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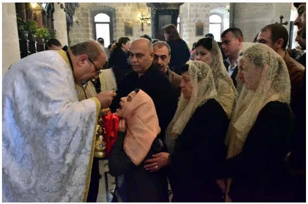
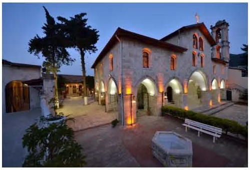
Christian Arab Congregation In Antakya, Turkey

By Edge of Humanity Magazine, February 7, 2017



On Holy Saturday after Daphne Ritual Father Jan is distributing holy communion to the congregation members. The communion has to be given very carefully to the member. If it drops, the priest drinks it himself by licking.

Documentary Photographer Aydin Cetinbostanoglu is the Edge of Humanity Magazine contributor of this social documentary photography. From his project 'Two Stories from Antioch's Christian Arabs'. **To see Aydin's gallery of projects click on any image.**



The Antakya Church was a simple monastery built in 1833 from wood. The church was destroyed by the earthquake of 1872 and burned. The present Church is a very good example of the stone mastery and Byzantine architecture built in place of the burnt Church. Built according to Byzantine order. When reconstructed with the help and influence of the Russian engineers, it took a bit of Russian construction style. The construction of the church was completed towards the 1900s.

Holy Easter Week Events of Christian Arabs, Antakya

Antakya (ancient Antioch) is regarded as the second most important center of the Christian world after Jerusalem and holds an important place in the Christian tradition. The Christian Arab community living in the center of Antakya is estimated to have 1200 members today. All citizens of the Turkish Republic, most members of the community conduct their worship and rituals at the church in Arabic. They also read the Bible in Arabic. After a fifty-day Lent, during which Christians fast or give up certain luxuries, the community festively celebrates Easter. On the last week of Lent, a different ritual is enacted at the Church every day. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the Messiah's arrest, prosecution, and crucifixion are among these. In addition, we find some of the traces of the local culture in these events. The most important one of these is the scattering of laurel leaves (the daphne or bay tree, which is an important plant in the region and has a mythological tale) on the community on Holy Saturday. With this ritual, the bay tree and its leaves are blessed.

Easter begins before the sun rises. With the candles lit with the holy fire brought from Jerusalem, the Easter prayer begins and the celebrations continue in the garden. The sun begins to rise just as the service ends.

On Easter morning at 4:30 AM, Easter candles are lit with the holy fire brought inside a storm lantern from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

Holy Thursday commemorates the arrest and prosecution of Jesus and is enacted with rituals. Dressed in black, the priest walks around the darkened church with a cross he carries on his shoulder. This represents the crucifixion of Jesus. Members of the congregation touch the cross and pray.

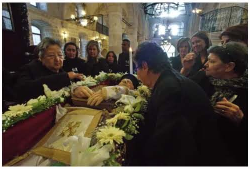
Pano prepared by Meslin during the church adornment in Holy Week.

Paying Respects to Father Sami, Antakya

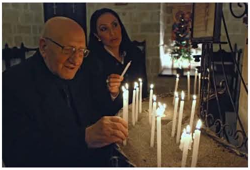
Christian Arabs have been living in Antakya for 2000 years and continue to worship freely. Their native tongue is Arabic and they also worship in Arabic. Between 2005 and 2014, I traveled to the area to observe and photograph the religious services of this community. Over time, I became friends with some of them. Father Sami, the old priest of the church, was one of them. The last time we were together was in 2012, when I visited Antakya for the Easter celebrations. He once went into the church in my arm. Dressed in his ceremonial garb, he sat with the members of the congregation and recited a few prayers from hi seat. "My brain is no longer dominating my body Mr.Aydın" he told me.

Upon hearing of his passing, I found a bus ticket and reached Antakya from Istanbul after a fifteen-hour ride. His body was sent to the morgue of the Church. As a clergyman that served his church for 60 years, he held an instrumental place in the lives of the community members living in Antakya. He married them, baptized them, helped reconcile them.

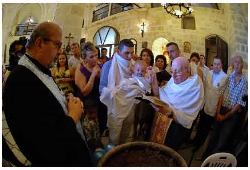
For me, Father Sami was a friend I made through photography. I visited his house every time I traveled to Antakya to talk.



As a friend, I had to fulfill my final duty to him. This also gave me an opportunity to photograph a different ritual. He lead many a ceremony at the alter throughout the years. He baptized or married many belonging to the church of Antakya. I remember him telling me once that he had baptized the majority of the congregation. Now he passes over in their presence. Some women pay their respects to Sami by caressing his hand. It is hard to capture such an emotionally-charged moment. Maybe I had the advantage of being familiar to the congregation, thanks to my years of photographic ceremonies at this very church. A lady who knows me, upon learning that I had come from far away to attend the ceremony, said that she was touched by my presence.

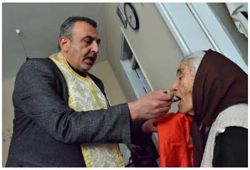


Father Sami Bolos Sabagil
As a clergyman that served his church for 60 years, he held an instrumental place in the lives of the community members living in Antakya.



Father Sami is in a baptism ceremony.

This work was awarded the "Humanity Photo Award" in the category of "Traditional Rites" organized in China by UNESCO and China Folklore Photographic Association in 2013.

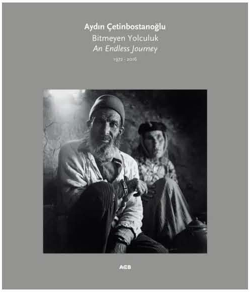


Sometimes members of the congregation become very old and can not go to church for the ceremonies. Father Dimitri visits these people in their homes and gives their holy communion.

The Christian Arab societies in Antakya adopted a modern lifestyle. It is possible to see this in every area of their life. It is difficult to separate them from a European. The names of the ladies are very much the same as the names of the ladies in Europe. Like Mari (Mary) in the middle of the photo. Nebil, Mari and Can are together in the photo at lunch in the Church.

Photos were taken 2009, 2012 and 2014

See also:



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