founded by Sts. Peter and Paul. There are three Eastern Catholic (non-Latin) rite churches: the Maronite, the Melkite, and the Syriac Catholic churches. There is the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, which is a member of the Eastern Orthodox communion. And there is the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, which is a member of the Oriental Orthodox communion. While the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and many Protestant churches follow the Nicene Creed's definition "true God and true man" of Jesus' nature, the Oriental Orthodox follow a different vision that might be defined as "true God-man". These churches have historically and jealously defended themselves against each other.

There are also Christian churches present in Syria that have descended from other ancient sees. There are Latin-rite Catholics and Protestants descended from the Church of Rome founded by St. Peter, and Assyrians and Chaldean Catholics descended from the Church of Babylon, also founded by St. Peter (and the first of the three he founded). Finally there are Armenians of both Catholic and Oriental Orthodox churches; ancient Armenia bordered Syria and was the first nation to convert to Christianity.

Bishop Yuhanna Ibrahim has been a member of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, making him an Oriental Orthodox bishop. He was in the city of Aleppo and had been working in early April 2013 on the hostage negotiations for the freedom of two abducted priests Fr. Michel Kayyal (a 27 year old Armenian-rite Catholic abducted from a bus on February 9, 2013) and Fr. Isaac Moawad (a Greek Eastern Orthodox). He had paid ransom money to a negotiator but the two priests were not delivered at a meeting on April 19. The next meeting was scheduled for April 22. At the last minute his friend Bishop



Fr. Michel Kayyal

Boulos al-Yazigi asked to come along. Bishop al-Yazigi belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, making him an Eastern Orthodox bishop. He had been away from Syria for several weeks because he had been spending time with his brother John, who had just been elected Patriarch of Antioch for his church, and had just returned to Aleppo the previous day.

They rode in a car driven by Deacon Fathallah Kabud and accompanied by Fouad Eliya, a layman. After passing through a rebel Free Syrian Army checkpoint the car was stopped by eight armed men who did not speak Arabic. Fouad later said he thought the men looked Caucasian and spoke Chechen. Deacon Fathallah was pulled from the car and taken away; he was later found among the small factories near the abduction point, shot dead. Fouad and the bishops protested the abductions, but the Chechens drove off with them. They passed through another FSA checkpoint, where the Chechens displayed grenades and threatened to detonate them if they were not allowed to pass. After driving through Fouad was thrown from the car and the Chechens drove off with the bishops. They were never seen again. There have been reports one or both are still alive, while others report they were both killed by the end of May 2013.

In a footnote to these events, the Latin-rite [Roman] Catholic Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio made a perhaps quixotic attempt to negotiate the release of the two bishops. Using his extensive ties with the Syrian rebels, he entered the town of Raqqa on July 29, 2013 to meet with a new rebel group reportedly associated with their abductors. He too was never seen again. Again, there have been reports that he is still alive, but others report that he was killed two hours after meeting with this group. This group has been renamed as it has grown and is now known as the Islamic State.



Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ

How far should any person go to save another? Just what did Jesus mean, for us today, when He prayed that we His followers be one? Here two bishops from two ancient and differing traditions became friends and worked together to save lives in their own and in other churches, only to disappear and perhaps die together. A priest from a third church then followed them and shared their fate. Perhaps. There have been no reports of the whereabouts of the first two abducted priests either. We may never know this side of heaven what really happened to these five men, but we can be sure that one day we will meet them, hear their testimony, and rejoice together - *together* - in their faithfulness and love.

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