

Not only was Ephrem an eloquent and powerful teacher, he was also a prolific writer. Although he lacked a formal education, he comprehended with ease the most abstruse problems of philosophy, and his commentaries on the Old Testament books of Moses impressed even the most scholarly men of his time. While his writings spoke to the mind, they were more greatly to be praised for the effect they had on the soul. As St. Gregory of Nyssa writes: "Who would not be influenced with a divine fire, reading his discourse on charity?... Who would not be frightened by hearing his discourse on the Last Judgment, which he has depicted so vividly that nothing can be added to it?" Over 500 genuine hymns survive, of great beauty and insight. His poetry is in two genres: *madrāshe* (hymns) and *memre* (verse homilies). They are written exclusively in Syriac, the Edessene dialect of Aramaic and his writings employ typology and symbolism. Syriac churches still use many of Ephrem's hymns as part of the cycle of worship. However, most of these liturgical hymns are edited and conflated versions of the originals. The most complete, critical text of authentic Ephrem was compiled between 1955 and 1979 by Dom Edmund Beck OSB as part of the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*.

On June 9, 373, Saint Ephrem departed to his heavenly abode. His memory is commemorated in the Syriac Orthodox on the first Saturday of the Great Lent.

### THE LENTEN PRAYER OF SAINT EPHREM

O Lord and Master of my life,  
give me not a spirit of idleness,  
despondency, love of ruling others  
and idle talk;

But rather, a spirit of chastity,  
humility of wisdom, patience and love,  
grant to me Thy slave.

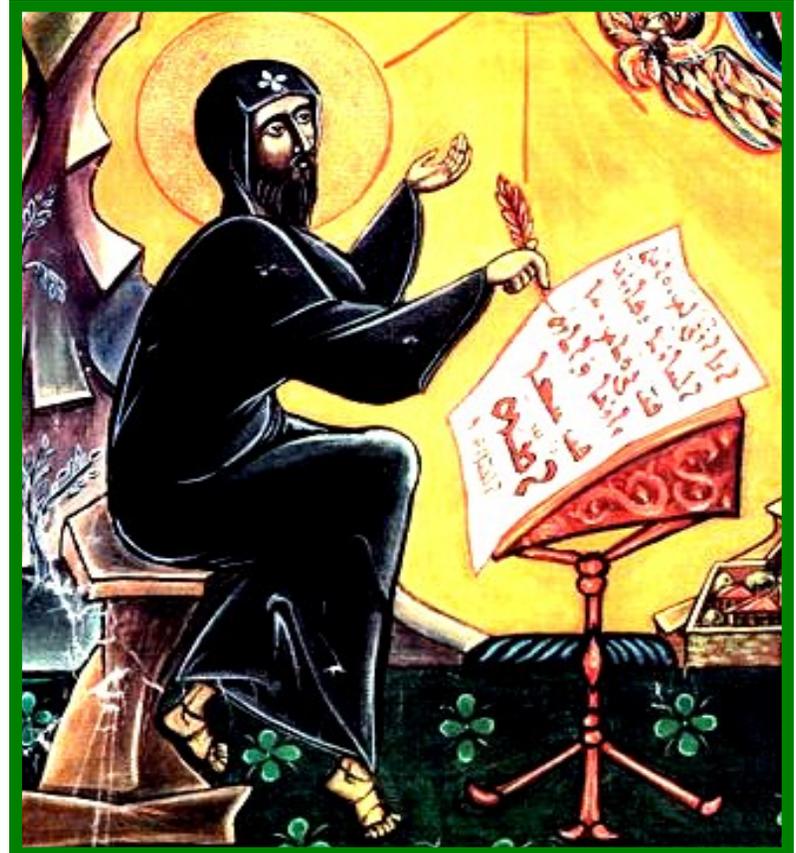
Yea, O Lord and King,  
grant me to see my own faults  
and not to judge my brother.

For blessed art thou unto the ages. Amen.

\*(excerpted from: [www.roca.org](http://www.roca.org); [//sor.cua.edu](http://sor.cua.edu); [//en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org))

## Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Feast Day: June 18



*I Ephrem am dying and writing my testament,  
to be a witness for the pupils who come after me;  
be constantly praying day and night;  
as a ploughman who ploughs again and again,  
whose work is admirable.  
Do not be like the lazy ones in whose fields thorns grow.  
Be constantly praying,  
for he who adores prayer will find help in both worlds.  
(Testament of Saint Ephrem)*

## ***Saint Ephrem the Syrian***

\*Saint Ephrem the Syrian, the great poet saint of the Syriac Church, was born in c. A.D. 306 in Nisibis (North-west of Mosul, Iraq). While some late sources claim that his father was a heathen priest who worshipped an idol called Abnil, his own writings affirm that he was raised in a Christian family. (Adv. Haereses XXVI. "I was born in the way of truth: though my boyhood understood not the greatness of the benefit, I knew it when trial came." Again more explicitly, if we may trust a Confession which is extant only in Greek, "I had been early taught about Christ by my parents; they who begat me after the flesh, had trained me in the fear of the Lord...My parents were confessors before the judge; yea; I am the kindred of martyrs.")

Judging from his youth, one could never have guessed his future greatness. In spite of his parents' having educated him in Christian precepts, he was impetuous and even rather wild. He writes how his parents sent him out town and he found a pregnant cow feeding along the road. He picked up stones and began pelting the cow until it fell down and died. During the night wild beasts ate the cow, and on the way back, he met the poor owner of the cow who asked him if he had driven his cow away. Ephrem not only denied it, but heaped abuse and insult upon the poor man. Another example that he writes about is that while idling with some shepherds, it grew too late to return home, and he spent the night with them... That night some sheep were stolen and he was accused of being in league with the robbers. He was taken before the magistrate and cast into prison. In a dream an angel appeared to Ephrem and asked him why he was there. The boy began at once to declare he was innocent. "Yes," said the angel, "you are innocent of the crime imputed to you, but have you forgotten the poor man's cow?" When he saw the tortures to which criminals were subjected, he became terrified and turned to God and vowed that he would become a monk if God would spare him such a cruel ordeal. The magistrate just laughed at the youth and ordered that he be stretched on the rack. At that moment a servant came to announce that dinner was ready and the magistrate postponed the examination to another day and ordered him back to prison. The next time the magistrate saw Ephrem he thought that he

had punished him enough and dismissed him. Although he was spared the rack, Ephrem had learned his lesson and, like the Prophet David, he entreated the Lord to overlook his youthful folly. True to his vow, upon his release he went straightway to the hermits living in the mountains where he became a disciple of St. James, who later became a great bishop of Nisibis.

Born again in repentance, Ephrem began to train as an athlete of virtues, exorcizing himself in the study of the Holy Scriptures and in prayer and fasting. He was transformed into a humble and contrite monk, weeping day and night for his sins and entirely surrendered to God. His earnest resolve pleased the Lord Who rewarded him with the gifts of wisdom; grace flowed from his mouth like a sweet stream, in fulfillment of his parents' dream.

Recognizing his disciple's God given talents, St James as a bishop entrusted Ephrem with preaching the Word of God and instructing children in school. In 325 James took Ephrem to the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea. On his return to Nisibis, Ephrem continued with his missionary work until AD 363 when the Persians conquered the city and most of its Christian inhabitants departed. He decided to go to the city of Edessa around which monastic life was flourishing. In Edessa, Ephrem earned a humble living in the service of a bath keeper. He used his free time in preaching the Word of God to the unbelievers. After living for some time in Edessa, the Saint was advised by a holy elder to go into the wilderness. He settled in a cave of the nearby "Mount of Edessa," where he gave himself up to prayer, fasting and the study of Holy Scripture. He once had a revelation regarding St. Basil the Great wherein he saw in a vision a pillar of fire reaching to heaven. The vision inspired Ephrem with the desire to see this great Teacher of the Church, so he journeyed to Caesarea in Cappadocia where he met with St. Basil. There Basil asked Ephrem why he had not received consecration to the order of priesthood? Ephrem answered because he was a sinner! Wherein Basil laid hands on his head and recited the prayer of consecration to the Diaconate. That is how St. Ephrem became a deacon.