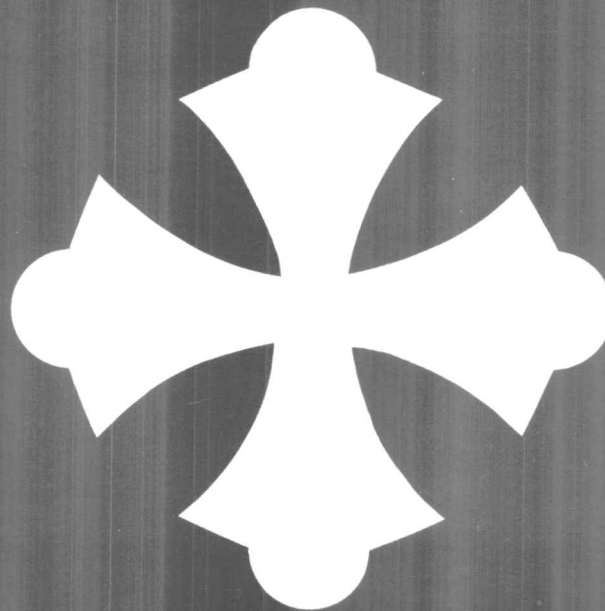


COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW

Volume 27, Numbers 3 & 4 Fall & Winter 2006

- *Eulogy in Memory of Fr. Hegumenos Matta El-Meskeen*
- *The Reality and Essence of the Eucharist (Part IV)*
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Subscription and Business Address:
Society of Coptic Church Studies
P.O. Box 714
E. Brunswick, NJ 08816
email: ralphyanney@hotmail.com

Editorial Address:
Rodolph Yanney, Chief Editor
Coptic Church Review
508 Margin Rd., Lebanon, PA 17042
yanney@mail.ptd.net

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ABOUNA MATTA EL MESKEEN CONTEMPORARY DESERT MYSTIC

By John Watson

1

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”ⁱ

The Gospel according to John 17.1,11

Ecumenical. The Greek word is *oikumene* and refers to ‘the whole inhabited world’, but the primary reference in the Christian tradition must focus upon the movement of the Church towards the recovery of unity amongst all believers in Christ, transcending differences of creed, ritual and ecclesiastical affairs: ‘So that they may be one, as we are one.’ A small but significant number of monks have made a profound impression upon all churches. The great Catholic Trappist Thomas Merton of Kentucky, the Russian Orthodox Seraphim Rose of Platina, California, the Protestant Roger Schultz of Taizé, and the Benedictine Catholic Bede Griffiths of Shantivanam in southern India were all significant writers on Prayer and Spirituality.ⁱⁱ All four of them were also readers of the renowned Coptic Orthodox monk Father Matta El Meskeen of the Monastery of St Makarios the Great in the Wadi El-Natroun, Egypt.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this decade too many Christians would justifiably despair of ‘*the ecumenical*.’ There is an ecclesiastical divisiveness, not unlike the split in Sunni and Shia Islam. For Bede Griffiths, Abouna Matta, Thomas Merton, Seraphim Rose and Roger Schultz there may be no obvious unity of faith, liturgy or custom. But there is a

i New Revised Standard Version, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

ii cf. Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, New York 1987. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, Image Books 1996. Seraphim Rose, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, California 1997. Roger Schultz, *God is Love Alone*, Taizé 2001 & 2003.

iii See esp. the English Language edition of *The Communion of Love* by Matthew the Poor, New York 1984. This work is focused upon the Life of Christ and its relationship to the Church, with additional commentary concerning ecclesiastical dogmatics and ascetical theology.

unity of prayer, which rises far above most faith systems and liturgical practices into a distinct world of mystical authenticity. In 1965 an article literally came out of the Western Desert. It was first published in Arabic as the *Rissâlat Beit el Takris bi Helouan* (Message from the House of Dedication at Helwan).^{iv} The virtually unknown author – certainly not well known in Western churches - was *Abouna Matta el Meskeen* ('Father Matthew the Poor Man'). Out of the eleven pages of the *Rissâlat Beit el Takris bi Helouan* only one short passage can be sufficient:

“*Unity* surpasses the capacity of the human mind. All that individual reason could do would be to understand any kind of *Unity* once it had been truly accomplished. But it could not grasp beforehand how *unity* would be accomplished. “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.” (NRSV trans. Luke 17.21).^v

If we desire a true *unity*, we must seek it and study it *in God, in His presence*, and not as some theoretical subject separated from God, whatever theological guise it may adopt.”^{vi}

The desert father who wrote *Rissâlat Beit el Takris bi Helouan* (Message from the House of Dedication at Helwan) in the 1960s became the author of several major texts of history, theology and spirituality. But the reality of Coptic Orthodox theology and spirituality, as defined by Father Matthew in *Hayat al-salah al-Urthudhuksiyah* (*Orthodox Prayer Life. The Interior Way*), was in fact recreated in Arabic, developed from a tiny English language text which had survived in an isolated wasteland, and then expanded for more than half a century into several hundred pages of extraordinary spiritual strength. An Introduction to the Second Edition of *Hayat al-salah al-Urthudhuksiyah* appeared in the Desert of Wadi El-Rayan in 1968. The seventh Arabic edition of *Orthodox Prayer* was published in 1995, forty years after its first Arabic publication. It now appears in English with an Epilogue written in 2003.^{vii} This notable text – born in the 50s and 60s, propa-

iv The English text of *Rissâlat Beit el Takris bi Helouan* is simply entitled *Christian Unity* by a Coptic Monk. W.H. Rankin copied from the French and English version, which was revised and corrected by Ruth Lennox when the original Arabic became available. Undated, but published by The Bookroom, Ladbroke Grove, London W11.

v NRSV, CUP, 1989.

vi *Christian Unity (Rissâlat Beit el Takris bi Helouan)*, p.6.

vii It must be noted that *Orthodox Prayer Life* has also appeared in Arabic and English language versions in *St Mark's Monthly Review*, Shoubra, Cairo throughout the 1980s & 90s. There are far too many variant editions in Arabic, English and many other languages to attempt a precise listing of texts.

gated from the 70s until the 90s and finalised in the last four years of Abouna Matta el Meskeen's life - must remain the central focus of his being and his ministry.

2

“The monastic profession is a lofty and fruitful tree whose root is detachment from all corporeal things, whose branches are freedom from passionate craving and total alienation from what you have renounced, and whose fruit is the acquisition of virtue, a deifying love, and uninterrupted joy.”^{viii}

**Theoliptos, Metropolitan of Philadelphia,
13th century**

Youssef Iskander was born in Benha Kaliobia in 1919. He graduated in Pharmacy from Cairo University in 1944. In 1948 he left his profession and entered the Monastery of St. Samuel (Deir Anba Samweel), roughly half way between Beni Suef and Minya in Middle Egypt. He was named *Abouna Matta el Meskeen* and in the 1950s began one of the critical revolutionary monastic experiments of modern times, moving into the Wadi El Rayan, a valley of the Western desert one hundred and twenty miles South West of Cairo. Leaving the world for a wasteland can be perceived as saving the world within oneself, and saving the wider world itself within the prayer life of eremitism and monasticism.

“The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but also even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them. This is their paradoxical lesson for our time.”^{ix}

Abouna Matta had first lived in the Wadi El Rayan for only a week. He slept at night under a palm tree. But one night he had a vision:

“Walking along the Wadi El Rayan, I saw an old man sitting in front of the door of a cave, and as I

viii *The Philokalia* Volume Four Faber & Faber, London 1995.

ix Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Hollis & Carter, London 1961.

approached the old man, he rejoiced, saying 'I have waited here for you for many years. Come, come along.' And the old man arose and took my hand and said, 'I shall give to you this mountain.' Then, one of the fathers standing near me went to the old man, and as he was about to touch him, the old man disappeared".^x

By 1960 seven other Coptic monks joined Matta in the caves of the Wadi El Rayan. When living near the well some bedouin approached them. They asked if these monks were just visiting or settling in their 'homeland'. *Abouna Matta recalled the vision and call of the old man.* The bedouin offered help to the monks. One of the bedouin told Matta that when he was a youth some forty years ago he used to enter the Wadi to search and dig for treasures. It was at this point that the bedouin discovered a cave which they thought most suitable for the monks. After a walk of about two hours the monks arrived at the cave, which was virtually filled with sand. This cave was a Coptic chapel. It carried icons painted on its walls. It became a centre of Eucharistic devotion. Matta El Meskeen and his seven monks moved into independent hillside caves. These twentieth century hermits were determined to emulate the hermits of the fourth and fifth centuries. It was these two early Christian centuries that were considered to be the 'Golden Age of Monasticism' and they now had to become the new Coptic monastic model in the Wadi El Rayan. On Saturday afternoon at about three o'clock the hermits would meet in the cave church with their Father Matthew. In this context, but also in their own solitude, they followed the canonical hours of monasticism. They then continued with the dedicated evening offering of incense, a significant form of devotion. Very early on Sunday morning the eremitic community once again assembled in the cave church for the canonical hours and the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Matta's hermits did not wear traditional monastic garb, though all of them wore sandals and a black robe with a leather girdle. On their heads they wore either a woollen cap, or a *taqiya*, which is the traditional headdress normally worn by the fellahin. Some of the brethren wore monastic cowls, entering the chapel-cave. At the end of the Liturgy of St Basil the Great it was usual for the hermits to eat and speak together in monastic communion before returning to the desert caves for the next six days.

The hermits grew several kinds of vegetables in the Wadi El Rayan. *Mulukhiya* was always popular. It is a leafy summer vegetable, not unlike spinach, and is extremely popular throughout the Middle East. In the city it can often be available, out-of-season in fresh, dry and frozen form. For the desert fathers of the Wadi El Rayan *mulukhiya* was well liked, though only the leaves are edible. Some small date palms

x Otto Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*. AUC Press, Cairo, 1999. pp 253-6.

were grown close to the cave church. The community expanded to twelve by 1964. Anchorite life in the modern world is an exceptional phenomenon, not only in Europe but also throughout the Middle East and Asia.

In response to an appeal from the Coptic Patriarch Kyrillos the Sixth the twelve hermits of the Wadi El Rayan came to the Wadi El Natroun in 1969 and developed the monastery of St Macarius the Great. Only six very tired and elderly fathers lived near the road between Cairo and Alexandria. Matta and his twelve monastic companions cared for the frail old desert fathers and then reformed and reconstructed the monastery. The scale of their achievement was simply staggering. In 1971 Matta had thirty monks in the monastery of Abu Makar, by 1981 over eighty brethren and in the 1990s there were more than one hundred and twenty monks.

In the 1980s President Anwar El Sadat donated 2,000 hectares of desert land to the monastery and a fleet of tractors to work it. Father Matta frequently spoke of 'work' not as an end in itself but as 'an effective means of bringing about death to the human self with an authentic humane growth into the ground of our being.' Daily self-exertion in the kitchen, on the building sites, through the fields, in the workshops and amongst the animal pens, was to be a means of glorifying God and participating in the service of others.^{xi} Matta's community restored many of the old buildings, replacing some of them with more than one hundred and fifty new monastic cells. A refectory was rebuilt, and a beautiful new library was constructed. A substantial number of spacious guesthouses were recreated for foreign guests. Several new buildings, which included a bakery, barns, garages and repair facilities, covered the site of the old monastery. A modern printing press, installed in 1978, produced the monthly magazine *Saint Mark*. Many other publications were printed in Arabic and carefully translated and reprinted, not only in English but also in a chain of other languages. Several monks who are highly qualified physicians and surgeons had staffed a clinic. Some other monks were also pharmacists controlling the private drug store in the monastery grounds. For over three decades, the monastery was served by about four hundred labourers, including several Muslims, who all worked on the land.^{xii} The administrative, agricultural and institutional revolution at the Monastery of St Macarius was very great. The spiritual revolution was much greater.

3

“Prayer is the flower of gentleness and of freedom
from anger. Prayer is the fruit of joy and thankfulness.

xi Matta el-Meskeen, *Coptic Monasticism*, The Monastery of St Macarius the Great 1984.

xii Otto Meinardus. *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* p. 163.

Prayer is the remedy for gloom and despondency. If you wish to pray as you should, deny yourself all the time, and when any kind of affliction troubles you, meditate on prayer.”^{xiii}

Evagrius the Solitary, circa 345-99

In 2003, St Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, published Father Matthew the Poor’s *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (The English language edition is full size. The cover is beautifully illustrated, showing the Monastery of St Macarius the Great. pp.292). Most of the original band of 1950s-60s Coptic Orthodox monks in the Wadi El Rayan, when asked what directed them to the eremitical life, said that it was reading this primary text on the life of Orthodox Prayer. The manuscript defined their spiritual course. In Arabic it was certainly a key text for Coptic monastic spirituality. It became a significant American-English text in the last three years of Abouna Matta’s life, having developed existentially through more than fifty-five years of tight monastic and institutional discipline, in parallel with his individual world of spiritual solitude.

Father Matthew the Poor died in Cairo, 8 June 2006.^{xiv}

It is perhaps not too much to say that his book on *Orthodox Prayer* has defined the prayer life of thousands of English language readers at the beginning of this century. It was a seed planted in the wasteland of the Wadi Rayan in the 50s but in our own time it has become a forest – an *ecumenical* forest.

The primary source of *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* was a typed English-language text. Abouna Matta had packed the modest manuscript of only one hundred and twenty-two, double-spaced, and typewritten pages into his bag. He did not open the English document because he was in a hurry to embark on the solitary life, which began for him in August 1948:

“When I finally opened the manuscript of the English pilgrim and found that it contained sayings on prayer, my heart leapt for joy. A wave of happiness and exhilaration overwhelmed me. How did God bring this treasure into my hand? This was my only inheritance from the world. I did not believe my eyes when I began reading of experiences that most strongly told of my own. They expressed my hope and

xiii *The Philokalia* Volume One Faber & Faber, London, 1979. pp 58-9

xiv English Language obituaries: *The Independent* newspaper, London, Tuesday 27 June 2006. *Watani International*, Cairo 18 June 2006. The Revd Dr John H Watson wrote both texts.

the joy of my life. So I decided to pray in the words of these sayings. I sat down to read each of them many times until they became impressed on my mind. I would then stand up to pray in the words that I had just read, and so on. My spirit thus became aflame as if with fire. I never stopped thanking God, while my soul remained full with the utmost joy." (Preface pp. 9-10)

The typewritten text was the creation of a British pilgrim who had visited Jerusalem. For the rest of his life, Abouna Matta acknowledged the influence of the English-language writer and the central value of the small booklet, which he had received so long ago.

Matta almost certainly did not know the translator as a fellow monastic but he did know – and loved – every word he read. Lazarus Moore was born in Swindon, England on 18 October 1902. He left his homeland for Canada when he was about eighteen years old, but then returned to the United Kingdom as a convert to Orthodoxy. He needed to travel from Britain to Eastern Europe. In 1934 he lived in a monastery on Mount Athos, the most eastern of three narrow peninsulas jutting out from the Halkidiki peninsula in north-eastern Greece. The monastic region of Athos is connected to the mainland by a low isthmus only a couple of miles wide. Under the Constitutional Charter of 1926 the Holy Mountain is an autonomous monastic republic. All residential monks, regardless of their country of origin, can automatically become Greek citizens. But Lazarus Moore had already decided to join the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).

He was installed as a tonsured monk in Eastern Europe and was then ordained as an Eastern Orthodox priest at Milkovo in Yugoslavia. Working with his Russian refugee monks, who had fled the Soviet Union after the Revolution in 1917, he had studied with them and mastered the Russian language. After the Second World War many monks of the ROCOR fled to the USA. Father Lazarus served with the Russian Orthodox Mission in Jerusalem and had major pastoral responsibilities as the chaplain of some Russian convents in the Middle East. After the establishment of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, the Moscow Patriarchate took control of the properties and churches of the Russian Church in Exile in the Holy Land. As a priest of the ROCOR, who was neither Russian by birth nor a member of the Moscow Patriarchate, he had to leave Israel-Palestine. He always signed his name with the letters TWA – *‘travelling with angels.’* Father Lazarus served in India for twenty years and became an Archimandrite in 1959. He was famous for his brutal honesty concerning institutional religion: ‘I must warn you that the outward form of the Orthodox Church is desperately wretched, in a word *crucified*, with little

cooperation.^{xv} He returned to Greece in 1972, continuing his ministry in Australia in 1974, in California in 1983 and finally in Alaska in 1989. Lazarus often referred to the ecclesiastical institutions as having ‘little generosity or heroism or real sanctity.’ He died at Eagle River, Alaska on 27 November 1992. A few days before his death, after battling with cancer for many years, he was described as one who ‘faithfully used the Jesus Prayer as the medicine for his affliction.’ His final scriptural quotation was from 2 Timothy 4. 6-8:

“As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”^{xvi}

Archimandrite Lazarus Moore was a great missionary and scholar. His translations were legion. His life of St Seraphim of Sarov is one of the best-known works in English. In many ancient monastic manuscripts he had discovered the sayings of the ancient and modern Russian fathers on prayer. Moore translated them into English, alongside some other sayings from Eastern Orthodox saints and mystics.

For the next fifty-plus years Abouna Matta El Meskeen lived with the much-loved little text, translated and typed by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore. But in each decade of his monastic and ascetic life, the Coptic father of the Western Desert expanded the primary Russian sources into a major commentary on classical Eastern Orthodox spirituality. Father Matthew had carefully classified and spiritually reshaped an extraordinary series of inspired texts from early Middle Eastern Christianity to nineteenth century Orthodox Russia. He believed that the notes of the British pilgrim in the Holy City were compelling, but that they were no longer full enough to cover the wide panorama of prayer. Matta began to collect the sayings of the Fathers from any sources that came to hand. He wished to develop the whole course of the life of Coptic Orthodox prayer for his own time. Although he always affirmed that he did not resort to intellectual authorship, he certainly wished to modestly record the necessary reality of Orthodox Christian prayer in the world of Abu Makar and in his own life. The intimate spiritual and intellectual relationship between these two impressive monastics - the Eastern Orthodox Lazarus and the Oriental Orthodox Matthew – has been and will remain vital and transcendent.

xv A letter sent to Timothy Ware, an Anglican convert to Orthodoxy.
xvi New Revised Standard Version

4

“The crown of every good endeavour and the highest of achievements is diligence in prayer. Through it, God guiding us and lending a helping hand, we come to acquire the other virtues. It is in prayer that the saints experience communion in the hidden energy of god’s holiness and inner union with it, and their intellect itself is brought through unutterable love into the presence of the Lord.”^{xvii}

St Makarios of Egypt, fourth century

Abouna Matta had written the two brief pages of the *Epilogue to Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* on October 28, 1995.^{xviii} The coherent Coptic epilogist refers to *Prayer: Access into the Father’s Presence*, and tells of the Holy Spirit speaking within Christians and through them. The Holy Spirit “speaks words known well to those who have experienced him, hot and flaming words that set the whole body on fire. They make man forget his disability and insignificance, nearly lifting him off the ground. For the burden that weighed him down with sins and bound him to this earth disappears.”^{xix} Within the life of personal prayer and ardent devotion the modern Desert Fathers experience death to sin, resurrection in the Holy Spirit and the mystical ascension that can be experienced within temporal life but that will finally rise above it. “Grace totally engulfs us, completely covering our nakedness.”^{xx} Matta’s epilogue is a model of twentieth-century Coptic Orthodox spirituality but the main body of the text of *Orthodox Prayer Life* is quite different and expansive. There are three-hundred-and-ninety-five paragraphs of significant quotations in this manuscript, mostly from the Fathers of the Church, and often translated freely from strictly Arabic sources. The author’s many extracts, from the earliest desert fathers of the first few centuries to Vladimir Lossky in the twentieth century, are well in excess of one-hundred-and-forty-pages. They are the most eloquent and inspiring contributions that Abouna Matta El Meskeen has given to his readers. He knows that the call and the challenge of classical Orthodox spirituality does not only speak to the Christians of the modern world but most notably to every monk of his monastery. The very old and the new voices echo across aeons of time:

“Prayer is the lifting up of the mind to God” (St John of Damascus).^{xxi} “Prayer is by nature a dialogue

xvii *The Philokalia* Volume Three Faber & Faber, London, 1984. p. 292.

xviii *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (English language edition). St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2003. See pp.289-90

xix *ibid* p.289.

xx *ibid* p.290.

xxi *ibid* p.25.

between man and God. It unites the soul with its Creator and reconciles the two. Its effect is to hold the world together” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*).^{xxii} “Do not neglect to cry out day and night to God. He will give you help from heaven.” (St Antony the Great).^{xxiii} “Every secret converse, every good care of the intellect directed toward God and every meditation upon spiritual things is delimited by prayer, is called by the name of prayer, and under its name is comprehended, from which the teaching of genuine prayer ensues. From genuine prayer the love of God is born, for love comes of prayer” (St Isaac the Syrian).^{xxiv} “Sometimes during a long-continued prayer only a few minutes are really pleasing to God, only a few moments constitute true prayer and true service to God. The chief thing in prayer is the nearness of the heart to God, as proved by the sweetness of God’s presence in the soul” (St John of Kronstadt).^{xxv}

The voice of Father Matthew the Poor Man is similarly vibrant. His brief but most persuasive commentary comes from his own response to the Orthodox Fathers of ancient and modern times:

“You should pause at each of these sayings and consider the lives of these heroes – how they gained prayer for themselves as if it were everything. Their lives became prayer and their prayer became life. Compare your life with theirs and your experience with theirs. If your spirit burns within you, lay down this book, worship and pray, and thus mingle your reading with prayer.”^{xxvi}

5

“Some declared that by means of zealous fasting and the keeping of vigils the mind would be enlarged and would produce purity of heart and body so as to

xxii ibid p.25.

xxiii ibid p.25.

xxiv ibid pp 25-6.

xxv ibidp.26.

xxvi ibid p. 24.

enable one to come all the more easily into union with God. Others posited detachment from everything in order that the mind, shorn of everything, freed from all the snares which were holding it back, would come more speedily to God. Others thought that what was necessary was to get completely away, to have the solitude and secrecy of the desert where a man, living there always, could converse more intimately with God and where union could be achieved more directly.”^{xxvii}

John Cassian (c.365-435)

Wherever or whenever the Arabic text of *Hayat al-salah al-Urthudhuksiyah* has been read in the last five decades, a significant commentary running through the book has always been a summons to the modern desert fathers whom Abouna Matta taught in his own monastery. The Coptic laity or the general readers of *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* can most certainly observe the thread of asceticism in this modern classic. Within the Christian tradition in general, and within Coptic Orthodox practice in particular, there have been a range of theories and practices of asceticism (Greek, *askesis*: ‘discipline’ or ‘training’). During the third and fourth centuries of Coptic Orthodoxy many individuals and small monastic communities of ascetics functioned from north to south throughout the deserts of Egypt. One of the principal influences upon the modern Coptic teaching of Father Matthew the Poor was St Antony the Great (circa 250-350) who affirmed that since martyrdom might not be his lot he would spend the rest of his life as a solitary ‘dying daily to self’ in imitation of Jesus Christ, who has obviously been frequently described as ‘the first martyr’ in many texts of the first two millennia. The hymnology of one of the Methodist founding fathers Charles Wesley (1707-88) appeals to most English language hymn singers:

“He left His Father’s throne above,
So free so infinite His Grace,
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race.
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For, O my God, it found out me.”

St Antony the Great saw the ascetic life as a type of martyrdom of intent, a daily exercising of the human will, and a subduing of the flesh in imitation of Christ’s suffering on Calvary. This was the model for the Monks of the Wadi El Rayan and

xxvii John Cassian, *John Cassian Conferences*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, NY, p.61

it is essential to emphasise that the teaching of Matta El Meskeen affirmed that 'through the ongoing process of institutionalization the church was so accommodating itself to worldly society that it was losing the vision of Orthodox Christianity as defined by the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers.' It was the Wadi El Rayan that became the place of silence, devoid of the noise and temptations of the cities and its inhabitants. The wilderness and the solitary place became for the Coptic *abbas* of the twentieth century the exercising ground in which they could become the true athletes of God. In the third and fourth centuries of Coptic Orthodox Egypt hundreds of men and women went out into the deserts. They either moved far away from the great cities out to the rural wastelands, or they camped on the edge of the urban landscapes gathering around a spiritual father who had already acquired a reputation for wisdom. The desert father was the one who had undergone strict training in spiritual combat. The desert fathers of modern times, and those of antiquity, were individuals who had learnt how to fight the good fight.

For Coptic monastics of the past and present there must always be narratives that once led them, and even now lead them, to spiritual endurance and stability:

"Some brethren went to the desert to visit a great old man, and they said to him, 'Abba, why did you come here to endure such hardship? And the old man said, 'The whole time of the hardship I give myself here does not equal a single day of punishment.'"^{xxviii}

"A brother asked an old man. 'What shall I do, father, for I am not acting at all like a monk, but I eat, drink, and sleep carelessly; and I have evil thoughts and I am in great trouble, passing from one work to another and from one thought to another?' The old man said, 'Sit in your cell and do the little you can untroubled. For I think the little you can do now is of equal value to the great deeds which Abba Antony accomplished on the mountain, and I believe that by remaining sitting in your cell for the name of God, and guarding your conscience, you also will find the place where Abba Antony is.'"^{xxix}

In the Wadi El Rayan and in the Wadi El Natroun the presiding desert father was Abouna Matta. He was very far from being a representative of the ecclesiastical institution. He was extraordinarily self critical and rooted in the earliest traditions

xxviii Benedicta Ward SLG, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, Fairacres, Oxford 1975. p.21.

xxix *ibid* p.23.

of Orthodox monasticism and hesychasm. *Hesychia*, a Greek word that refers to 'quiet', 'stillness' and 'tranquillity', was indeed of central importance for the desert father of the monastery of St Macarius the Great. There is a Coptic Orthodox tradition that refers at first to the way of inner prayer, then to the external physical life of the institutional monk or isolated hermit, next to the monk who strives to confine his spiritual life within his physical being, but most specifically and finally to the world of pure prayer that becomes free from images and ideas.

The teaching of Father Matthew the Poor Man was rooted in purity of heart, *metanoia* - complete conversion towards God with all the heart and mind. The coenobitic asceticism of the Western Desert in modern Egypt was geared towards a life of mutual service. The call was to 'die daily to self': the challenge was the same appeal to any member of the Coptic Orthodox monastic community. The commandment 'to love one's neighbour as oneself' became a daily-lived experience. To love God and to love one's neighbour became the defining tradition of the Coptic monks at *Abu Makar*. There follows, in one most eloquent paragraph, a personal testimony from Abouna Matta El Meskeen himself:

"Renunciation of the world and its possessions had been my greatest concern. I thus left the world without keeping the least connection with it.

I thus realised at once that what I had asked for had materialised. Prayer was now the only profession of my life – not by way of choice but by way of obligation. Prayer indeed became now my only anchor.

I do not wish now to bother the reader with my affairs. Let it suffice to know that God meant to besiege me with prayer. Whenever physical hunger turned cruel against me, I found my gratification in prayer. Whenever the biting cold of winter was unkind to me, I found warmth in prayer. Whenever people were harsh to me (and their harshness was severe indeed) I found my comfort in prayer. In short, prayer became my food and my drink, my outfit and my armour whether by night or by day. This was all the more true in my case, for I had not spiritual father or friend. I had neither a colleague nor a comrade for my journey.

The voice of God was the only answer for all my needs. It was the voice of father, friend, comrade and guide. No sooner did I feel the need for his voice than I heard it speaking inside me a thousand times stronger than an ear would ever hear. For what the ear hears, the mind forgets. But what the heart hears, time can never erase.”^{xxx}

Matta’s ascetic discipline meant nights of prayer and the practice of making countless prostrations. While reciting the sayings of one of the Fathers of the Church he would visualize the saint standing before him. He would then ask the saint to clarify for him the real meaning of his words. In the view of this Coptic father, God answered this appeal. Abouna Matta would emerge every night with a new friendship with the spirits of these saints; with a knowledge and illumination from them that grew every day for him. It was only some years later that the messages he received would eventually be published in *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way*.

6

“Life is not to be regarded as an uninterrupted flow of words which is finally silenced by death. Its rhythm develops in silence, comes to the surface in moments of necessary expression, returns to deeper silence, culminates in a final declaration, then ascends quietly into the silence of Heaven which resounds with unending praise.”^{xxx1}

Father Thomas Merton OCSO (1915-68)

The final twenty-first century manuscript written by Father Matthew the Poor Man should be described as an ecumenical text. Many Christians from any tradition would experience the courage and the challenge of the content. It is perhaps clear to the Coptic Orthodox laity and to others that the book rests in a monastic tradition that teaches the faithful but does not completely define their lives of Christian service. In the brief chapter ten entitled *Holy Silence* the subtext is always an appeal to enter the desert for a Retreat:

“If there is any work to be done by man in retreat, it is to ponder himself in much contrition and humility, in sorrow and anguish over the sins that have brought about the thick clouds, which have hidden his soul

xxx ibid Preface p.10.

xxx1 Thomas Merton *No Man Is An Island*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1983 p.261.

from God. Such humble feelings may perhaps function in paving the way for the release of his soul.”^{xxxii}

In only four pages of text, the word ‘retreat’ appears seven times. “When you become well trained in solitude, you will find precious occasions for practicing the presence of God and unveiling your soul before its Creator so as to repair every defect and default in it.”^{xxxiii} The monastic ideal need not be criticised, but for the laity at work in the world the challenge of Christian prayer life is different. Rich seams of theological and spiritual reflection run through Abouna Matta’s text. There are also moments of exquisite simplicity that appeal to the Christian reader outside the desert monastery.

No doubt Father Matthew the Poor Man would have admired the simplicity of the Protestant hymn writer James Montgomery (1771-1854) who reinforces the message and the reality of the Coptic Orthodox mystic:

Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire
Uttered our unexpressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.

Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try:
Prayer the sublimest strains that reach
The majesty on high.

Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath,
The Christian’s native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters Heaven with prayer.

Father Matthew’s focus is upon the silence of the prayer life, but also upon the intimate silent communion and wordless tête-à-tête with our Lord Jesus Christ:

xxxii *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (English language edition) p.199.

xxxiii *ibid* p.200.

“If your tongue is used to chattering, your heart will remain dim and foreign to the luminous intuitions of the Spirit. But if your mouth is silent, your heart will ever be aflame with the Spirit. Hush your tongue that your heart may speak, and hush your heart that God may speak” (St John of Dalyatha). “Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer” “The ear of the solitary will hear wonders from God” (St John Climacus). “A man who loves conversation with Christ loves to be alone” “If you love the truth, love silence. This will make you illumined, sun-like, in God: it will deliver you from the illusions of ignorance” (St Isaac the Syrian). “Many times have I spoken and regretted it; but I have never regretted keeping silent” (St Arsenius).^{xxxiv}

Once again, it is the most persuasive commentary upon these four saints that comes from Abouna Matta El Meskeen himself:

“Solitude is a chance for the imprisoned soul to be released and go about its business. Simply wait for God in silence and do not seek him in your fanciful thoughts or in his visible creation. All these attempts at effort will hamper the release of your soul and its abiding in God’s presence.”^{xxxv}

Matta’s radical God-centeredness stands in contradiction to our pervasive human-centeredness. God is at the centre of this remarkable Coptic desert life.

7

“The stories of the spiritual journeys of others nourish us, revealing profound psychological and spiritual realities, illuminating the inevitable difficulties and realisations of all who journey along with us. Stories show a path, shine a light on our way, teach us how to see, and remind us of the greatest of human possibilities. We are invited to laugh, to awaken, and to join our journey with others. Their stories are our stories – they have the power to touch us, move us, and to inspire us.”^{xxxvi}

Christian Feldman & Jack Kornfield

xxxiv *ibid.* p.199.

xxxv *ibid.* p.199.

xxxvi Ed. Christian Feldman and Jack Kornfield, *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, Harper Collins, New York 1991.

Narrative has always been a central feature in the history of all world religions and in the Orthodox theology of the desert fathers. Stories are at all times needed as essential expressions of the thought of both historical and modern Coptic monasticism. Theological and philosophical narrative is especially appropriate as a central process for expressing the timeless values of all faith systems and of the greatest ascetic spiritual traditions. The specific actions and events of classical desert life in the time of the early fathers tend to support not simply traditionalist theological discourses but the essentials of desert spirituality. Stories must never be rejected in modern times. An interaction between Coptic monasticism, and other religions and traditions, could prove to be a healthy reinforcement of any spiritual institution. Every modern perspective that is sceptical or agnostic about how narrative relates to universal spiritual experience is probably mistaken. The centuries long tales of monastic spirituality are sufficient testimony to the unending strength of narrative monasticism. Truth can be conveyed in many tales, especially in those recounted in the *Orthodox Prayer Life* of Abouna Matta El Meskecn. He is a narrator. He is an interpreter. His many narratives are an invitation to ecumenical, even existential dialogue.

One of the earliest narratives in *Orthodox Prayer Life* shows how meditation upon the law of God engenders meditation on and scrutiny of the monk's virtues:

“A monk went to his master in the morning, sad after a long night he had spent in meditation counting the virtues of one of his fellow monks. He said to his master, “Father, I have wasted the night in vain – sitting the whole night and counting the virtues of brother so-and-so, and found that they were thirty virtues; and I grew sad, since I found that I own nothing, not even one virtue of them.”

But his master said, “Your sadness because your soul is void of virtues, and your meditation on the virtues of another, is better than thirty virtues.” xxxvii

Any monk of the desert might ponder the virtue and the challenge of Christian meditation. All meditation in the Coptic Orthodox wilderness would be regarded as the contemplation of the mystery of the divine economy. Monastic virtue is no different from any Christian virtue:

xxxvii ibid p.47.

“In this quiet moment,
Here before thy throne.
Conscious of thy presence,
Known as I am known.
In this quiet moment,
Set my spirit free.
In this quiet moment,
Make a better me.”

xxxviii

Chapter four of *Orthodox Prayer Life* is entitled *The Freeing of the Soul*. It reflects upon the outward, daily life of the modern Christian, perhaps even of the Coptic monk in the Western Desert, who might feel that such everyday living could not be truly free. The briefest story line can be the most powerful. In only three sentences we learn of the great number of souls who would wish to fly toward God. These souls, in a tiny but penetrating narrative, might be many. But the truth is that they are in reality fastened to the things of this world:

“If we tie a bird with a string he will not be able to fly. If he tries to fly while he is tied, his wing will certainly be broken and his body will be bruised. If we afterwards untie him, he will not be able to fly.”^{xxxix}

It is in vain that man should try to fly toward God while he is bound with the cords of this earth. The story emphasises the point that after becoming airborne for a little while and having the illusion that the soul is heading towards God, he is stunned to find that life still weighs him down. It is possible to fall from the spiritual height when the soul is broken with despair. Just a few sentences of message and narrative could expand for a long time.

To outline the spiritual and physical discipline of fasting - for it is this form of abstinence that may calm the impulses of the body and even quench the fires of human passion - is to rediscover religious self-control. It is a discipline. The story comes from the biography written by St Athanasius of Alexandria:

‘For nearly twenty years, St Antony the Great continued to train himself in solitude. He did not go out into the open and most people did not see him. Even though many were eager to imitate his physical and

xxxviii General John Gowans, the Salvation Army.

xxxix *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* (English language edition). St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 2003. p.125.

spiritual discipline they could not find him. They attacked his monastic cell. Antony came out. He was initiated into the earliest mysteries of classical monasticism. He was filled with the Spirit of God. For the first time he was seen outside his cell. When they saw him they wondered at the sight. He had the same discipline of the body. He was not fat. He was not thin. He was exactly the same as he had ever been.^{x1}

Abouna Matta's focus upon the Patristic traditions in Orthodoxy is sympathetic, loyal and sensitive. But it must be noted that he has also referred to more recent traditions that related to the earlier fathers of the Egyptian desert. St Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) was a Russian Orthodox monk who entered his monastery at the age of twenty. He was ordained a priest, but received permission to retire to a forest hermitage. His Russian cell was colder than any cell in Egypt but at the very least it was a rewarding spiritual desert. For many years he had no contact with the monastic community. He did not speak a word. The recorded sayings of "the father of the freezing forest" may not be perceived as remarkable but Abouna Matta El Meskeen loved them. The Coptic Orthodox Father carefully recorded the discourse between St Seraphim of Sarov and his disciple, which refers not only to the acquisition of the Holy Spirit but also to the nature of fervent worship in the Russian nineteenth century tradition:

"My friend, we are both at this moment in the Spirit of God. Why will you not look at me?"

"I cannot look at you, Father – I replied – your eyes shine like lightning; your face has become more dazzling than the sun, and it hurts my eyes to look at you."

"Don't be afraid," he said. "At this very moment you have not become as bright as I have. You are also at present in the fullness of the Spirit of God. Otherwise, you would not be able to see me as you do see me".

"What do you feel?" asked Seraphim.

"An immeasurable well being," I replied.

"But what sort of well-being? What exactly?"

"I feel such calm, such peace in my soul, that I can find no words to express it."

"My friend, it is the peace our Lord spoke of when he said to his disciples, 'My peace I give to you.' It is the

x1 Source *The Life of Antony* by Athanasius (circa 295-373) see *The Classics of Western Spirituality*. SPCK London 1980.

peace which the word cannot give. 'The peace, which passes all understanding.' What else you feel?"

"Infinite joy in my heart."

Seraphim continued: "When the Spirit of God descends on a man and envelops him in the fullness of his presence, the soul overflows with unspeakable joy, for the Holy Spirit fills everything He touches with joy. If the first fruits of future joy have already filled you with such sweetness, with such happiness, what shall we say of the joy in the kingdom of heaven, which awaits all those who weep here on earth? You also, my friend, have wept during your earthly life, but sees the joy which our Lord sent to console you here below."^{xli}

Father Matthew the Poor Man understands the Russian Orthodox tradition because its spiritual attributes and virtues in the contemplative life are passed on to all who live in the twentieth century wastelands – wastelands that are not merely physical but more profoundly spiritual, even at times cerebral and deeply theological. It is most certainly the contemplative life, in all its dimensions, that renews mankind. The substantial literature of modern monasticism presents the Coptic Orthodox monastic as a new person of outstanding holiness and moral strength. Saint Seraphim of Sarov - the Russian Orthodox ascetic of the freezing landscape - speaks to Abba Matta El Meskeen - the Coptic Orthodox mystic of the baking desert. Narrative runs skilfully and carefully through most of these substantial ecumenical texts. The Copt is more than happy to live with the Russian.

8

"Almighty God, from whom all thoughts of truth and peace proceed, kindle, we pray thee, in the hearts of all men the true love of peace, and guide with thy pure and peaceable wisdom those who take counsel for the nations of the earth; that in tranquillity thy kingdom may go forward, till the earth be filled with the knowledge of thy love."^{xlii}

Francis Paget (1851-1911)

xli Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, pp.227-29.

xlii Francis Paget, Bishop of Oxford, 1851-1911.

At the height of the Cold War in the late 1960s Abouna Matta El Meskeen wrote another *Introduction* to his book on *Orthodox Prayer Life*. He focused upon both war and peace referring to ‘the menace of nuclear weapons and their threat to destroy the world.’^{xliii} The modern desert father of the Wadi El Rayan, already on the move to the Wadi El Natroun, is physically isolated, but not spiritually. ‘We have no path to peace, security or hope except through people of prayer. By means of the divine power stored like treasure within them, these people can create within us a transcendent vision of a world that evil cannot overcome. We have thus no choice but to enter the inner room of prayer, not to isolate ourselves from the perishing world, thus escaping destruction and saving ourselves, but to attack the destruction that is in the world and redeem it. For when we die to ourselves and to the world, the world lives and is renewed. Through bended knees not only can other souls be changed, but also the fate of the whole world.’^{xliv} The search for peace continues in the spiritual life. “The true foundation of prayer is this: to be very vigilant over thoughts and pray in much tranquillity and peace” (St Macarius the Great).^{xlv} “If you are yearning for peace of mind, root out from your heart the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (St Isaac the Syrian).^{xlvi} The modern Desert Fathers of Abu Makar are called to spiritual warfare with all the weapons God has given to them. In the desert they persevere in this life of warfare, giving up all physical weapons of violence but discovering other levels of violence within each heart and mind. No Coptic disciple of Abouna Matta El Meskeen can think of explosives or guns as the required means to kill. The authentic monastics of the modern world face the venom inside themselves, seeking always to bring peace to their own hearts and minds.

In chapter sixteen of *Orthodox Prayer Life*, entitled *Loss of Purpose*, Abouna Matta El Meskeen describes an individual who, if badly treated by his enemy, would inevitably lose his temper when he tends to give in to his worst instincts. The absence of peacefulness of heart naturally creates anger of mind and spirit. But it is ‘the Prince of Peace’ who intervenes to say, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven: for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?’” (Matthew 5.43-6).^{xlvii} And in Father Matthew’s words, “Man can thus turn obstacles *to* prayer into motives *for* prayer.” Christian prayer is greatly strengthened by forgiveness. The motive set by Christ in prayer for our

xliii *Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way* ibid p.18.

xliv *ibid* p.18.

xlv *ibid* p.195.

xlvi *ibid* p.141.

xlvii New Revised Standard Version, 1997.

adversaries is that we be taken out of “the transient sphere of animosity and hostility into the eternal sphere of God’s presence and peace.” “Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge or we labour aimlessly” (St Antony the Great).^{xlviii}

In the long history of Christianity any thought about ‘Peace’ has invariably moved in two directions. In the public domain the focus has been upon the concept of the “Just War.” St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) had laid down three conditions for a ‘just war.’ First, there must be an honourable power, carrying real authority, and ruling over Christian people (Latin. *auctoritas principis*). Second, the basis for any war within Christendom must be moral, righteous and just (Latin. *justa causa*). The Christian belligerents, engaged in any possible conflict, should have a rightful intention (Latin. *recta intentio*).^{xlix} The central debate within the Christian world has invariably been between the spiritual and the political. Christian societies in East and West have refused to separate the spiritual from the social. Western Christians have often affirmed and included the actively political in their societies. Any reading of the theology and spirituality of peace, in the thought of Abouna Matta El Meskeen, would certainly suggest that the biblical and spiritual *Peace* of the western desert has little if anything to do with the social and political. In the Wadi El Natroun, monasticism has everything to do with the inward peace of these modern desert fathers and nothing to do with taking sides. “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways” (2 Thessalonians 3.18). Father Matthew stands apart from all political, national or institutional aggression:

“These early communities, burning with love for Christ, had no creeds, no patrology, no expositions of Scripture, but the few words of Christ that reached their ears immediately became their creed, needing no explanations or teaching or interpretation, but needing, as they saw it, to be experienced and lived. When they heard “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”, they bore the cruellest humiliations and insults and attacks. When they heard “Love your enemies”, history recorded no resistance put up by Christians, whether positive or negative, against their persecutors. And they bowed their necks to the sword in humility and obedience to honour the words of Christ.”¹

xlviii *Orthodox Prayer Life* p.274.

xlix cf. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. ‘War, Christian attitude to. pp.1719-20.

1 Matthew the Poor. *The Communion of Love*. New York, USA, 1984. pp.25-6.

Like most Christian teachers in the *oikumene* and in Coptic Orthodox Egypt, Father Matthew has often referred to Jesus as the *Prince of Peace*. We might think of two contradictory responses in the gospels. Jesus once said to his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10.34).^{li} But in the fourth gospel at the Last Supper when Jesus spoke with his disciples he said to them, "'Peace I leave with you: my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'" (John 14.27).^{lii} The inherent contradiction in the gospels of St Matthew and St John is at least partly resolved when we understand that for Jesus peace itself seems to have meant not simply the absence of an extreme struggle but the real presence of love. This is the message of Abouna Matta El Meskeen too.

9

"The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. She must take her part in the social life of the world, not lording it over men, but helping and serving them. The Church must tell men, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others. She will have to speak of moderation, purity, confidence, loyalty, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, content and modesty. The Church must not underestimate the importance of human example, which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus."^{liii}

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45)

Within the Coptic Orthodox Church a powerful element of tragedy occurred in the life of Abouna Matta El Meskeen in the last century. It cannot be ignored. *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt* is a regrettable title for any study of Coptic Orthodox Egypt. But the publishers at Oxford University Press once suggested that the original title was to have been *The Century Long Struggle for Coptic Equality*. Title and subtitle were reversed.^{liv} The author S.S. Hasan describes herself as a nominal Muslim woman, or more precisely as an agnostic. After receiving political asylum in the United States of America, and being stripped of Egyptian nationality, she returned to Cairo in 1987. Ms Hasan narrowly escaped arrest by the secret police. But she went on to conduct fieldwork for her book *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt* from 1991-95. Hasan was also the author of *Enemy in*

li NRSV, 1997.

lii NRSV, 1997.

liii Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Fontana, Collins 1959, p.166.

liv S.S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslim in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality*, New York, 2003, 320 pages.

the Promised Land, having conducted detailed political research in Israel-Palestine. She was an effective translator of Arabic, a gifted English-language journalist for *The New York Times*, and frequently reported on both the State of Israel and the Arab Republic of Egypt. Ms. S.S. Hasan was widely acknowledged as a remarkably gifted graduate of Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she eventually became an Associate of the Harvard Centre for Middle Eastern Studies.

During her preliminary research in 1991 Ms Hasan decided to focus as carefully as possible on the central institutions of the Coptic Orthodox Church. It was even more important to acknowledge the political and social position of His Holiness Pope Shenouda the Third, who had been confined to a monastery for some years (September 1981- January 1985). She longed to meet Abouna Matta El Meskeen. But Ms. Hasan was warned that the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch might find out that she had visited the famous desert father, who presided over the monastery of Abu Makar. William Kilada, a leading Coptic intellectual, warned her that if she had taken the risk of meeting a person “who was anathema” to the Pope then “all the welcoming doors of the church will suddenly be closed to you.”^{lv}

She did not meet Father Matthew the Poor Man, though she did interview the monks who were closest to him. One of them told her that Matthew had left the monastery because the Coptic Patriarch had conducted an “unrelenting campaign of vilification” against him. Hasan believed that some had even ‘intrigued’ against Matta within his own monastery by ‘infiltrating it with spies’. Some monks from Abu Makar were allegedly offered positions in the clerical hierarchy. Three of Matta’s disciples withdrew from his monastery. They became bishops, acting directly and personally on behalf of the Coptic Patriarch. One of them claimed that he had fallen ill from lack of sleep and another described Father Matthew as ‘hard driving, both of himself and others.’ The generally received opinion was that their spiritual father was “exacting in the standards that he imposed on the monks at work, as those by which he measured their industry in learning and their religious devotion.”^{lvi} Hasan has confirmed the internal conflict within the Egyptian Church. She believes that the discord has lasted for at least three decades. Her fifteen-page chapter concerning the late twentieth century Coptic Orthodox leadership carries the sub-title ‘Bishop Shenouda, Bishop Samuel and Abbot Matthew the Poor’ but the title itself can hardly be ignored, and simply reads “The Warring Founding Fathers.” For at least a quarter of a century the great majority of Western students of Coptology have been aware of bitter verbal assaults upon Abouna Matta El Meskeen. The greatest number of abusers were modern bishops. But the older and wiser bishops, the humbler monks and the active Coptic laity were not critics of the ‘abbot’ or of his two listed – ‘warring’ -colleagues.

lv ibid p.94.

lvi ibid p.90.

Matthew the Poor had deliberately broken away from the church revival of the 1960s-90s. He judged the twentieth-century Coptic Orthodox institutional restoration to be too socially orientated and far too political. He was afraid of the public role of the Coptic Orthodox Church. But he worried much more about the position of any patriarch in a political position as the lone communal spokesperson for the Copts. Pope Kyrillos the Sixth, who died on 9 March 1971, was not a politician. He had stood before the altar every day for forty years. The Divine Liturgy was the central action of his life. Politics was not. A life of Eucharistic devotion and prayer was the answer Kyrillos gave to the Coptic situation, the Coptic problem and the Coptic anxiety in Egypt. He was not a demagogue, certainly not an orator. But he was a holy man. Not long after the demise of Pope Kyrillos in 1971, Bishop Shenouda was elected His Holiness Pope Shenouda the Third, the one hundred and seventeenth Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The assessment of Professor P.J. Vatikiotis from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University was sharp:

“He (Pope Shenouda) was already known for his rather aggressive, activist views regarding the promotion and defence of the rights of the Coptic community. During his ministry, Coptic youth organisations proliferated and became more vociferous in their demands for greater rights in the Egyptian body politic.”^{lvii}

The March 1980 crisis between the rather secular Government of Egypt, the militant Muslim Brotherhood, and the Coptic Orthodox Church, seemed about to become a disaster. The Government was referring to ‘the vociferous protestations of the leader of a national minority.’^{lviii} The public minority leader was Pope Shenouda. Muslim extremists were reported to have bombed churches and Coptic properties in the north and south. There were armed and violent clashes – ‘involving Coptic Christians and Muslim militants, between 1977 and 1981.’^{lix}

The internal political and religious crisis escalated in June 1981 when there were alleged to have been armed clashes between Christians and Muslims. Pope Shenouda was confined to a desert monastery, and over 1,500 mass arrests took place during the month of September 1981. Abouna Matta appealed to President Sadat for the support and protection of the Coptic minority throughout Egypt. On 6 October 1981 Islamic extremists assassinated Sadat. A Coptic Orthodox Bishop was killed on Sadat’s podium. Ms Hasan recorded the tragic death of Anba Samuel

lvii P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt*, Weidenfeld Paperbacks, Fourth Edition. London 1991. *ibid.* p.421

lviii *ibid.* p.422.

lix *ibid.* p. 421.

who had been gunned down on the presidential dais - close to Nasser City on the fringe of Central Cairo. Anba Samuel (born Sa'ad Aziz, 1920) was described by Ms Hasan as 'amiable and easygoing' but not 'stern' like 'the doctrinaire Abouna Matta.' Bishop Samuel was responsible for the Bishopric for Public, Ecumenical and Social Services. He was most admired in the ecumenical World Council of Churches, and well known in many countries. S.S. Hasan states very clearly that the Coptic Patriarch referred to Samuel as 'a very bad man', and described his assassination as an act of 'divine justice' that had rid the church of a 'scourge.'^{lx} Father Matthew the Poor Man firmly believed that the current movement for Coptic revival lost its bearings whenever it allowed itself to become too involved in communal and political action. The Copts know that they are a minority but 'they may be,' in Matta's view, 'a minority in faithfulness to Christ.' In a piece entitled *Articles Between Politics and Religion*^{lxi} Matta insisted that the Coptic clergy were called to serve as models of time-honoured Christian virtue, helping believers through prayer and persuading them to repentance and confession.

Politics was not at the centre of Abouna Matta El Meskeen's monastic life. He was quite certain that any attachment to politics was against the spirit of Christianity. In *Articles Between Politics and Religion* he had clearly affirmed that 'in defending the gospel one sacrifices oneself, but in attacking others one must truly sacrifice the gospel for oneself alone.' Christians must always be prepared to lay down their lives to defend their faith, but not to attack their opponents. 'Make me a channel of your Peace. Where there is hatred let me bring your love.' This powerful Franciscan confession can be an authentic expression of Christian pacifism and it is the absolute opposite of far too many modern forms of Islam. For the majority of Copts in Egypt and in the Diaspora, Abouna Matta was often described as one whose intrinsically good nature was 'devoted completely to prayer and communion – and especially to confession.' These three essential mystical elements have often been affirmed as necessarily playing a vital role in Coptic Orthodox monasticism. Matta affirmed the centrality of confession, communion and devotion, but the reigning Coptic Patriarch described Matta as 'headstrong, imperious, or arrogant.'^{lxii} The conflict between any Christians in any churches throughout the world has sadly not ended.

In many of the Western churches –Catholic and Protestant - Abouna Matta El Meskeen is regarded as the greatest Coptic Orthodox spiritual father of the last century. Metropolitan Mikhail of Assyut produced a note concerning Matta in the Coptic Christian newspaper *Watani*:

lx S. S. Hasan, p.96.

lxi Matta El Meskeen (Arabic version only): Maqalat bayna ai-siyassah wa-al din, Wadi El Natroun, Published by the Library of Abu Makar, 1966

lxii S.S. Hasan, Christians versus Muslim in Modern Egypt, pp.96-7.

“Father Matta lived a monastic, ascetic and virtuous life for the greater part of the eighty-seven years he spent on earth. I make this testimony for the record and because it is the truth: Father Matta El Meskeen was a bright milestone for the Copts. He represented a new era in Coptic theological writing. During his long monastic life he continued to fight and struggle as an honourable spiritual knight. He never lost sight of his target but always took a precise aim at it. He is now carried into heaven.”^{lxiii}

Matta was an exemplary teacher and guardian, epitomizing the consummate Coptic Orthodox asceticism of the Wadi El Natroun and equally powerfully expressing an authentic ecumenical prayer life in the modern world. Prayer is a personal relationship with God for all Christians who not only listened to Father Matthew the Poor Man but to each other. “The mystical experience which is inseparable from the way towards union can only be gained in prayer and by prayer. In the most general sense, every presence of man before the face of God is a prayer; but this presence must become a constant and conscious attitude – prayer must become perpetual, as uninterrupted as breathing or the beating of the heart.”^{lxiv} Prayer lives on in the daily life of each faithful, individual Christian but perhaps above all in the daily life of Abouna Matta El Meskeen who was a powerful witness of both Coptic Orthodox and ecumenical spirituality.

lxiii Watani, 18 June 2006.

lxiv Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clarke London 1957, p.209.

EULOGY IN MEMORY OF ER. HEGUMENOS MATTA

*By His Beatitude Metropolitan Mikhail
Metropolitan of Assiut
and Head of the Monastery of St. Macarius*

Born in 1919, Father Matta El-Meskeen lived a monastic, ascetic, virtuous life for the better part of the 87 years he spent on earth.

On 8 June, at dawn, and following some 10 years' struggle with illness, he passed away to a joyous everlasting life. As a child he loved the Church he grew up in and was since early youth, a gifted writer of Christian literature. Father Matta's works were characterized with a unique spirituality, and his writing maintained a growing sublimation until the end.

Deep inside, he sensed the beauty of a life spent with the Lord, and decided to dedicate his entire life to Christ the King. He started his monastic way, and became thus among the first generation of highly educated monks in the Coptic Church. Many followed his example and became his disciples.

After a long, arduous journey on earth, Father Matta left for the Heavenly Kingdom between the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was one of the major themes around which Father Matta's extensive writings and unique contemplation revolved. These drew a lot of discussions, questions, and comments; and it must be said that no one on earth—even if their life is a mere one day—is past erring.

I make this testimony for the record and the truth: Father Hegumenos Matta El-Meskeen was a bright milestone and represented a new era in writing, during his monastic period and continues after he fought and struggled as an honorable knight who never lost sight of his target and took precise aim at it.

Father Matta is now carried in the everlasting arms. He is commending the mission for which he dedicated his utmost efforts to the hands of Christ the Savior, who will judge the living and the dead, examining the depth of every man, and how greatly we trust in His promise: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to what he has done."

Glory be to His Holy Name for evermore. Amen.

Translated by Saad Michael Saad from the Arabic original published in *Watani* of 11 June 2006.

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A word of gratitude and appreciation for the soul of our reposed beatified,

FR. MATTHEW THE POOR

Abbott of Abba Makar Monastery, in the Wilderness of Shihit, Egypt

By Fr. Shenouda el Anba Pishoy

*“What is that coming up from the wilderness, like a column of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and frankincense,
with all the fragrant powders of the merchant?
Who is this that looks forth like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners.
Leaning upon her beloved?”*

Song of Solomon 3:6, 6:10,8:5

Indeed, I do not know where to begin discussing the life of this saintly desert father. There are no words in the human language that can precisely chronicle such a prolific life, rich in God’s work in countless areas, nor can words sum it up. The life of Fr. Matthew the Poor (*Abouna Matta el Meskeen*) remains above words, written or spoken. His life needs not a brief article such as this, or even a book, but perhaps volumes. Because who can truly comprehend the many facets of a life such as his life, each day of which can be the subject of a book or a text? Nonetheless, we will try to recount a few, out of the many, which we can talk about now.

I. MY FIRST MEETING WITH HIM:

I first met Fr. Matthew the Poor in 1970 on a trip to his monastery. He had just embarked on building hermitages for the monks adjacent to the monastery’s fence. His expertise in construction, as in all his projects, was better than that of the best architects or architectural firms around. Each hermitage was separate from the others and consisted of two rooms, a full bathroom and a small kitchen.

As a young man back then, I mustered my courage, sidestepping the protocol and almost forgetting that I was talking to one of the great fathers of monasticism who was perhaps older in age than my own father, and went on to comment about

the hermitages saying to him: “Wouldn’t these monk cells, which look like small villas, be considered inconsistent with all monastic canons? Many people outside the monastery live in humble dwellings, sometimes with as many as five people cramped into one room, sharing a bathroom with other tenants, and here we see each monk living in a large hermitage surrounded by all means of comfort?” He did not reply with any kind of rebuke or reproach. Rather, he asked me what my name was, and when I answered him, he put his blessed right hand around my shoulder, and in a fatherly way proceeded to say: “Son, I thank you for your courage, but I did not build these monk cells to take any monk away from his monasticism or his asceticism, but to provide him with a serene setting that will help him remain inside for prolonged periods of time without the need to leave. This will help him realize the objective of his monasticism, which is to stay inside with the doors of his monk cell shut, and this is the secret of a monk’s viability.”

He then added, “Monasticism, after all, is a bonding of the heart with God; it starts inside the monk’s heart and ends up there. As for the role a monk’s cell may play, it remains to be only a catalyst. A monk’s cell, or even a cave will not make a monk, but the foundation of his entire monasticism lies within his inner intent.”

He embarrassed me by his meekness and love. I then went on to ask him for a word of advice as a father who experienced monasticism and spiritual life in all its dimensions and in its deepest mysteries. He was reluctant, but I was insistent and because of my nagging he answered my request saying: “Let prayer be your support in all that matters in your life. Pray, my son in depth, in understanding and in fervor. Resign yourself to what is against your own self. And remember me in your prayers too.” I then kissed his pure right hand and went away from his presence enlightened and deeply touched by his love, humility and awesome fatherhood.

II. GIFT OF TEACHING AND EXEGESIS:

As God had given him the gift of architecture and that of stewardship, He also gave him the gift of writing. Starting with his first book “*Orthodox Prayer Life*” he went on to write books on exegesis, books to explain church dogmas and rituals, and lastly he wrote “*With The Christ*” and “*With The Virgin*” in four parts. All his books and texts were written in a very unique, deep and characteristic style and all reflect a superior monastic life experience of over a half-century. His books, audio tapes and CD’s, which fill our homes and churches locally and abroad, are recognized academically all over the world as valuable references.

I remember during my ministry in St Mark church in Chicago from 1980 to 1988 that a pious Russian Orthodox nun used to visit our church. She read one of Fr. Matthew the Poor’s books; “*The Communion of Love*.” After she read the book time and again, she commented saying, “Fr. Matthew the Poor is my hero.” She asked me for more of his books and I gave her parts of “*Orthodox Prayer Life*” that were translated into English by some parishioners in Chicago. Indeed, Fr. Matthew the Poor has enriched not only monastic life but also the whole Church with his precious writings, many of which have been translated into several languages.

Abba Makar Monastery also publishes a monthly magazine called “St. Mark Monthly,” in which Fr. Matthew wrote more than one article in Arabic in addition to a column in Greek, and, in each issue, he always wrote an elaborate article in English. It is one of the Church’s best periodicals, with widespread membership due to the depth of its subject matter and the richness of its substance. Fr. Matthew never used it as a podium to talk about himself or his achievements, nor to defend himself against accusations directed against him. His only objective was to provide readers with guidance to build their souls and benefit their lives; leaving judgment to time and history, understanding that history is a fair judge that knows no courtesy. He placed all of his concerns in the hands of the Lord, who, on the Day of Judgment, weighs intents and motives; hidden and unseen, with scales that never err in their reckoning.

III. MAINTAINING PEACE FOR THE MONASTERY AND ITS MONKS; HIMSELF BEING AN EXAMPLE:

Fr. Matthew the Poor should be commended for maintaining peace and integrity within the monastery. He sustained peace among monks and upheld respect and reverence for the monastery. Pilgrimages to the monastery were only for those who sincerely desired to obtain the blessings of these holy places, and the blessings of the saints who dwelt in them and inundated their grounds with their tears and pure blood.

He set a good example for his monastery’s monks as well as all monks. In his simple way of living and simple manner of dressing, in his renunciation of worldly possessions, he never distinguished himself from the youngest monks of the monastery. It is said that he was once presented with a set of expensive pens as a gift by one of his spiritual children to help him in writing his notes. He declined to accept the gift, saying to the giver: “Beloved, you are not going to help me with these expensive pens, for I am used to the regular pens that anyone can afford. Besides, if I lost one of these valuable pens, or misplaced it, this may cause me some distress and annoyance. But the inexpensive pens do the same job and losing them won’t be a problem.” In this way he set the example in self-denial and simplicity which embodied his foremost attributes.

IV. HIS CARING FOR THE LORD’S BRETHREN:

Fr. Matthew the Poor took a special interest in the Lord’s brethren, helping them in all their needs so that they may lead dignified lives. As was the norm in all of his activities, he approached each endeavor by thoroughly studying the subject at hand. His projects covered poor neighborhoods and sprawling, haphazard slums. In this capacity, he went beyond taking care of his monastery’s monks to taking care of the world around him; the world that his heart cared for even when he was within his monastery’s fences.

V. THE STATE HONORS HIM:

In the late 1970s, President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt visited the Abba Makar Monastery and admired its many projects and its participation in the development of Egypt's economy. During his visit, he voiced to Fr. Matthew the Poor an unforgettable remark: "The state with all its capabilities could not have done what you have done for your monastery and your country." President Sadat then dedicated 1000 acres to the Abba Makar Monastery, in addition to a truck and a bulldozer, to help the monastery with its projects and as a gesture of appreciation for the monastery's efforts to serve all.

VI. HIS ENDURANCE, PATIENCE AND FORBEARANCE:

Fr. Matthew the Poor, like all the greats of monastic saints and esteemed pioneers, faced a lot of troubles and weathered many dilemmas, rigors and wars, both from within and without. He confronted all of them with a lion's heart. He never tired, never gave up and never looked back. He did not allow these wars to divert his attention, and did not concern himself with them. He never answered any of the cruel and unjustified accusations that he encountered. Rather, he endured them with the patience and faith of saints. He always said: "Life is too precious to waste it in wars and strife, but we should spend it in constructive, objective and undisturbed work."

Even though his achievements in so many areas are abundant, emphasis should not be placed on what his hands have accomplished, but on his prominent life, in which God's grace was profoundly present wherever he dwelt: starting with Deir el-Suryan, to Deir Abba Samuel the Confessor, to Wadi el-Rayyan and ending in Deir Abba Makar, which, on the day he took over its responsibility, was comprised of no more than four elderly monks who were unable to find their own bare sustenance and would wait for alms from visitors. After only a very short period of time, and in a race against time, this monastery became a beacon for the vast wilderness and for the whole world, thanks to his energy and fervent determination and, above all, thanks to God's grace that worked through him and his children, the monks. Even if our beloved Fr. Matthew the Poor has departed our vanishing world, we know that death cannot put a halt or an end to a life such as his.

VII. HIS RECEPTION BY SAINTS:

I say the truth, and my conscience is my witness that I was shocked when I heard of the departure of Fr. Matthew the Poor. I wept a great deal over the profound loss the Church and monasticism has suffered by his passing at a time when we needed him the most. The next day I held a Liturgy for the repose of his soul, as a humble gesture of duty toward a man who dedicated his life and all his God-given talents to serve monasticism in particular, and the Church in general. In that Liturgy I was comforted tremendously by the thought of how saints have received him, especially the great fathers of monasticism, and how their collective body

could now rest regarding him. St. Anthony the Great; Abba Makar, father of the wilderness of Scetis (*Shihit*); the other two Abba Makars; the two Roman fathers Maximus and Domitius, the children of kings and the disciples of Abba Makar; St. Moses the Strong; St. Pishoy the righteous and the perfect man, the beloved of our Good Savior; the Elders of the wilderness of Scetis; and also his own children in monasticism, whom he had primed and trained and are now in their eternity. All of these saints; how was their heavenly celebration at the release of this righteous soul to paradise?

Indeed, our beloved father has exited from this world quietly and unceremoniously, but heaven has compensated him, nonetheless. For now he harvests the fruits of his labor, sweat, strife, struggle, tears, patience and endurance. Christ will give him a crown; will give him his wages and his share in the returns of what he has done for the good of monasticism, the good of the Church and the good of the whole world.

Finally, my beloved father Fr. Matthew the Poor, allow me to greet you with this hymn, of which every word applies to your life, for you have loved your Church in her faith, her dogmas, her rites and her hymns. These words are taken from “E Pek Ran” (*Your Name*), a church hymn which is sung for the saints on their feasts:

*“YOUR NAME is great in the land of Egypt oh beatified and venerable saint among all saints, our pure father, Abba Matta el-Meskeen.
Hail to your tomb full of grace.
Hail to your body out of which sprung healing for all sicknesses.
Truly and indeed your awesome remembrance moved my heart.
Blessed indeed oh father the saint because you have rejected this vain world and its vanishing possessions.
Blessed indeed for you have done wonders in your holy monastery.
Let us actively go inside your monastery to gain healing for our sicknesses and find mercy from the Lord.
Ask the Lord for us, oh our pure father, that He may forgive us our sins.”*

May a double share of your pure spirit be on your monastery’s monks and on all the monks of the sacred wilderness of Scetis, and on all your many spiritual children everywhere in the world. Remember us and forget us not. Your sweet memory is in our hearts until we are reunited with you. Hail to your pure spirit. Hail to your teeming monastery. Hail to monasticism that takes pride in you as one of her pioneers. And finally hail to the Church that begat you.

GONE IS THE MOST GLITTERING STAR
In Memory of Abouna Matta El-Meskeen
By FAYEK M. ISHAK

Gone is the most glittering star
Who beckons to us from afar
In the galaxy of modern monastic endeavor
The luminous cluster of austere ascetic glamour

Shining among the chosen vessels of God
The saints who vigilantly labored with no nod
Departed to his mostly aspired otherworldly habitation
Where grace is the speechless language of the souls' citation

The citadel of sanctity was laboriously established
On the glories of *Orthodoxia* that we all nourished
Non-forlorn! The unmatched treasure you left us
Would keep many a generation digging at no fuss

Relishing the spirit from the fountain-source of holiness
Quenching the raging thirst with draughts of saintliness
You have planted and nurtured a vast vineyard
For many an inquiring soul who would be on guard

Gathering the aromatic nectar of laborious toil
Culling the blossoms of a richly fertile soil

O departed soul! We miss you more than words can say
Your memory will be kept in every loving bay

Rest in peace among the saintly whom you ever-cherish
Your beloved and sanctified souls who will never perish

Dr. Fayek M. Ishak is Professor Emeritus and Editor in Chief of Coptologia
Theological Publications

AN ELEGY FOR FATHER MATTA THE LAMP OF SCETIS

By George Behawi

In the quiet sea of the sand of Scete
You sleep like its eternal rocks
The rocks are silent
Your lips no longer speak
Your death now speaks louder

Before you the old theology of the isolated church
Battered by storms from inside and out
The greatness of Christ went under tons of Folklore
The love of God was buried under false teaching

We loved our darkness and thought it is light
We loved our isolation and considered it holiness
We even believed that we are the only true Christians
Christ became the property of the Copts

It is hard to say to the blind that the sun is shining
It is impossible to convince the deaf
that the world is full of great melodies
It is shameful to say that we are the best Christians
As if God was a prisoner of our worship
As if the Holy and Divine Trinity resigned His ministry

From the womb of divine providence you were born
Like many of our great ones
For you, like them, solitude became bread
Never once you replied to insults
Like a lamb you lived
Like a lion you preached the gospel

Being a mystic you opened for us the highest level of awareness
Our decaying Christian Arabic received new words

For you faith was a revelation of the Person of Christ
From Christ we receive divine life
Deification was very new to us
Fear of Islam had reduced Jesus to a collection of ideas
Legalism filled our empty life
Replaced the grace of God in Christ
It is not false to call you the Dawn of our history
The light that shined in our inner life

Before you the Holy Spirit was known by name
Truly the Holy Spirit was in our prayers
But you came to tell us that his Hypostasis lives in us
Many of our little ones were disturbed
They wanted to speak only of the Charismas
They never had one Charisma to share with us
It goes back to the fear of god indwelling in us
They believed in Allah who abhors our humanity
The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ loves to be in us
His love makes us loved like his Son
This love was too much to be proclaimed in Egypt
Where, since the days of the Pyramids our humanity has been crushed

Your writings remind us of the beautiful branches of a tree
In the heat of the summer of Egypt
Many will sit under their shade
Many will eat from their divine food
Many will regret that they never met you

Believing in the written words as the treasure of the future
We write, as you said once, for the coming generations
We have to put into their hands our tools
You opened our mind to the universal Christian heritage
A mind that has perceived freedom
A mind that has received the light of Christ
Will never go back to the darkness of slavery to ignorance

You will not hear these words
As you are now plunged in the sea of divine love
But like you I wrote this for the coming generations
In the coming years your greatness will shine

Dr. George Habib Bebawi was the Director of Orthodox Christian Studies at
Cambridge University in England.
He is presently teaching in universities in the USA.

CONTEMPORARY COPTIC POPULAR PIETY ACCORDING TO HAGIOLOGICAL COLLAGES

Otto F.A. Meinardus

Introduction

Throughout the Middle East one can distinguish the so-called official religion from the various popular cults. This difference is discernible among the orthodox and catholic forms of Christianity as well as those in Islam. The “official religion” of the orthodox Copts has its theological foundations in the Canon of Holy Scripture, the theological decisions of the first three ecumenical councils of 325, 381, 431 and the teachings of the fathers and doctors of the Church. The “official cult” is celebrated regularly by the clergy in the Eucharistic liturgy; it is set forth in the catechisms as well as in the official theological treatises. This type of religion is a predominantly intellectual encounter with the teachings of the Church, and as such, its appeal by its very nature somewhat limited to more educated Christians. The less sophisticated Copts who are unable to comprehend the fine details of Christological and stereological data, which are couched in abstract thought forms and patterns, have no other choice but to cling to mere tangible images. These are the saints of the Church who are examples of faith and service to be followed and even imitate.

In more than one way, the popular religion and piety responds to the socio-economic and political environment, it reflects the physical and spiritual needs of the common people. Certain saints are called upon to assist in certain economic crisis situations, while others are known for their help to women in distress. For most Copts, the equestrian warrior-saints like Sts. George, Mercurius, Victor, Theodore or Menas are believed to be the most trustworthy “helpers in need”. In case of sickness and diseases, Copts turn to the “unmercenary saints”, Sts. Cosmas and Damian or Cyrus and John. They heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out the devils, for freely they had received their charismata, and freely they offer their services (Mt: 10:8)

These 21st century collages of biblical and hagiological themes furnish a clear and incontestable document of the contemporary popular piety of the Copts. The collages are composed of numerous inexpensive devotional pictures which are dis-

tributed in church- or monastic kiosks or bookshops. Some Copts carry them in handbags, purses, use them on their key-chains or attach them to their cars. Some of these pictures, cast in plastic serve as a kind of apotropaic protection or as amulet against various threats. The popularity of these devotional pictures among Copts is widespread from Alexandria to Aswan and also in Coptic parishes of the Diaspora. The collages were composed by arranging the most popular devotional pictures, thereby reflecting the common piety of the contemporary Copts. The selection and arrangement is published by the Coptic bookshop Al-Mahabba in Cairo.

The choice of persons is only partly determined by the lists of saints in the Eucharistic liturgy, the *magma*, the commemoration of the saints and the *al-baraka*, the benediction. The collages portray different types of saints. There are the New Testament saints like St. Stephen the proto-martyr and St. Mark the evangelist. The doctors of the Church, Sts. Cyril and Athanasius coined the Christological and theological doctrines of the Copts. Important to the life of the Church are the monastic fathers, St. Anthony and St. Paula the Theban, Sts Ammonius, Macarius, Shenouda, Macrobios as well as the famous ascetics, like St. Onuphrius. There are the famous equestrian warriors, the two Theodori, St. Mercurius, St. Abaskhiroun, and St. George. The Martyrs of the Mamluke period are presented by St. Tegi (Anba Roweiss) and St. Barsoma the Naked. Among the women Saints, there are the popular St. Demianah and her 40 virgins, St. Julietta and her son Cyriacus and St. Mohrail and her brother Hor and St. Rebecca and her five children.

Important in these collages are the contemporary "saints", to whom modern Copts ascribe miraculous powers and who receive intense devotion and admiration. In most of these cases, their popularity arose locally. However, modern means of communication and the circulation of devotional material have made a widespread dissemination possible. In almost all instances, the fame of these men is due to *post-mortem* miracles consisting of prophecies, healings and exorcisms. These Coptic clerics belong to the mid-20th century, the period of the patriarchate of Pope Kyrillus VI (1959-1971). Among these priests is Qummus Mikhail Ibrahim of Shubra, born April 20, 1899 in Quwaisna, died March 26, 1975. He had served as father confessor of Pope Shenuda III. Abouna Yassa Mikhail of the Upper Egyptian town of Tima was born 1877 and died on June 10, 1962. His tomb has become a popular pilgrimage site. Abuna Abd el-Messih al-Maqary al-Manahry (1892-1963) of the village of Nazlet Abu Shehata, Matai, once a monk at Dair Abu Maqar, is known for his many visions and miracles which he performed in Upper Egypt. Abouna Andraus al-Samwili, born blind, lived all his life in the desert monastery of St. Samuel at el-Qalamon. Prior to his death on February 7, 1988 he experienced a vision of the famous *Mater Dolorosa*, which the Copts venerate since 1990.

Then there are those medieval Coptic saints that were recently archeologically discovered. In 1991, the relics of the 12th century monk and martyr St. Bashnouna were unearthed in the old Cairo Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus. In the same year, archeologists discovered the bodily remains of the 10th century St. Simon the Tanner in the subterranean Church of the Virgin of Babylon al-Darag in Old Cairo.

Moreover, on account of the recent translations (2000-2001) of the relics of the 7th century martyrs of Najran (Yemen), the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem and those of the Twelve Apostles, it is to be expected that the list of popular saints will significantly increase in the future.

The canonical acceptance of some of the 20th century saints is still hidden in the fog of the *cultus immemorabilis*, in local veneration and admirations. So far, they are not officially confirmed by the Holy Synod. These persons, men and women, are highly valued and respected by the faithful and their relics are venerated. Their *Vitae* witness to miracles and extraordinary acts of piety, healing and exorcisms. These are often locally published with or without a preface by the diocesan bishop. Devotional pictures of these “postulants”, sometimes with the *hanut* attached to them, are distributed. This in turn leads to the kind of tacit recognition by the Church, comparable to a *beatificatio aequipollens*.

Because there is a lack of devotional pictures of the Old Testament Patriarchs and prophets and the New Testament Evangelists apostles they are not included in the collage. These Biblical persons are highly venerated in the “official cult”, they seem to play a less significant role in the popular piety of the Copts.

Three collages shall be presented, the “Heavenly Paradise”, “The communion of Saints” and “The Light of the World”. Around the central picture of Christ, various Coptic saints are assembled in their typical iconographical setting as portrayed in the popular devotional pictures. This enables Coptic believers to identify the miniature pictures of saints without much difficulty.

A: The Collage of the “Heavenly Paradise”

“The Heavenly Paradise” is a modern collage of 44 traditional and 10 “contemporary” saints, who have received popular recognition and veneration during the past 50 years. All saints are set in an Old Testament environment. There is the rainbow demonstrating the covenant between God and Noah and his sons (Gen 9:8-17). Four rivers originating from Mt. Zion water the paradise (Gen 2:10-14)

- 1 Christ Pantocrator** is portrayed with the imperial scepter (Ps 45:6, Heb 1:8) in his left hand. With his right hand, he extends the Coptic “one-finger-benediction” based upon (Ex 31:18, Deut 9:10, Lk 11:20). The three joints of the index finger symbolize the unity of the Trinity (Mikhail of Dimyat, 12th cent.). The scarlet robe was placed upon Christ by Pilate’s soldiers (Mt 27:28).
- 2 The Holy Virgin** holds in her left hand the imperial scepter, suggesting Mary as queen of heaven. In Latin Mariology, Mary is “queen of all angels” (Anselm of Canterbury, 1109). She appears as the Virgin of Zeitun, 1968; Edfu 1982; Ard Babaoblu, Shubra, 1986; Shentana al-Hagar, 1997. She represents the type of the Immaculate of the “wonderful medal” as seen by Catherine Laboure of the Convent of the Filles de la Charite, Paris 1830.

In 19th century Coptic Iconography, Christ and the Holy Virgin are always crowned (Astasi ar-Rumi)

- 3 **The heavenly host** is presented by several *putti* playing “the music of the spheres”, In the Western Middle Ages (12th/16th cent.), *putti* were often incorporated in works of ecclesiastical art. Here they play the violin, the harp, the lute, the trumpet or sing praises to the Glory of God. *Putti* playing music are unknown in the Coptic tradition. The only angel playing an instrument is Suriel the trumpeter.
- 4 **St. Bashnouna al-Maqary** (Bashans 24, June 1). In 1142 he suffered martyrdom. His relics were discovered on April 25, 1991 in the Church of Abu Sergah, Old Cairo.
- 5 **St. Barbara** (Kiyahk 8, December 17), martyr under Maximian. Her relics appeared in Old Cairo in the 11th cent. They repose in the Church of St. Barbara and in other Coptic churches.
- 6 **Abouna Andraus al-Samwili** was born blind, as a young man he joined the Monastery of St. Samuel in the Qualamun desert. Just prior to his death on February 7, 1988 he experienced a “vision “of the *Mater Dolorosa*, a popular picture of the “Sorrowful Virgin” (by Carlo Dolci, 1616-1686). Since 1990 he is venerated by many Copts.
- 7 **Qummus Mikhail el-Beheri** (1847-1923). Because of his many charismatic gifts, he is one of the most popular Upper Egyptian monks of the Monastery of the Virgin Al- Muharraq. In June 1985 the Coptic Holy Synod raised him “to the honor of the altars”. In 1991 his relics were transferred to a new reliquary in the Church of St. George, Dair Al-Muharraq, others repose in Ishnin Al-Nassara, Dair Al-Azab, Fayyum and in Old Cairo.
- 8 **St. Abaskhiroun of Qallin** (Ba'ounah 7, June 14), equestrian officer who suffered severe torture and martyrdom by Arianos, governor of Ansena. A large mouldid takes place at his church in Bayahu, Samallut.
- 9 **St. Takla Haymanot the Ethiopian** (Misra 24, August 30), well known founder of Ethiopian monasticism (13th cent.). Because of his numerous celestial journeys, he is portrayed with wings. His relics are venerated in Zaqaziq (1848).
- 10 **St. Macarius, Bishop of Edkow** (Baba 17, November 6) accompanied Dioscorus in exile, he later returned to Alexandria, refused to accept the decisions of Chalcedon.
- 11 **St. Macarius the Great** (Baramhat 27, April 5), founder of monasticism in the desert of Scetis, 4th cent. Many of his sayings are recorded in the *Apophthegmata*.
- 12 **St. Macarius the Alexandrian** (Bashans 6, May 14). He surpassed all his contemporaries in his ascetic practices. He was a contemporary of Macarius the Great and Palladius.
- 13 **St. Samuel of el-Qalamon** (Kiyahk 8, December 17). Served as disciple of St. Agathon in the desert of Scetis. Later he suffered persecution when he refused

to recognize the Council of Chalcedon. He was driven away from the Monastery, he moved to el-Qalamon, where he established the Monastery of St. Samuel. His relics repose in his Monastery.

- 14 **Sts. Cyrus and John** (Ba'ounah 14, June 21).brothers from Damanhour, served as unmercenary physicians, were beheaded by Diocletian: their cult was in Abuquir until the 7th/8th century.
- 15 **Sts. Maximus and Domadius** (Tuba 17, January 25) were the sons of the Roman Emperor Valentinian. Around 383 they went to the inner desert of Scetis. The Monastery of Al-Baramos received its name from the two Roman princes.
- 16 **St. Marina of Antioch** (Abib 23, July 30) killed a dragon by making the sign of the cross. She was tortured when she refused to worship the idols. Finally she was beheaded.
- 17 **St. Ammonius** (Kiyahk 14, December 23) , bishop of Essna, he spent half of each week in a nearby monastery, the rest of the week in his diocese, setting an example for Pope Shenuda III. Eventually he was beheaded by the governor of Ansena in 303.
- 18 **Sts. Cosmas and Damian** (Hatour 22, December 1), well known “silver less physicians”. From May 27/29 epileptics and those suffering from nervous disorders, visit their shrine at Manyal Shiha near el-Badrashen (Giza).
- 19 **St. Paphnotius** (Amshir 15, February 22) was a disciple of St. Anthony the Great and lived in the inner desert of Scetis. After the death of St. Macarius the Great he became his successor as “Shepherd of the ascetics”.
- 20 **St. Onuphrius** (Hatour 16, November 25) was one of the naked ascetics of the inner desert. He was discovered by St. Paphnotius. His relics repose in the Convent of St. Theodore, Haret el-Rum.
- 21 **St. Shenouda the Archimandrite** (Abib 17, July 14) was the leading prominent original writer in Coptic literature using the dialect of his own district of Atriye. At his uncle's death, he became abbot of the White Monastery in Sohag. In 431 he attended the ecumenical council at Ephesus. As reformer of Coptic monasticism he made rules for all monks, dignitaries, laymen and women.
- 22 **Anba Bishoy** (Abib 8, July 15) as a disciple of St. Bemwah he became one of the early settlers in Scetis, a friend of St. John Colobus. His relics repose in the Monastery of St. Bishoy, the papal residence of Pope Shenuda III.
- 23 **St. Apanoub of Nehisa** “district of Talkha” (Abib 24, July 31) suffered martyrdom as a youth in the 4th cent. His relics are venerated in his church in Sammanud, Sharqiya.
- 24 **St. Pachomius** (Bashans 14, May 22), founder of Upper Egyptian coenobitic monasticism from Aswan to Edfu. He is well known for his monastic rules and regulations for male and female convents.
- 25 **St. Thomas of Shanshif** (Bashans 27, June 4) was a hermit in the desert east of Akhmim who excelled in the asceticism. He was known to St. Shenuda of Atriye.

- 26 St. Barsoma the Naked** (el-Nasie 5, September 10). For 20 years he inhabited the crypt in the church of St. Mercurius in Old Cairo, later he lived on a dung heap in Ma'sara (Helwan). His relics are venerated in his church in Ma'sara.
- 27 St. Theodore of Shotep** (Abib 20, July 27) is one of the very popular equestrian warrior saints of the upper Egyptian town of Shotep (south of Assut). He killed the dragon and saved the life of a widow and her son. His relics are venerated in the churches in Haret el-Rum and Haret Zuwaila in Cairo.
- 28 St. Theodore the Oriental** (Tuba 12, January 20) fought against the Persians and suffered martyrdom in Ctesiphon (Baghdad). His relics are venerated in Dair el-Surian, Wadi el-Natrun.
- 29 St. Mohrail and her brother Hor** (Tuba 14, January 23) suffered martyrdom in 305. Their home was in Tammuh near Giza. They are venerated in the church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Manyal Shiha, Giza.
- 30 Sts. Julietta and her son Cyriacus** (Abib 15, July 22) were killed during the Diocletian persecution. They are the patrons of the Upper Egyptian city of Tahta where their relics repose.
- 31 Pope Kyrillos VI** (1902-1971), the 116th successor of the Evangelist St. Mark, was the initiator of the 20th century renaissance of the Coptic Church.
- 32 St. Mina** (Hatour 15, November 24) born in Alexandria, he served as officer in Phrygia and suffered martyrdom in Cotyaeum. His relics were transferred to Maryout. St. Mina shrine in Maryout used to be the most popular pilgrimage site from the 4th/9th cent. His relics are venerated in several churches in Cairo.
- 33 St. Demianah and her 40 Virgins** (Bashans 12, may 2). She is the most popular woman saint, comparable to the Roman St. Catherine. Her relics are venerated in numerous Coptic churches in Cairo and in her convent at barari near Bilqas.
- 34 St. Ana Simon** daughter of a governor entered as 'woman monk' the desert of Scetis under Anba Daniel (6th cent.) Not in the Synaxar.
- 35 St. Mark the Apostle** (Baramoudah 30, May 8), Evangelist and founder of the Christian Church in Egypt. He suffered martyrdom in Alexandria in 68.
- 36 St. Stephen** (Tuba 1, January 9), deacon and first martyr of the church (Acts 7:54-60)
- 37 St. Mercurius (Abu Saifain)** (Hatour 25, December 4) one of the popular equestrian warrior saints of the Decian persecution. He is venerated in the church and convent of St. Mercurius in Old Cairo.
- 38 St. George** (Baramoudah 23, May 1). He is the most popular Coptic saint and symbolizes the victory of the good over the evil forces. Several hundred Coptic churches are dedicated to St. George and his relics repose in numerous churches and shrines.
- 39 Anba Roweiss** known as Abba Tegi or St. Freig (Baba 21, October 30) of Miniet Yamin, Gharbiya (1334-1404). He possessed the gift of prophecy. His relics repose in his church at Anba Ruwais, Cairo.

- 40 St. Simon the Tanner** (Abib 28, August 4), saved the life of Pope Abraham Ibn Zar'ah by offering his help and advice for the transfer of the Muqattam Mountain at the time of the Caliph al- Mu'izz. His relics repose on the Muqattam and in several churches in Old Cairo
- 41 St. Anthony the Great** (Tuba 22, January 31), the father of Christian monasticism (250-355), originally of Qimn el-Arous. He withdrew to the inner desert of the Red Sea. He supported St. Athanasius in his fight against the Arian heresy.
- 42 Anba Paula of Thebes** (Amshir 2, February 9), was the first hermit in the Red sea desert (240-340). His vita was written by St. Jerome.
- 43 St. Moses the Black** (Ba'ounah 24, July 1) originated from Ethiopia where he was a robber and thief. He went to the desert of Scetis and joined St. Macarius and St. Isidore. His relics repose in the Monastery of el-Baramus.
- 44 St. Athanasius** (Tout 20, September 30), 20th pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, doctor of the Universal Church at the first ecumenical council of Nicea in 325.
- 45 Sts. Piroou and Athom** (Abib 8, July 15). They suffered martyrdom in 303 and their relics repose in the church of St. Rebecca in Sonbat.
- 46 St. Rebecca** (Rifka) (Tout 7, September 17), mother of four sons of the Upper Egyptian town of Qous. They were all killed in 303. Their relics repose in the church of St. Rebecca in Sonbat opposite Mit Damsis.
- 47 Abouna Abd el-Messih el-Maqary el-Manahry** (1892-1963) of the village of Nazlet Abu Shehata, Matai, used to be a monk at Dair Abu Maqar, later priest in Manahra where he performed many miracles.
- 48 Anba Abra'am, Bishop of el-Fayyoun** (1829-1914) (Ba'ounah 3, June 10) once monk at Dair el-Muharraq, later bishop of el- Fayyoun, a well known thaumaturgy with gifts of prophecy. His relics repose at Dair el-Azab near el-Fayyoun.
- 49 Abouna Yassa Mikhail of Tima** (1877-1962) is one of the most popular miracle workers, especially in prophecy, healing and exorcism.

B: The Collage of "the Communion of Saints"

(Those saints mentioned in the list of "The Heavenly Paradise" are merely referred to by their number of entry)

1 - Christ Pantocrator in the brightness and with the rays of the apocalyptic sun of righteousness. His nimbus carries the divine identity "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). Of course Christ should bless with his right hand.

2 - The Holy Virgin as *Immaculate of the mariophany of April 2, 1968* in Zeitun.

3 - Seraphim (Is 6:1-4) or Cherubim (Ex 37:9)

4 - The 24 Elders of the Apocalypse (Hatour 24, December 3) as Coptic priests with golden bowls full of incense (Rev 5:8).

- 5 - **St. George** (A 38).
- 6 - **St. Demianah and her 40 Virgins** (A 33).
- 7 - **St. Mina** (A32).
- 8 - **St. Samuel of el-Qalamon** (A 13).
- 9 - **St. Abadir** (Tout 28, October 8) desired martyrdom and went to Alexandria, then to Terenuthis, finally was killed in Hermopolis.
- 10 - **St. Irene** (Tout 28, October 8) desired martyrdom and went to Alexandria, then to Terenuthis, finally was killed in Hermopolis.
- 11 - **Anba Paula of Thebes** (A 42)
- 12 - **St. Anthony the Great** (A 41)
- 13 - **St. Arsanius** (Bashans 13, May 31) tutor of the imperial princes Arcadius and Honorius, in Scetis; he became a disciple of St. John Colobus. He died in 445.
- 14 - **St. Barbara** (A 5)
- 15 - **St. Pachomius** (A 24)
- 16 - **St. Syncretica** was "the mother of Coptic nuns" and excelled in asceticism. (Not in the synaxarium).
- 17 - **St. Mathew the Poor** (Kiyahk 7, December 15) served as abbot of the monastery of Essna. Known for his miracles.
- 18 - **St. Stephen** (A 36)
- 19 - **St. Macarius the Great** (A11)
- 20 - **St. Atrasis** (Hatour 18, November 27), the legendary daughter of the Roman emperor Hadrian. Forced to worship the Roman gods, she preferred martyrdom.
- 21 - **St. Bashnouna al-Maqary** (A 4)
- 22 - **Abuna Abd el-Messih el-Maqary el-Manahry** (A 47)
- 23 - **Pope Kyrillos VI** (A 31)
- 24 - **Abuna Yassa Mikhail of Tima** (A 49)
- 25 - **Anba Abra`am Bishop of el-Fayyoum** (A 48)
- 26 - **St. Mauritius** (Tout 12, September 22) was the commander of the Theban Legion. He suffered martyrdom in Switzerland (4th cent.) His relics repose at Dair Anba Ruwais, Cairo.
- 27 - **St. Moses the Black** (A 43)
- 28 - **St. Paphnotius** (A 19)
- 29 - **St. Shenouda the Archimandrite** (A 21)
- 30 - **St. Onuphrius** (A 20)
- 31 - **St. Barsoma the Naked** (A 26)
- 32 - **Archangel Suriel** (Tuba 27, February 4), one of the seven Coptic archangels.
- 33 - **Archangel Michael** (Baramhat 24, April 2), the prince of the archangels, appeared in Kafr Youssef, Zaqaq in 1995, 1996.
- 34 - **St. Mercurius** (A 37)
- 35 - **St. Theodore the Oriental** (A 28)
- 36 - **St. Apanoub** (A 23)
- 37 - **St. Ana Simon** (A 34)

- 38 - **St. Abaskhiroun of Qallin** (A 8)
- 39 - **St. Marina of Antioch** (A 16)
- 40 - **Anba Bishoy** (A 22)
- 41 - **Sts. Julietta and Cyriacus** (A 30)
- 42 - **Sts. Maximus and Domadius** (A 15)
- 43 - **Qummos Mikhail Ibrahim of Quwaissna** (1899 – 1975), served in Shubra, father confessor for pope Shenuda III.
- 44 - **St. Sedhom Bishay** (Baramhat 17, March 26) (1804 – 1844), served as customs officer, suffered martyrdom in Demyat.
- 45 - **Umm Abdel-Sayed of Sohag** (1910 – 1999) lived for the poor in Shubra.
- 46 - **Pope Cyril IV the Reformer** (Tuba 23, January 31) successor of St. Mark (1854 – 1861).

C: The Collage of “the Light of the World”

(Those saints mentioned in the lists of “The Heavenly Paradise” or “The Communion of Saints” are merely referred to by their number of the entry)

- 1- **Icon of Christ as High Priest** with the Coptic “one-finger-blessing” and the open gospel (John 8:12).
- 2- **Icon of a neo-Byzantine crowned Eleusa of the passion** with two angels holding the instruments of the passion.
- 3- **Pope Kyrillos VI** (A 31)
- 4- **St. Mina** (A 32)
- 5- **Anba Paula of Thebes** (A42)
- 6- **St. Anthony the Great** (A 41)
- 7- **St. Ana Simon** (A 34)
- 8- **St. Onuphrius** (A 20)
- 9- **St. Stephen** (A 36)
- 10- **St. Apanoub of Nehisa** (A 23)
- 11- **Anba Abra`am Bishop of el-Fayyoum** (A 48)
- 12- **Abouna Yassa Mikhail of Tima** (A 49)
- 13- **St. Simon the Tanner** (A 40)
- 14- **St. Demianah and her 40 Virgins** (A 33)
- 15- **St. George** (A 38)
- 16- **Abouna Andraus el-Samwili** (A 6)
- 17- **St. Samuel of el-Qalamon** (A 13)
- 18- **St. Abaskhiroun of Qallin** (A 8)
- 19- **Sts. Mohrail and her brother Hor** (A 29)
- 20- **Abouna Abd el-Messih el-Maqary el-Manahry** (A 47)
- 21- **St. Bashnouna el-Maqary** (A 4)
- 22- **St. Macarius the Great** (A 11)
- 23- **St. Theodore the Oriental** (A 28)

- 24- St. Rebecca and her children (A 46)**
- 25- St. Barbara (A 5)**
- 26- Sts. Julietta and Cyriacus (A 30)**
- 27- St. Athanasius (A 44)**
- 28- Sts. Cyrus and John (A 14)**
- 29- St. Thomas of Shanshif (A 25)**
- 30- St. Ammonius (A 17)**
- 31- St. Pachomius (A 24)**
- 32- St. Mercurius (A 37)**
- 33- St. Takla Haymanot the Ethiopian (A 9)**
- 34- Anba Roweiss (A 39)**
- 35- St. Shenouda the Archimandrite (A 21)**
- 36- St. Moses the Black (A 43)**
- 37- St. Isidore (Ba'ounah 24, July 1) was priest of el-Baramos Monastery. He took St. Moses the Black to St. Macarius.**
- 38- St. Barsoma the Naked (A 26)**
- 39- Anba Bishoy (A 22)**
- 40- St. Marina of Antioch (A 16)**
- 41- Sts. Cosmas and Damian (A 18)**
- 42- St. Arsanius (B 13)**
- 43- Sts Maximus and Domadius (A 15)**
- 44- St. Macrobius (Baramhat 2, March 11), bishop of Nikiu, healed the sick and was killed by Armenius in Alexandria.**
- 45- Archangel Michael (B 33)**

FATHER IBRAHIM LUKA

His Deeds, Programs, Struggle for the Renaissance of the Coptic Church and the Christian Unity

By Boulos Ayad Ayad

From the Beginning

Father Ibrahim Luka was born on January 19, 1897 in Isna (Upper Egypt). His pious mother had a great influence on him throughout his childhood. He was raised in a spiritual family of the Christian faith with the traditions of the Coptic Church.

Ibrahim Luka obtained the High School Certificate in 1915. Although he was accepted by the School of Medicine at Fouad I University, he preferred to join the Theological School in Cairo.

In fact, when he was in high School, he became a member of the Society of the Friends of the holy Bible, attending the religious meetings held by the Society in his school.

His religious activities had started when he was in high School, during the summer school vacation he went to Isna to preach and offer his religious services to the Christian families in the nearby villages.

We know that Ibrahim Luka, during his early years until the end of his life, attended the services of the Coptic Church, approaching the sacraments, fasting, reading the Holy Bible, praying, and chanting the hymns of his church.

Ibrahim Luka and the Theological School

Mr. Habib Girgis, who established the Theological School in Cairo, encouraged Ibrahim Luka to join the school.

After he joined the Theological School, Luka studied the following subjects independently because of his sickness, which took place from October 1915 to May 1916: Interpretations and history of the Holy Bible; decrees, laws of the Coptic Church; general history, Islamic religion; organizations of the other Churches; doctrines of the churches; Greek and Coptic languages ; and logic.

Ibrahim Luka continued his religious services after he recovered. He participated in the annual retreat of the Society of the Holy Bible, in the program

arranged to service the villages surrounding Armant (a village in Upper Egypt), and in the services offered to the workmen.

In April 1918 Ibrahim Luka graduated from the Theological School. His services to the Coptic Church and the Coptic communities and Societies increased, especially in the Church of Faggala in Cairo; and he preached in Cairo Churches.

Father Luka, the Priest at the Church of Assyut

After he graduated from High School in 1915, Ibrahim Luka decided to dedicate his life to serve the lord along with ten other youths; Hafez Daoud, Ibrahim Bisharah, shaker ghattas el-Maasarany, Halim Bisharah, Gendy Wassef, Younan Nakhla, Ryad Sorial, Bisharah Bastawros, Botros Rizkallah and Gayyed Gendy al-Fizi.

For his many religious services, in September 30, 1923, Bishop Macarius of Assyut ordained him a Coptic priest in the church of Assyut. The following year (1924), he was promoted to the rank of "Qommos" because of his significant services to the church and his effective preaching, which attracted many people to church attendance.

One of his great accomplishments while in Assyut was the establishment in 1924 of the Journal of al-Yaqza, which has been continued by his family even after his death in 1950.

Father Ibrahim Luka and the Church of Heliopolis in Cairo

Father Luka was instrumental in building Saint Mark Church of Heliopolis in Cairo in 1922. On July 14, 1925 Pope Kyrillos V, the Coptic Patriarch, agreed that Father Luka should leave Assyut and serve in this new church, where he supervised the church construction and arranged for icons and decorations. When Father Luka left Assyut Bishop Macarius and the Christians of Assyut disagreed.

Father Luka and his other buildings and churches

In addition, he built a cemetery within which was a church that served the Coptic people in Almaza, a district of Heliopolis. He erected a wall surrounding all the area, to protect the tombs and their belongings from thieves and animals. Ironically, the first person to be buried in that cemetery was Father Luka.

Father Luka was instrumental in building other churches: St. George Church at Almaza, the Church of Manshiat el-Bakri, and St. George Church in Heliopolis. He tried to build a church at Sarayet el-Kubba, but the project failed. He also bought a villa near the church of St. Mark, Heliopolis, which was added to the church property.

Father Ibrahim Luka and his programs

Father Luka's church and the Coptic Society were engaged in many activities such as a charity program, society for women, Christian preschool, a Sunday

library, services for workmen in Heliopolis, and a society for the general services, in addition to the regular religious services and special spiritual services held throughout the year which included services for Passion Week and the Feast of St. Mary. Father Ibrahim was successful in both his religious and social services.

Other Programs Related to the Renaissance of the Coptic Orthodox Church

Father Luka established many other programs to improve the situation of the Coptic Church during his lifetime. These included the programs relates to the election of the Popes of Alexandria, the committee for improving the situation of the Copts; his representation of the Coptic Church in the Conference of Life and Work, Faith and Discipline held in England. He intervened to solve the severe conflict among Pope Macarius of Alexandria, the Bishops, and the congregational council in the problems related to the properties of the Church.

When Pope Youssab the second became the Head of the Coptic Church, father Luka was appointed by the Pope to be his deputy. Father Luka established many committees to increase the activities of the Coptic Church, such as: the legislature Committee, the Committee of Programs, Committee of Propaganda, the Financial Committee, and the General Fund for the program of the Coptic Church. Father Luka was concerned with the importance of the relationship between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Church. He worked hard with the other Christian churches for Christian Unity among all the churches.

Father Luka and His Publications

He published the following books: Research in the reality of Truth, 1922; Chosen Religious Songs, 1949, reprinted five times until 1946; different pamphlets from the Moral Reformation Society, reprinted in 1922; Flee for Your Life, 1923, 1931; Approaching the Holy Sacrament, 1927, reprinted several times; Dangerous Illness, 1932; The Purity, 1932, 1933, 1935; Spiritual Meditation in the Gospel of Matthew, 1935; General Messages about the Coptic Church and its Creed, 1937, translated into English and reprinted several times; Christianity in Islam, 1938, 1948, 1952 (reviewed in Coptic Church Review Vol. 9, No. 1); A Declaration to be Judged, 1939; Guide to United Worship, 1940; To the Depth, 1944, 1952; The Popes, Chosen from What Group of People, 1946; Did you Return to Yourself, 1947, republished more than once; Guide to United Worship and Chosen Songs, 1946; The Day of the Lord, 1950; and Awakening Bulletin 9al-Yaqzah), 1924-present, which is considered one of the oldest Coptic Bulletins. The family of Father Ibrahim Luka, after his death, found many manuscripts in Luka's Library which have not been published.

The Library of Father Luka

His Library was a very valuable one, and included many volumes in the following fields: World History; History of Egypt; History of Christianity and its

Sects; History of the Coptic Church; History of Islam; the Islamic Culture; the Interpretation of the Holy Bible and of the Holy Quran; the sayings of the Fathers of the Churches; the sayings of the Prophet of Islam; Judaism; the Greek, Coptic and Modern languages; Geography; Literature; dictionaries; and journals. Many of these books are now out of print.

Father Luka established another library for the Sunday School of SAINT Mark Coptic Church of Heliopolis, which included more than 2000 books in 1950.

Father Luka and the Renaissance of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Christian Unity

He struggled to save the church from anarchy and established many societies and committees to solve various problems facing it, especially in the manner of choosing Popes and clergy. He also attended many conferences within the Coptic Church as well as in other Christian churches both in and out of Egypt. In these conferences he worked to establish a close relationship among the various Christian churches, hoping to allay the enmity which had existed for generations. Such attempts of Father Luka to bring strong programs to his church resulted in false accusations that he was trying to separate from the Coptic Church and unite with the English Church. This caused many church members to turn their allegiance from him, for they did not want to accept these programs. Some of his enemies believed he had a lack of faith and was not sincere in his acceptance of the Coptic Orthodox Creed. However, authorities of the Coptic Church confirmed that they were in favor of his programs and activities.

Father Luka and the Result of His Activities

Pope Kyrillos VI and Pope Shenouda III accepted the various activities and the many programs of Father Luka. The Coptic Church gained socially and spiritually from the struggle of Father Luka, which started in the early twentieth century.

Father Luka and the Late Emperor Haile Selassi of Ethiopia and the Ethiopians

He also aided the Ethiopian Church and people, especially during the Second World War, when Italy occupied Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassi fled to England. Many of the members of the emperor's family, the dignitaries of Ethiopia, high officials of the Ethiopian Government, monks, priests, and the general population left Ethiopia during the war and fled to Egypt. Father Luka welcomed many of these Ethiopians in his house and offered to all of them apartments and shelters.

Father Luka supported all the Ethiopians in their daily life and with their needs. The Ethiopians found in father Luka, the good shepherd, the excellent priest and wonderful Father for all of them, not only during the Second World War but during his life.

The Family of Father Luka

A. His Wife

He was married in 1920, Rojina Botros, a pious lady from a religious family. She had many virtues and activities: sincere, modest, an excellent mother, truth-loving, and an ardent reader of the Bible who prayed and loved Christ. She was also a lady of high moral character and always interested in aiding the poor of the area. The Luka's home life included Father Ibrahim gathering the members of his family together every evening for a Bible reading and time of prayer. Mrs. Rojina passed away on November 16, 1953, after a full life of good works.

B. The other members of His Family

Father Luka had three daughters. All of them completed their studies in the Coptic College for girls in Abbassiyah, Cairo. The three showed many talents: the art of painting, writing, and public speaking. Their lives have been examples of social and spiritual success. They studied the Bible, and the religious books about Christianity, attended the prayers of the Coptic Church and were accustomed to chant hymns in certain Festivals of the Church. They participated in the trips of the church to visit the old churches, monasteries and other historical places.

The three of them have been married: Lucy was married to the late Mr. Youssef Kamil who worked as a lawyer and then became a judge. Mary was married to the late Mr. Fayez Riyad who was an engineer and worked with the Egyptian Government until he became the head of one of the governmental departments. Suzanne is married to Mr. Farag Nashed who graduated from Engineering College, University of Cairo, then joined the Army and later became one of the leaders in the Egyptian Army until he retired.

All of the sons-in-law of Father Luka were very successful in their private, public and spiritual lives. All were university graduates and from famous families, very religious individuals who loved the Lord and His Church. The three of them published books and articles and have been editors of the Journal of Yaqza after Father Luka. They were good speakers and some of them were preachers.

The three families of the daughters of Father Luka undertook numerous activities in serving the Lord, His Church, and Egyptian Society as well as the Egyptian Government.

Father Luka and His Friends

The friendship of Father Luka had been extended to many individuals as well as the rest of his family.

As a witness of such friendship, I once visited Father Luka with my father, Archdeacon Ayad Ayad, one evening during the 1940's, when my father heard that Father Luka was ill. When we went to visit Father Luka in his cabin in El-Mandara, one of the districts of Alexandria, I met a huge number of visitors. Some of them

were leaving, some others were coming to visit, and a third group was speaking among themselves, A fourth group was singing hymns while yet another group was discussing the problems of the church. We stayed for two hours, and throughout this time other people came to ask Father Luka's health, but his personality drew them together. Since that time, I recognized that Father Luka had many friends and instilled prayers, discussions, thought, and action among others.

The Death of Father Luka

On December 19, 1950, following a short illness, Father Luka passed away. Many important people attended his funeral as well as from all the different classes of Egyptian Society. Others sent telegrams or wrote articles in his memory in newspapers. His death was noted in publications and in churches throughout the world. When the family held a memorial service one year later, there were many articles praising Father Luka in newspapers, journals, and books.

One of the best books written about Father Luka is by his son-in-law, Mr. Fayez Riyad in 1986, *The Struggle of a Priest: From the Library of Father Ibrahim Luka*. In this book, Mr. Riyad presented the history of the Coptic Church from the middle 1920's until early 1950. he supplied the book with the full details concerning the life of Father Ibrahim L, one of the great personalities of the Coptic Church in the twentieth century. The volume is written in Arabic and it will be useful to future generations of Copts in teaching of the Church's struggle to succeed in the face of adversity.

Those Who Wrote or Talked Highly About Father Luka

These included Archdeacon Ayad Ayad, the dignitaries of Ethiopia, Bishop Kyrillos of Qena, Bishop Youanness of Giza, Bishop Mikhail of Assyut, Mr. Kamel Boulos Hanna, Mr. Rafla Girgis, Bishop Bassilioos of Ethiopia, Father Marcus Daoud, the Coptic Society of Alexandria, the Society of El-Tawfiq el Qibtiya in Cairo, St. John Coptic church of el-Zaytoon, St. Mark Coptic Church in Heliopolis, Father Ibrahim Saied, Makram Ebeid Pasha.

The Memorial Hall of Father Luka

After the death of Father Luka, the responsible committee of the church of Heliopolis in Cairo decided to build a hall close to the church. This hall carries the name of Father Luka because of the great deeds he offered to the church and society.

On December 21, 1951 the foundation of this hall established by the hand of Pope Youssab II. On June 5, 1964, Pope Kyrillos VI opened the hall.

By erecting such a hall, we can see that one of the main goals of Father Luka has been fulfilled. The hall is the place for many of the social and spiritual activities for the Coptic people.

Boulos Ayad Ayad, Ph.D. is Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado

PART IV IN A SERIES

Continued from Volume 26, Number 4, Winter 2005

THE REALITY AND ESSENCE OF THE EUCHARIST

The Fourth Aspect

PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE EUCHARIST

(3)

THE REAL PRESENCE OF THE LORD (IN THE FLESH) IN THE EUCHARIST

Western Questions in the Middle Ages and their Repercussions in the East How? When? Who?

- *This is my Body . . . This is my blood (Mt 26:28).*
- *As Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of his word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh (First Apology of St. Justin 66).*

How are the elements changed into the Body and Blood of our Lord?

When and at what time in the liturgy does the change occur?

Who changes the bread and wine? Does the change occur by the words of Christ recited by the priest or by the action of the Holy Spirit in the epiclesis?

The Orthodox East has not tried to deviate from the biblical and patristic teaching about the Eucharist. All Orthodox Churches followed the Apostolic Tradition of accepting the words of Christ in faith, without philosophical analysis or mental research. A leading contemporary Orthodox theologian writes:

The Orthodox Church believes that after consecration the bread and wine become in very truth the Body and Blood of Christ: they are not mere symbols, but the reality. But while Orthodoxy has always insisted on the

reality of the change, it has never attempted to explain the manner of the change: the Eucharistic Prayer in the Liturgy simply uses the neutral term *metabolo*, to “turn about,” “change,” or “alter.”¹¹⁰

Catholic Scholasticism and the Eucharist

On the other hand, Western churches tried to explain what happens to the bread and wine by the use of current scientific and philosophical theories. Probably they were forced to do that by the many heresies which appeared in the Middle Ages that taught that the Eucharist is merely a symbol for the Lord's Body and Blood. These heresies, however, have left no permanent impact upon ancient belief till the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. From the 12th and up to the middle of the 20th century, the Roman Catholic Church and the West in general explained Christian dogmas by the use of Scholastic Theology. This was the only system of theology known through all these centuries. Scholastic theology was based upon the philosophy of Aristotle as translated from the Arabic version of his works. These were mixed with the teaching of Moslem scholars; works of Ibn-Rushd and Ibn-Sina became very popular in the West. The scholastics explained the change in the Eucharist as a change in the essence (i.e. the whole substance of the bread and wine are converted to the whole substance of Christ's Body and Blood), while the accidents (i.e. the appearances of the bread and wine) remain the same. Catholic theologians started these Latin terms in the thirteenth century. They were officially used in the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which the Roman Catholic Church held in order to respond to Protestant questions.

Using the scholastic system, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries spread their respective beliefs to all Orthodox churches. At a time when patristic writings were only in the original languages, the Orthodox had no way of defending their faith against the Protestant missionaries except by using Roman Catholic material. This is how the whole system of Scholasticism entered into Orthodox manuals of theology. Since the 15th century the Eastern Orthodox Church has used the Greek word *metabole* to translate the Latin term *transubstantiation*. The doctrine was given formal approval in 1672 by the Synod of Jerusalem.¹¹¹ Transubstantiation and the terms used by Aristotle, like “essence” and “accident,” became familiar terms in Orthodox books!¹¹²

Actually the use of the term transubstantiation was not intended to start a new doctrine. It was an attempt by Western theologians to explain what happens in the Eucharist and to answer the old question of the Jews that was renewed by those

¹¹⁰ Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware: *The Orthodox Church*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1963: 290.

¹¹¹ F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, 1997: 1637

¹¹² *The Orthodox Church*, *ibid.* 223; Habib Guirgis: *The Seven Sacraments*; Samuel Azer Guirgis: *The Eucharist*, 2nd edition, n p. 223.

who started to challenge the ancient belief of the “real presence” in the Sacrament. However, the use of old scientific theories about the structure of matter (essence and accident, etc.), and even the simplistic thought that the change is a material change subject to the observation of the human senses, made the whole doctrine of substantiation incapable of standing against modern scientific discoveries about matter. Instead of essence and accidents we now have atoms, electrons, protons, and all the new discoveries of modern science. This is the problem that has faced Roman Catholic theologians in the twentieth century.

During the last few decades some Roman Catholic theologians have tried to introduce other terms (such as *Tran signification*) instead of transubstantiation, without reaching any unanimous agreement. Different theologians have understood even this term in different ways. The only way out of this dilemma is to go back to Tradition. This is the conclusion reached by a leading Roman Catholic authority:

The real presence of Jesus is the center of this church teaching. Even a name for this change, *transubstantiation*, though used by the bishops at Trent, was not defined. Consequently teachers should never say: the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on the real presence is transubstantiation. Rather, the defined teaching of the Church is centered exclusively on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.¹¹³

Protestants and the Real Presence

From the early years of the Protestant Reformation, there was no uniform teaching about the Eucharist. Luther accepted that Christ was really present in the Sacrament. He insisted on the literal sense of the words of Christ in the Last Supper, and he declared in 1534, “The papists themselves are obliged to praise me for having defended the doctrine of the literal sense of these words much better than them.” The Confession of Augsburg, the primary Lutheran Confession of Faith, declares that the Lutherans “teach that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the Lord’s Supper and that they are distributed to the communicants.” However, Luther refused the idea of transubstantiation, insisting that the Body and Blood of Christ are present in the Sacrament together with the bread and wine. Later the term ‘consubstantiation’ was used to describe this belief. Other Protestant leaders denied the real presence, ending with a total schism in the movement. Calvin taught that in the Eucharist Jesus bestows his Spirit on the spirit of the believer who partakes of the bread and wine. Gregory Dix comments on Calvin’s doctrine: “He does not meet the difficulty that what our Lord had said He was giving was not his Spirit but his Body. The Last Supper is not Pentecost.” Zwingle, one of the Reformation leaders, denied even that spiritual presence of Christ,

¹¹³ K.B. Osborne, *Sacramental Guidelines*. Paulist Press, 1995: 81.

saying that in the Eucharist there is but plain bread and wine, a reminder of the salvation achieved long ago on Calvary. Gregory Dix summarizes the Eucharistic teaching of Zwingle: “The Eucharistic action consists in a vivid mental remembering of the passion as the achievement of ‘my’ redemption in the past.”¹¹⁴

When and by Whom Does the Eucharistic Change Happen?

Beside the confusion in the West concerning the change in the elements of the Eucharistic oblation, another question has been raised: When does the change occur? A third question is related: Is the change the work of the Son or the Holy Spirit? In the sixth century, the Roman Catholic Church removed the Prayer of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Epiclesis, from her Liturgy; which had been in the Roman Liturgy from the earliest centuries. This issue may look irrelevant now since the Roman Catholic Church has re-inserted the Epiclesis, the prayer for the descent of the Holy Spirit on the elements, a tradition that had been interrupted for more than thirteen centuries. Yet two reasons make such study essential:

(1) *The need to know the present teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.* This is still ignored at the parish level and in many Orthodox Sunday school curricula.
 (2) The second reason is more important because it is related to the Orthodox faith itself and how far Orthodox churches are following Church Tradition. Contrary to what happened with the doctrine of transubstantiation, in which Orthodox teachers everywhere followed the Roman Catholics, here they preferred not to follow them and kept the Epiclesis. Although they kept the ancient liturgical formula, yet they thought in the same scholastic mind as the Roman Catholics, but in an opposite direction. While the Roman Catholics spoke of ‘the Institution Narrative’ (the words of Christ) as the moment of consecration, that moment for the Orthodox became the Epiclesis. Evelyn Underhill describes the belief of the early Church: “For the early Church, the whole of this great prayer (*the Eucharistic Liturgy*) was a single act of worship There was no attempt to identify the consecration with any one formula or moment; whether the recital of the Words of Institution or the Epiclesis.”¹¹⁵

As early as the eighth century St. John of Damascus writes in the East: The bread and the wine are made over into the Body and Blood of God. If you inquire into the way in which this happens, let it suffice to you to hear that it is through the Holy Spirit that the Lord took on himself the flesh from the mother of God The bread on the credence table, as also the wine and water,

¹¹⁴ For more details of the history of the Eucharistic controversy among Protestants see G. Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* 629- 636, op. cit., and Philip Schaff: *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, 1910 (reprinted by Eerdmans, 1978): 612- 682.

¹¹⁵ *Worship*, op. cit., 136.

through the epiclesis and coming of the Holy Spirit, are supernaturally changed into the Body of Christ and into his Blood.¹¹⁶

Father Tadros Malaty, an Orthodox theologian, comments on this: “St. John of Damascus says that the consecration is not effected by the Institution Narrative, but only by the Invocation of the Holy Spirit The celebration of the Liturgy cannot be divided into separate parts. We cannot separate the positive action of Christ in the mystery of the Eucharist from the action of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹⁷

The Chalcedonian division that affected the Orthodox east did not prevent the spread of new doctrines, as well as liturgical rites, prayers, feasts and fasts, from one church to the other. Father Youhanna Salama writes in 1909 in his book on the rites and doctrines of the Coptic Orthodox Church, that was probably the earliest book of Coptic Orthodox doctrine ever printed: “The Church believes that the bread and wine change into the Body and Blood of Christ at the moment of the invocation of the Holy Spirit by the priest.”¹¹⁸ The Coptic Orthodox Church has not been isolated from both the Eastern and the Western innovations in doctrine.

Ironically, in their teaching on a moment of consecration, both Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians and liturgical scholars were mistaken and have deviated from the patristic Tradition in two main issues:

- (1) Applying the dimension of time to the Holy Eucharist, which is an eternal Sacrifice.
- (2) Limiting the Eucharistic action to a single hypostasis in the Holy Trinity.

And now it is to the patristic Tradition that we have to turn, where theologians from all churches have now found their common roots.

To be continued.

¹¹⁶ Jrgens WA: The Faith of our Fathers, volume three. Liturgical Press, 1979: 339.

¹¹⁷ T. Malaty, Christ in the Eucharist. Alexandria (Egypt), 1973: 472

¹¹⁸ Fr. Youhanna Salama: Precious Pearls on the Rites and Doctrines of the Church (in Arabic), Cairo (third edition), 1965: 460

BOOK REVIEW

Faith at Suicide, Lives Forfeit: Violent Religion - Human Despair.

By Kenneth Cragg. Preface vii. Main Text, pp. 180. Sussex Academic Press, 2005.

Dr. Kenneth Cragg served as an Anglican priest and bishop in the Lebanon, Egypt and Israel-Palestine for many years. His arabic is widely acknowledged and he has translated *Readings in the Qu'ran* (1988) into modern English. Having written more than fifty books on Christianity and Islam, and many hundreds of academic pieces for theological journals, Cragg's latest book, *Faith at Suicide* was written to explain how the issue of suicide fits in with the conscience of a certain brand of Islamic extremism in the modern world, and also how suicide in almost any circumstances is an innate contradiction of our common humanity. Suicide certainly expresses itself in religious terms, not merely in Islam but in a variety of faith systems. The martyrdom-suicide of Samson, eyeless in Gaza - "Let me die with the Philistines" (Judges 16.30) - has provided much more than a puzzle for readers of the Christian Bible. Historically, even some Christians have set out to emulate the death of Christ on the cross, but this mode of conduct provided a vivid contrast with the State religion that became Christianity in the fourth century. Suicide is most certainly subverting any faith, including Islam, but it is not absent. The calculated martyrdoms of early Christians, the sacrifice of the Masada captives, the suicide of Judas Iscariot, the modern suicides of Primo Levi, Ernest Hemingway and Sylvia Plath, with others, are all transparent statements of calculated loss and sacrifice. But too many in any faith system embrace suicide as sacrifice.

The shallow blasphemy of scriptural literalism is perhaps the greatest evil in all the world religions, not only in Islam but most certainly in modern Christian Fundamentalism and in the sophistry of literalist Judaism. The 11 September 2001 is a date written into our minds. Hijackers destroyed the Twin Towers and over three thousand people - Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Christians and others - were annihilated. This event was a 'faith event'. It was a denial of God's reality in Islam and a destruction of religious truth. A copy of the Holy Qur'an was found in the principal hijacker's motorcar. The world's theologians - Jewish, Christian and Muslim - could not really deny the power of the destroyer because all three religions are filled with exclusion and hatred. Christians attack homosexuals and kill people in abortion clinics. Catholics murder Protestants. Jews shoot worshippers in

mosques. Sunni Muslims wipe out Shia. This is the real world of religion. It can be no surprise that great scholars like Stephn Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins and Stephen Pinker hate religion, for religion of a certain kind *is* hatred. It is the lunatic concept that the suicide bomber is a martyr that so offends the modern world, and encourages atheism on a grand scale. The bomber is a martyr. He is promised instant bliss in paradise. His family is honoured in Islamic society. This idea is most certainly not only mad, from an atheistic and agnostic point of view, but it is most especially absurd within the context of authentic Islam. If suicide bombing cannot be deconstructed then there is no future; not for any religion and probably not for mankind.

Christianity, Islam and Judaism certainly have the potential to be observed as religions of peace: *Pax*, *Salaam* and *Shalom* echo in the minds of faith seekers. But the tragic reality of all religions is that any believer may read what they like into the Hebrew Bible, Qur'an or New Testament. Scriptural literalism is a real curse.

Interpretations of these three faith systems depend entirely upon irrelevant ancient traditions and modern circumstance. The world of all religions - or all faith systems - is an actuality the modern world no longer understands.

Bishop Kenneth Cragg's faith lies in expectation of any religion that rests in honesty and integrity; it rests in the closest intellectual search for the truth in any faith system, monotheistic or polytheistic, and not in the crude physical and mental exercises of those who have no real faith. Purposeful suicide in contemporary Islam, and the deep pathos in its fequency for religious ends, is the greatest tragedy at the heart of all religion in the modern world. Faith-in-suicide is all too ready for destruction in a world where the beauty of Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith may end through violence. Islamic beauty has been annihilated by a violent fundamentalism, which has no real place in Islam at all.

John H. Watson

Dorset, United Kingdom.

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2007 CALENDAR OF FASTS AND FEASTS

* ***THE SEVEN MAJOR FEASTS OF OUR LORD***

** ***The Seven Minor Feasts of Our Lord***

*** ***Feasts of Virgin Mary***

**** ***Fasts***

* ***January 7 - CHRISTMAS***

** ***January 14 - Circumcision of Our Lord***

**** ***January 17 - Paramoni (2)***

* ***January 19 - EPIPHANY***

** ***January 21 - First Miracle of Our Lord at Cana***

*** ***January 29 - Dormition of Virgin Mary***

**** ***January 29 - Fast of Nineveh (3)***

**** ***February 12 - Great Lent (55)***

** ***February 15 - Entrance of Our Lord into the Temple***

March 19 - Feast of the Cross

* ***April 1 - ENTRANCE OF OUR LORD INTO
JERUSALEM (PALM SUNDAY)***

*** ***April 2 - Apparition of the Virgin Mary at
Zeitoun in 1968***

** ***April 5 - Holy Thursday***

* ***April 8 - EASTER***

** ***April 15 - St. Thomas' Sunday***

*** ***May 9 - Birth of Virgin Mary***

* ***May 17 - ASCENSION***

* ***May 27 - PENTECOST***

*** ***May 28 - Apostles' Fast (45)***

** ***June 1 - Entrance of Our Lord into Egypt***

July 12 - Martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul

**** ***August 7 - Fast of the Virgin Mary (15)***

** ***August 19 - Transfiguration of Our Lord***

*** ***August 22 - Assumption of the Body of Virgin Mary***

***September 12 - Feast of the Martyrs; New Year's Day
(Coptic Year)***

September 28 - Feast of the Cross

**** ***November 26 - Christmas Fast (42)***

*** ***December 13 - Presentation of Virgin Mary into the
Temple***



Abouna Matta El Meskeen
1919-2006