

A decorative border consisting of a repeating pattern of stylized crosses. Each cross is composed of four smaller crosses, with a central square containing a smaller cross. The crosses are colored in shades of blue, yellow, and red, with intricate patterns. The border runs along the top, bottom, and sides of the page.

St George Church Sporting Alexandria - Egypt

# The scent of Christ in the lives of the righteous

(Part 4)

Fr. Louka Sidarous



## Introduction

The biographies of our modern day righteous men and women which we documented in the first three parts of this book prove that the Coptic church is in the DNA of our people. The church is not just the history of saints which lived in the end of the 4th Century; the church lives on till now through those who have dedicated themselves to Jesus, not only conquering the temptations of the flesh, but conquering the whole world.

They conquered the world with Jesus who is alive in them and with the spirit of Jesus which is stronger than the spirit of the world. Their biographies also prove that there are witnesses for Christ in all generations because He does not leave Himself without witnesses.

Egyptians have taken these examples of righteousness not as entertaining or intellectual stories, but as concrete examples of a Christian life and an incentive for spiritual endeavours. These stories have encouraged and supported many and everyone who has read them has found something in them for their lives and their circumstances. Often the readers' circumstances would mirror those of these stories leading



them to have stronger hope in Jesus Christ our Saviour and His power which defied death itself.

Therefore, motivated by the spiritual results in the souls of many which I know and which I know of from the Church, I decided to take some time to document what I have experienced and seen over the years. I thank the Lord that I did not forget the names and details of these stories.

I pray to God that the lives of these pious people will be an even bigger incentive to live our life in Christ and to encourage us to a life of virtues till our last breath. May this book - with the intercessions of our Virgin Mary - be the reason for blessing and the salvation of all who read it.

The children of God are different, just as Saint John said that the children of God are distinct from the children of the world, whom he also called the children of the Devil.

What distinguishes the children of God throughout their lives, becomes even more obvious during the moments when they are about to leave this world. This offers solace to the believers, as they see with their own eyes proof of faith.

God has allowed me to see a lot of these blessed examples, whose departure from this world was the reason for blessings



for many, a motive for redemption for those who strayed from God's path, and a reason for increasing the faith for those who are already on the narrow path.

What is common in most of these stories is the ability of these pious people to have visions of heaven before their departure. One of these stories was that of a pious villager who feared God and lived according to His commandments. He was the oldest of his family, a peace-maker, who prayed and fasted all the time. He was an example for all his family members, who saw in him the perfection of Christianity in character and in following God's commandments. He was such a role model to the extent that his family considered him the 'priest' of the family and they would come to him, asking for his advice in all aspects of their lives.

The man fell ill in his last days, during which he prayed non-stop day and night to thank Christ for everything. He would ask everyone around him to pray continuously, especially the Psalms. Whenever they would pray the Psalms, he would ask them to pray them again. The Psalms were his consolation during his sickness and in his old age. When it was almost his time to depart from the world, the whole family - some 100



people – were at his house. They all felt extremely sorrowful about the loss which they would soon have to face.

The man said to those around his death bed: “Pray for me the Psalms of the sixth hour”, as it was around noon. His family prayed the Psalms with tears in their eyes. He opened his tired eyes and prayed with them some of the Psalms. In his last moments, he drew the sign of the cross on himself and then closed his eyes and left. Those around his bed started to cry and some of the women even screamed.

The man then opened his eyes and said: “Why are you screaming? I asked you to pray the Psalms. You have disturbed me, children. I was in heaven and heard the sound of heavenly praising with my ears.”

One of his grandchildren ran and got a paper and a pen and said: “Please grandfather, tell me what you heard and saw so that I can document it.”

“My son, these are things which cannot be documented,” said the man. “Can the language of heaven be written on earth? No, my son...”

With that the man closed his eyes and opened them forever in heaven.

How beautiful is the departure of the pious.



## Live as the Bible

Another example of the rare souls which live meekly as Christ, is that of a pious man who held a managerial post in an engineering firm. Despite his managerial position, no one who dealt with him ever saw him angry. Unlike others who became strict and arrogant when they became managers, the position never changed this pious man. He remained meek and calm, with a low and kind voice. Surprisingly everyone loved him because of his meekness, and his kind words had a magical effect on everyone making his subordinates gladly obey him.

The man used to derive his meekness from his Saviour who said: “Learn from me because I’m meek and humble of heart.” The man used to pray a lot, spending hours at the end praying. He used to love praying and would get up very early to pray.

Additionally, he enjoyed reading the Bible, reading it simply, without being philosophical about it. For him, the words of the Holy Bible were simple instructions for life; they were not logical messages to appeal to his brain or intellect.

For him, the Bible was for life and only for life.



He used to say that the most beautiful verse which he followed his whole life was that which came in Philip's letter "Live only as is fitting to the Bible of Christ ". The man had read it early in his life when he was still a first year student in university and felt that this verse covers all aspects of life. He got attached to it and memorized it not just as words, but as a lifestyle. He would often say it to his children and his household, advising them to "live only as is fitting to the Bible of Christ".

Despite his loving nature, the man didn't mingle much with people. He had a few friends whom he carefully chose and who were similar to him in seriousness and humbleness. Whenever they would meet, they would spend a peaceful time together as the Psalm says: "How good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity".

Often they would invite me over when they would meet. It always brought me great happiness to be amongst them, reading the bible or praying together. I felt that I forgot all my troubles behind and felt comforted and peaceful in the midst of these loving people.

Early one morning, I woke up to my phone ringing. On the line was the man's wife screaming:



"Help me...my husband...". I was troubled. I don't recall how I dressed up, how I ran in the street or how I reached their house! The man's wife opened the door for me in a state of shock. "Come and look," she said. I accompanied her into his bedroom. He was sleeping on his bed, his face peaceful and his arms hugging the Holy Bible. I looked at where the Bible was open and it was Philip's letter. My eyes fell on the verse "Live only as is fitting to the Bible of Christ", which glowed as if its letters were made out of light. It really is the verse of life. This pious man lived by this verse and it took him to Heaven.

## **The meekness of sheep and the courage of the saints**

We were sitting at someone's house - a person filled with love and leading a true Christian life - and we were discussing those who departed who lived the life of chosen ones. Suddenly the host said: "No matter how much God reveals Himself in the lives of His children, nothing will compare to what we saw in the life of my father, may God rest his soul." That evening, several relatives of that person who were witnesses to that story, were there. The man continued with tears in his eyes, even though it was over 20 years since his





father had departed: "My father was in his early 40s. He was extremely healthy and had never been sick. He was a gentle loving man, merciful to the poor and to the needy to the extent that he was often accused of being naive. My father was also an extremely merciful and peaceful man who could not stand seeing or hearing anyone fight. If by chance he would be sitting on the porch and saw or heard people fighting, he would quickly enter into the house and shut the door behind him. He could not stand hearing a vile word, cussing or a loud voice.

He regularly attended the mass and prayed from the Agpeya. Sermons were not very common in his day, especially in the little village where he lived in Minya, but he didn't need sermons. Christian life for him was the most important thing and living a life of piety was his only priority. My mother (who was there that evening) was a simple woman who knew nothing about life apart from her house and three children. She would only leave the house to go to church on Sundays. My father was rich. He had lands and estates and money. He managed his estate and fortune alone and spared my mother all worldly concerns and worries. He provided her with everything she needed without worry. Their life was like a 9



beautiful church hymn. We never heard them fighting or even disagreeing.

One day when I was 16 years old, my father woke up, had breakfast with us as usual and then we all left to go to school, while he stayed in the house with my mother."

"Aren't you going to work today?" my mother asked him.

"No," answered my father. "Today, I'm taking a day off."

He then invited my mother to his office and told her with a sweet smile: "I would like to show you some of my papers."

"Why?" answered my mother.

My father then proceeded to show her the deeds to his estates and land, as well as his bank accounts. My mother was disturbed and asked him: "Why are you showing me all this? I don't want to know any of this", to which my father answered: "You must know. I have protected you all these years from this load and today you must know everything so that you can carry the responsibility."

"Responsibility?!" she asked. "Why?" said my mother and with this she broke out crying.

"My father tried to calm her down, saying: "Why are you upset? God organizes the whole universe and will take care of you. My days on earth have ended and I'm going to Jesus 10



today."

My mother started wailing saying: "What are you saying? What is this nonsense? You are young and in excellent health. If you are feeling sick, please tell me and we will call the doctor."

"Believe me my dear, I am as you say, but this is God's will."

"Enough with this bad joke," answered my mother in tears. "If you want me to help you with the load, I'm happy to do this. I am your life's partner."

"Ok," he answered quietly and calmed her down. He then shared with her all his work secrets and made some phone calls, while she went to the living room to organize some things.

My father then left the study. He went to the washroom, showered, put on new clothes and then lay down on his bed and picked up the Agpeya to read some Psalms. When my mother returned to the bedroom, she found him eternally sleeping.

She started to scream uncontrollably. A few minutes later, my older aunt came in, saying: "My brother was an angel and not human." My aunt at that time lived in a village one and a half hours away. It turns out that she was one of the people that 11



my father had called on the phone earlier, telling her: "I'm travelling today and want you to come over immediately, because my wife is upset and I want you to be with her", to which my aunt answered: "Why is she upset about you travelling? You always travel."

"You will know when you come," answered my father.

The neighbours congregated at our house when they heard the shocking news, including the owner of a funeral parlour, who said: "Engineer Boulous (my father) telephoned me a couple of hours ago and said that someone has died in our household and asked me to come and prepare for the funeral." The owner of the funeral parlour - a Muslim man - was in shock saying: "This is unbelievable! I'm about to lose my mind! How can this happen?!"

My mother went to show my aunt my father's study and all the papers in it. On his desk, she found a paper which my father had just written. It was his obituary which was to be published in the newspaper! My father had quietly prepared everything, including his obituary because he knew that my mother would not know how to act and he didn't have any brothers to help her.

The strange thing is that with the prayers of my father,



God gave my mother the power to manage everything. She managed the estates and the money as cleverly as my father had done and she did not experience any of the trouble which those who go through the same circumstances often experience. We thank God for everything and are certain that the spirit of my father accompanies us and that he is praying with us for us.”

### **Who do I have in heaven...Psalm 73**

The righteous ones witness visions of heavens when they are about to depart and which are like a final consolation before they take off their earthly body. We live by faith and confidence in things which we cannot see. These visions are the beginnings of the end of the days of faith, as the body is starting to disintegrate like a dark opaque cloth which when disintegrates becomes see-through through which we can see the light.

This does not happen except to those who are pious for it is hard to take off our earthly bodies. We don't want to take it off, but want to wear our heavenly home on top of it. This is the nature of our earthly life...or what scientists call our survival instinct. An instinct ingrained in us. However, the



new instinct in the new person longs for heaven and longs to be in heaven. As Saint Paul said: “I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me.”

These visions create in the soul a great and strange confidence to face death.

I know a pious sister who used to serve in Los Angeles in the 70s. She was a mother of three children and arrived in LA in the year 1978. A year after arrival she was diagnosed with leukemia and started a long journey of treatment and pain.

Throughout the next 15 years she oscillated between weakness and strength, health and sickness, sadness and happiness. However, for everyone who knew her, she was a beautiful icon of unwavering gratitude and patience; a patience which did not falter even in the darkest of days.

I was visiting her a couple of months before her departure to heaven and the physicians had decided that the treatment was no longer working. We had a strong relationship in Christ and she also had hope and strength in her faith in Christ.

However, the devil does not leave an occasion except when he tries to plant doubts, but those who hold on to God defeat him.



This reminds me of something I once read written by one of our Fathers about a monk who on the day of his departure was surrounded by many priests to receive his final blessings. He suddenly saw the devil sitting on the windowsill of his cell, so he yelled to his disciple, saying: “Give me my stick for he (the devil) thought I was weak with death.” As soon as his disciple gave him his stick, the devil ran away terrified and all the fathers who were there saw this him and praised God who gives courage and strength to His children even at the hour of their death.

Close to her death, this pious woman asked me: “Tell me the truth, Father. Why do the children of God suffered and are afflicted by disease and pain, while the people of the world rejoice?”

She was asking this not because of her doubts, but those of her children who had doubts and wanted to hear something to comfort them.

I answered, directing my words to her children: “I will not answer your question from my knowledge, but I will answer it from the Holy Bible which reveals how God thinks.” I asked for the Holy Bible and took out Psalm 73 which speaks in incredible details about this issue, revealing God’s aim



from this. The writer of this Psalm was confused how the children of this world live comfortably and happily, while the children of God are being tested. Therefore he said: “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is





good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.”

Two or three weeks later, the physicians declared that the woman had gone into the final stages of the disease and that that she only had a few more days to live. They sent to her house psychologists to prepare her to expect death, however in her Christian gentleness and courage, she told them: “I’m not afraid of the mystery of death because I know where I’m going. I thank you for your care, but please don’t come again for perhaps someone else needs you. As from my side, I will not die in a couple of days like the physicians said because my life is in the hands of Christ who will decide when my time is.”

Indeed, she did not depart after three days as she was told, but God gave her an extra three weeks. She then departed in heavenly peace and quietness.

A few days later at her funeral, I found her three children around the coffin reading Psalm 73 publicly in front of all the attendees. They had memorized it because she had read it to them so many times and made them also read it repeatedly.



## **Prayer is better than life**

It was the custom of the older generations to sleep early and then wake up in the middle of the night or at latest at dawn to pray and praise God. The quietness of the night allows the soul to pray and praise.

Morning prayers - which is at the time of the resurrection of Christ, the true light - is the time where day breaks and darkness disappears and also a time for our sins to be broken by God who came as the light to destroy our sins and the thorn of death with his resurrection.

What a joyful hour every Christian experiences every morning with light, which comes to fight the darkness.

What helped the older generations to follow this schedule of nightly and early morning prayers was that there wasn't much opportunity for staying out late, for there was no electricity, no place to party at and no television. None of these things, which consume time and distract the heart and mind from a life of prayer and instigate sin, existed.

I will mention here some examples which allowed those of the previous generation to live loving prayers.

At the end of the 60s, exactly in 1968, I got to know



a family which lived in Al Ibrahimiya area. An old man with his wife who lived in a small apartment. Their children were all married and one after another they left the country. The kind simple man lived in peace with his wife and they were both pious living in fear of God and His commandments.

Whenever I would visit them, I would see in them a beautiful icon of a life filled with blessings.

The man became weaker and older, but he continued to pray everyday as he always did. He would start his day by reading from the old testament and the new testament, followed by reading the daily newspaper. He would then have his breakfast and then would do some small chores around the house. He would then pray the Agpeya at noon and after dinner, he would pray again. At 8 pm, he would go to bed. At midnight, he would wake up, wash his face and pray the midnight prayers, as well as some praises which he had learnt by heart since his youth.

His pious wife would often pray with him, but at other times she would be so sleepy that she would pray while laying in bed. As the man grew older, his wife told him out of pity: “My dearest you cannot continue to pray like this. Why don’t you pray while laying down in bed? God will not be angry at



you.” She used to repeat this every time she would see that he is getting frailer, but he would always answer her kindly that prayers heal the sick body and solace the heart and soul. As Jesus Christ said: “The flesh is weak but the spirit is willing”. One day as he was getting off his bed in the middle of the night, he tripped and fell. His wife woke up alarmed, lamenting him saying: “I told you my dear that you are incapable of doing this anymore. Are you waiting till you die doing this?”

“How lucky would I be to die praying and worshipping my Saviour,” he answered her.

The man pushed himself and washed his face and stood there with his arms held up in prayer despite his weakness and injury. He kneeled down to pray, while his wife was praying in bed. Ten minutes later, his wife found him still kneeling in prayer. She wanted to call out to him, but didn’t want to interrupt his prayers. She waited a bit, then thought to herself that he must have fallen asleep whilst kneeling. She stepped off the bed and came closer to wake him. His body was still in keeling position, but his soul was with the worshippers who worship God in heaven. As he had asked for God in prayer, his prayers were heard. Indeed prayer is



better than life.

Sticking to prayer and fasting was nothing strange for that generation. They would prefer to die than to break their fast. For example if they were suddenly afflicted with a disease during fasting days, no one would be able to convince them to break their fast. They would continue fasting till the end, preferring to go to Jesus while fasting.

When I remember this pious generation which held fast to prayer and fasting till the last breath, I feel sad about how careless we have become about our prayer and fasting. We break our prayers and fasting for no reason whatsoever. The value of prayer and fasting has almost disappeared and we find all kinds of excuses not too.

### **In the name of Jesus**

In the summer of 1968, I was visiting the house of my beloveds called Samir El Wazam. He was from a renowned family originally from Aswan. He lived in their family home in Yelgha street in Shoubra. I would often visit them, where we would pray and talk about saints. I was accompanied on this visit by a young physician who was a friend of the family. As we were sitting there, Samir said: “Grandmother is sitting inside, but would like to come and sit with us. Would



anyone mind?”

“Of course not,” I answered. “Why would she sit inside all by herself?”

“She is shy by nature and very timid,” he answered.

“There are no strangers here,” I answered. “I’m the priest and she knows the young physician and all of you. Why the embarrassment?”

The man went in to bring her. A very old woman, over 80 years old, dressed in a black long gown and a head scarf, in the fashion of her time. I greeted her and asked her to join us. She went to a corner of the room and sat on the floor.

“That can’t be mother,” I said. “You cannot sit on the ground.” I scooted so that she had space to sit on the couch next to me. Her grandsons tried to convince her to sit next to me, but failed.

“How dare I sit next to the priest,” she insisted. “This is an honour I don’t deserve.”

I was truly astonished by such real humility from a woman the age of my grandmother.

We then continued our talk about the Holy Bible, with her listening quietly. I wanted to involve her in the conversation, so I asked her: “Tell me mother, where you living in Aswan 22



all by yourselves?”

“No,” she answered. “We were a big family. All the different generations lived in one big house. It was a family house.”

“So you were living with your mother-in-law in the same house?” I asked.

“Yes, she answered and also with my sister-in-law.”

Smiling I asked her: “Didn’t you ever fight?”

“Oh no...we never fought,” she answered surprised. “How could we fight when we would sing praises all day long while working at the house. We would always sing the praises, which we knew by heart, all the time while cooking or cleaning.”

We then stood up to pray. The old woman asked one of her grandchildren: “Can you ask the priest to pray for me?”

I overheard her and answered: “With pleasure!”

“But you have to take,” she said.

“Take what?” I asked.

“Money,” she said simply.

“Prayers are not to be paid for,” I answered. “Plus in our day and age, priests receive a salary.”

“You have to take to pray for me,” she insisted.

“But I don’t need it,” I argued.



“Who said that you need it?” she said. “Take the money and spend it as you see fit. You take care of those in need, right?”

“Ok, I said. “I will take the money from you as a blessing”.

The old woman put her hand in her purse to give me the money. My young physician friend, who was a joker, said: “Do you just want to give away your money, ok...then give me some money.”

“Then say in the name of Jesus Christ,” she said.

“In the name of Jesus Christ,” he said laughing.

The old woman pulled out money from her purse without looking and give it to him in his hand. Everyone laughed. I prayed for her as she had requested, then we all prayed and said our goodbyes. As we were leaving, the young physician went to the old woman and thanked her, trying to return the money she had given him.

“What are you saying my son?” she said sternly. “You asked in the name of Christ and I gave you. Whatever I give in the name of Christ can never come back”.

In vain, the man tried to give her back the money. At the end, the woman left and went back to her room.

It was a lesson to all those who were there about the simplicity of Christian life and the life of giving in the





name of Jesus Christ.

## **The sermon on the mount**

It was the custom of the Christian students at the faculty of engineering at Alexandria university to organize an annual party at St. George church in Sporting, to which they would invite all Christians professors and teaching assistants. The students would do some light sketches and organize some competitions and everyone would have a good fun time.

Following that, Father Bishoy Kamel or one of the church's priests would give a short sermon about human relations and how to live a better life.

I was invited to the celebration of the year 1966 along with a large number of professor and teaching assistances. Sitting next to me was a professor called Dr. George. I hardly knew the man as he worked in another department. Whenever we would meet, we would exchange curt greetings but nothing more. He was a quiet gentle man. He was not very sociable and had very few friends.

In the middle of the party, they called out his name to take part in the competition. The man stood up, but his face had turned red from shyness. He went up to the stage, where a



student asked him: “How many books are there in the Holy Bible?”

“I don’t know my son,” Dr. George answered. “I know nothing at all.”

The whole hall broke out in laughter.

The student then asked him another question from the old testament.

“That is a trick question my son,” Dr. George answered.

The student then asked him a third question, to which Dr. George answered that he doesn’t know the answer.

A student then performed part of a hymn and asked Dr. George to name which hymn it was. As a joke, Dr. George took out a pound from his pocket and gave it to the student, saying: “Nice performance my son.”

The whole audience broke out in laughter again, laughing at the professor who failed to know anything.

Dr. George then took the microphone and said to the audience: “Believe me, I really don’t know the answers to any of these questions, and that is not good of me. The only thing that I know is the Sermon on the Mount, which is in the Gospel of Mathew in chapters 5, 6 and 7. I read it everyday and try to live by it and obey it as much as I can.”



Everyone clapped for the man. He went off the stage and came and sat next to me.

I was truly impressed by the man who worked very hard to follow the commandments of Jesus Christ and live accordingly.

“Truly Christianity is a life and attitude and I would be honoured that we get to know each other better,” I told him. After a year, I was ordained a priest. This gave me the chance to get to know him better. I visited him at home and was impressed by his humility and the simplicity of his life and the amount of love in his family.

When we recounted what had happened in the party, I found that he was truly a forgiving Christian man, for in this situation of injustice, he did not complain, but acted as Jesus has requested from us namely to turn the other cheek. The words of the Sermon the Mount were engraved in his heart and mind and he followed them in all his dealings with people.

That day, I realized that real Christianity is not scriptures or information which we cram into our heads, but that the secret for a Christian life lives in the living Christ and following His commandments in everyday life.



## **A live conscious**

Real humbleness is the most important of virtues, as defined by the father saints. In the 50s, specifically the period when the papal seat was empty after the departure of Pope Yousab II, Father Athanasious, the Bishop of Beni Suef was visiting Alexandria and was interim Pope. Father Athanasious was renown for his monotheistic life and his seriousness of word and action. He was respected by all.

Father Athanasious was advanced in years. He had diabetes and other diseases which made him often irritable and unable to endure long discussions or lots of talking. One day while he was leaving his cell in the Papal building in Alexandria he was stopped by a group of people who wanted to take his blessings. Amongst them was a boy who shines shoes, who always stood in the porch of the Patriarchy hoping that someone would want to shine their shoes and give him a couple of coins in return. The boy went up to the Bishop and asked him: “May I shine your shoes?”, to which the Bishop - who was in a hurry - said “No my son”. The boy repeated it several times insistently, with the Bishop trying to refuse, until finally the Bishop got upset to the extent that 28



he waved his cane in the face of the boy, telling him sternly: “Get out of my way, boy.”

This scene is very common, as the number of beggars or those in need pester priests, until the priests send them away or those who are with the priests admonish them with harsh words.

Father Athanasious left and took his car to where he was going. He returned in the afternoon. With the setting of the sun, the deputy of the Patriarchy had prepared with the help of some servants a simple dinner table, as it was a day of fasting. Father Athanasious returned around 6 pm. The Bishop sat at the table, but before blessing the food, he asked the deputy: “Please go and summon the boy who shines shoes”.

“Father, there is no one standing in the porch of the Patriarchy. They all leave in the early afternoon,” answered the deputy. “I don’t know where the boy lives. Please bless the food and tomorrow I will go and get him. Don’t worry about it, Father, these children and beggars are used to being admonished every day because of their pushy ways.”

The deputy tried and tried to dissuade Father Athanasious, but it was all in vain. “I will not eat when someone is



upset with me,” said Father Athanasios. “Please ask around if anyone knows where this boy lives.”

One of the servants eventually said: “I know the boy. He lives in the grape fields.”

Father Athanasios went and apologized to the boy and wouldn’t leave until the boy said that he forgives him. He then took out some money from his pocket and gave it to the boy, saying: “My son, I’m an old sick man, with little energy. Please don’t do this again.”

Only then, did Father Athanasios bless the food and he ate with all the others. Those who witnessed this incident wondered at how his conscious can be so live and how he is so humble even in front of the lowliest of people.

It is incredible how we now give excuses to ourselves and don’t admonish ourselves, while these fathers were very strict in the way they followed the commandments.

I was mentioning this story in front of Ibrahim Gergis, father of Dr. Eissa Gergis, the owner of Victoria hospital in Alexandria, who was a friend of mine and we would often discuss the stories of our departed fathers.

Ibrahim then shared his own story of Father Athanasios, saying: “I used to host Father Athanasios in my house



whenever he would come to Alexandria. He would spend the night at my place and leave in the morning. One time, he went into the bedroom to rest. My son Eissa - who was a student in medical school at the same - did not know that Father Asanasious had entered into the room to rest. Without knocking at the door, he went into the room to take a book and was shocked with what he saw. Father Athanasious had taken off his priesthood robe and underneath it, he was wearing clothes of a pauper and he was lying on the floor...he was not even sleeping on the bed.

Father Athanasious was also surprised that someone had opened the door. Eissa apologized profusely and Father Athanasious, in his simplicity, forgave him immediately. No one knew the secrets of Father Athanasious' life and the secrets of his monotheism until his departure.

### **The Feast of Nairuz**

On the eve of the Feast of Nairuz of 1976, our church in Sporting in Alexandria was full of people. The Feast of Nairuz is important, not only because it is national feast of Copts and the start of the calendar which goes back to the pharaonic Egyptian year, but primarily because the Copts chose the year 383 AD



which is the year when Dekladianous (the largest persecutor of Christians) came to power, confirming the Copts' pride in martyrdom. Our beloved church has offered the best of its children to martyrdom and each one of them had a unique love story with Christ.

While the stories of martyrs might appear similar, in reality each one of these martyrs had a unique story. We often repeated to our congregation that our church really is the mother of all martyrs and that each Copt is related in blood to one or more martyrs. If we could go back in time, we would find that in each family there is one or more martyrs. The blood of martyrs flows in the veins of each Copt.

It was the custom of Father Bishoy each Nairuz eve to collect all he could of Saints' icons and make a procession in church engulfed with incense.

In the midst of the glorification, the congregation suddenly found a stream of bricks being thrown at the church. The devil it seems was angry at the renewed glorification of the saints which had defeated him, so he filled the hearts of some of his aides with anger and jealousy, making them stand on a bridge in front of the church and shower the building with bricks.





The bricks hit some of the windows of the church, making the glass break and shreds fly everywhere. Suddenly one of the women screamed. A brick had hit her eyeglasses making here lenses break and some of its glass went into her eyes. Blood was flowing from her eyes and face.

Some of the workers of the church and some young men ran to the bridge, but those who had thrown the bricks had already ran away. I called the officials who quickly came to the church and apologized for these disgraceful acts.

Father Bishoy rushed to the woman who was injured and tried to stop the bleeding. Surprisingly, the woman, while bleeding was thanking God saying to Father Bishoy: “Thank God, Father, that the lady next to me was not injured. Thank God that that brick also did not hit one of the little girls. I’m an old woman and my eyes are not important. This is the blessing of the Feast of the Nairuz for me. I’m happy.”

Father Bishoy and all those who could hear the woman were amazed by her words and by her spirit.

Father Bishoy took the woman in his car and headed to renown ophthalmologist, Maher Michael. The doctor removed the bandages from the women’s eyes and turned around to Father Bishoy and said: “I can’t do anything



now with the bleeding still ongoing and the glass shreds in there. I will bandage it back and please come back to me tomorrow.”

The woman insisted that she return to the church with Father Bishoy. Despite his insistence that she goes home and rest, the women insisted that she continue the Nairuz mass till the end. Indeed, she attended all the mass and after she received the holy communion, she went back home.

The next evening, we picked up the woman along with Father Bishoy and returned to Dr. Maher Michael as he had requested. He removed the bandages from the woman’s eyes and to everyone’s surprise...her eyes were completely healthy. There were no signs of bleeding, scratches or injuries to the eye. The doctor then performed an eye test for the women and her sight was completely normal. We were all speechless and praised God for His miracles.

## **An angelic spectrum**

In August 1989, we started building the church of Abou Seifein and Father Abraam Bishop of Fayoum in the city of Torrance in California.

There was no place for us to pray, so we used to hold a mass<sub>34</sub>



every two weeks on Saturdays in a Greek Orthodox church. At the same time, there was a Protestant church up for sale which the Coptic church did not buy, but was brought by a Pakistani businessman with the aim of converting it into an Islamic centre. As we needed a temporary place to rent until the church was built, we rented the church from the Pakistani businessman. That was on the Feast of the Virgin on 22 August 1989. We used to hold a Pascha on Saturday evening and a mass on Sunday morning.

The rental agreement that we had with the businessman allowed us to only use the church Saturday evening for three years and Sunday morning for three hours. However, we used to also pray on Wednesdays and Fridays, as well on feasts, such as Christmas and Easter. The Pakistani businessman had rented out the house next to the church to an American man and hired him to manage the church and some of its rooms. The American man allowed us to pray during the additional times which we wanted, so we thanked God for helping us. The Copts in that city were loving blessed people. Despite that they knew very little about the liturgy or spiritual life or the hymns, they were eager to learn and this eagerness encouraged us tremendously.



At the beginning we organized a hymns class for the elders. It was hard for them as it was at the end of the day and they would congregate for the class after a long day at work. They would meet at my house - like with all the other meetings, since we were not allowed to stay at church after mass.

Those who wanted to learn hymns would come to my house once or twice a week. My son Arsani did the best he could to help them learn the hymns and choruses.

Amongst the men who attended the classes was a man who stood out in his regularity in attending the class. He was a quiet person of angelic appearance. He was so meek and peaceful that his words were almost whispers. His features were comforting to all those who saw him.

Often he would sit, meekly but passionately asking me questions, especially after a sermon he had heard or the Bible chapter that was read at church. What especially drew my attention was that he was like a thirsty person who wanted to drink in everything about spiritual life. In his meekness, he accepted every word from the Bible.

At the end of October 1989, Pope Shenouda visited Los Angelos for the second time. The first time was in 1977. This second time was after the events of 1981 and after the Pope 36



was put under house arrest in the monastery for more than three years. His visit to LA was therefore an event of great happiness for the people and they welcomed him with great celebrations. The church which he visited in LA could hardly accommodate the number of people who came to see him. The Pope prayed on 30th October in the church of St. Mark. As we had no church, we and our congregation went to St. Mark.

It was a wonderful day. The Pope prayed and ordained some priests as bishops. He baptized children and made some children deacons in an atmosphere filled with happiness and joy. On that day, I found that man standing in front of me like an angel. I introduced him to the Pope along with the rest of my congregation. The Pope asked me about his name and called him Agnusta. At that point, the man's face turned red and tears filled his face, tears of unworthiness.

The man continued to come religiously to our Bible Studies classes which we organized in my house for the youth. Only a few youth used to show up, but he was happy to be amongst them, even though he was in his 30s and was married with a six-year old daughter. When all the youth would leave, he would ask if he could stay longer and we were always



happy to have him with us.

On 18 January 1990 at 7:00 pm, we went to the church to pray the feast of the Epiphany - the Lakkan and the Holy Mass. Everything was very basic. There were few people who attended the beginning of the mass. It was after all a day in the middle of the week and not a Saturday or Sunday. There were only four deacons, but who would be the deacon in the alter? I asked one of the deacons to enter into the alter and also the young man, who was a deacon that day, and told him: "Go and serve in the alter." He quietly apologized, saying: "I don't know". I answered: "We will pray together. It is not important if you don't know."

"But I've never entered the alter," he said.

"You know that there is only few of us and there is no choice. What is important is that we pray and raise our hearts to God. It is not important that you know the tunes and hymns, as much as you can pray from the heart. A humble heart is never rejected by God."

We started the mass and during the reading of the Bible, he came to me and said: "How can I serve in the Holy alter and I know nothing about it. This is much bigger than me and I don't deserve it."



“Believe me, no one of us deserves to come close to the alter,” I answered. “It is the mercy of Christ and we don’t come close because we deserve it, but because we need to.”

“In that case,” he said, “let me confess my sins and my unworthiness.”

The man then whispered in my ear in a spirit of rare humbleness.

It was almost 10 pm and after a 10 minutes sermon, I found myself - contrary to normal - praying the mass quickly. I don’t know why? Why did I feel that way? When I was giving communion, there weren’t more than a dozen of men and women. The mass ended, I dismissed the people and everyone went back home.

The man was the only one who had come from his family members. His wife had come back tired from work, his little girl had fallen asleep and his mother who lives with them didn’t want to go out at night. He was the only one who attended mass.

He took his car and drove back home. It was about midnight. The man woke up his family and gave them the Holy offering he got from church. His wife offered to prepare him some food. He agreed and went to lie down while she prepared



the food.

After a couple of minutes, she returned from the kitchen to find that he had departed to heaven. It was amazing....he had departed like an angel right after his first service at the altar.

Oh my dear God...how can You arrange things so perfectly?

Days later, his wife - a pious young woman which I had known since 1977, came to me saying: "Before my husband passed away by three days, I went into his office and found him writing letters. When he saw me, he looked nervous. When I asked him what he was working on, he refused to tell me. Today I found the letter which he wrote in one of his pockets."

She then gave me the letter which he had started but not finished. It was a letter to the Virgin Mary. The letter read as follows:

*"In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen*

*Los Angeles dated 15 January 1990.*

*Mother of humanity, merciful mother, lady of piety and virginity, beautiful dove, mother of light, Eve of the new age, I write this letter to you begging and asking for your intercession in front of my Lord and Saviour Your Son and*





*King of Kings Jesus Christ. I have waited for a very long time, since 1968. I have been sick for over 20 years and waiting for a touch from you.*

*I have been in pain for a long time, but I remain in hope that you will give me strength and healing. My pain and sickness has increased.*

*You have given thousands if not millions the blessing of being cured from incurable diseases. As you have done for those, please intercede to your Son to give me same blessing and also thank Him for all the blessings He has already given me.*

*I want to thank Him not only for the external blessing, but for the blessing which happen inside of us and no one sees. I feel these blessings through the intercessions of you, Mother of Light. Please intercede on my behalf and salvage my soul..."*

*He did not finish the letter.*

*I was amazed as I read this letter which he wrote three days before his departure, in which he asked the Virgin Mary to thank Jesus for the hidden blessing which he feels and which no one could see. It was the blessing of God.*

*I folded up the letter and put it in my pocket inside a small agenda. I still have that letter and it instigated me to write these lines in hope that it may offer condolences to those who read it.*



## Just believe!

The El Baranshawy family lived in Fayoum since the time of Father Abraam. In the 60s, some of them moved to the area of our church in Sporting. I used to visit them regularly, during which I would hear from the family elders the miracles which they witnessed during the time of Father Abraam. Father Abraam had departed some 50 years earlier and at that time they were in their early adolescence. Life with Father Abraam had left its imprint on their lives and that generation enjoyed true Christian values. The whole generation was pious and feared God.

One of the members of this family was Dr. Tadros El Baranshawy, who was in his fifties and had heard from his uncles the beautiful stories which they had witnessed with Father Abraam. Dr. Tadros' wife was a true saint; quiet, humble and fearful of God. I used to feel really blessed when I would visit this family and I used to see them as an example of how a true Christian family should be, for the mother who enjoys such virtues is able to raise her children as children of God.

I had never heard that this pious women got angry or upset.<sup>42</sup>



She was meek and humble and was able to turn all what life threw at her into prayers. Prayers was her means and her life. It was the habit of this pious women to ask me to come and pray for them at home, especially if someone was sick or if someone was going through a tough time.

This time when she asked me to come and pray for them, I confirmed that I would come to their house at 7 am. That day, however, I was praying at someone else's home before and due to circumstances out of my control, I arrived at their home 30 minutes late. They received me - as always - with love and gratitude and as I sat there preparing my thurible, we discussed spiritual issues in an atmosphere full of the scent of Jesus. I was in no hurry. We prayed, I anointed them with holy oil and as I was spraying the water, I noticed that Dr. Tadros appeared a bit agitated, looking regularly at his watch and moving quickly. For the first time, I noticed a travel bag next to the door.

I realized then that they must be traveling.

“Are you travelling?” I asked innocently.

Before Dr. Tadros answered, the pious women interfered and said: “With the blessing of Jesus, we are travelling. My sister in Cairo is sick and we are going to visit her because she



will undergo an operation. Please remember her in your prayers.”

Without still not fully understanding, I asked: “You mean you are travelling today?”

“If God so wills, we are traveling now,” answered the woman.

“Have you booked the train already?” I asked.

“Yes, Father, we are booked for the train at 8:30 am.” she responded.

I looked at my watch to find that it was already 8:30 am! “Oh my...I’m so sorry,” I said embarrassed. “I have delayed you and made you miss your train.”

“Of course we have missed the train,” said the husband. “What can we do?”

The husband then turned to his wife and said: “I told you let’s postpone the prayers!”

“There is no problem my dear,” answered the women. “With the blessing of Christ we will travel today.”

“And how is that supposed to happen?” answered her husband with apparent annoyance.

At this point, I understood what was happening behind my back during the prayers. In the middle of the prayers, I had heard some hums from the husband and when I turned



around I saw him point at his watch with his wife looking, but she put her finger on her mouth in a sign that he should stay quiet and continue praying.

I apologized profusely for arriving at their home so late. They could have drawn my attention to pray faster or even postpone the prayers till their return from Cairo, but on the contrary they were so moved that I apologized, saying: “This is not your fault Father. You didn’t know.”

While I was packing up, the wife then told me: “May I ask you for something, Father?”

“Of course,” I answered.

“Did you come here with your car?” she asked, to which I answered “yes”.

“In that case,” she said, “and so that we don’t waste our time finding a cab, can you please and if it is not too much of an imposition drop us off at the train station?”

“Gladly,” I answered

“Why would we go to the train station when we have already missed the train?” asked the husband. “This is strange what you are asking.”

“Just believe!” answered the wife. “We were late because we were praying and prayers can do the impossible.



Prayers have moved mountains, healed the sick and put out the fires. Aren't we always talking about Father Abraam."

"Let's not waste any time," I said.

We went down the stairs in a hurry and quickly jumped in the car. I drove as fast as I could to the train station, thinking to myself: "The blind faith and humbleness of this lady must perform miracles."

Five minutes later we were at the train station, as their house is not too far from the station. We ran into the train station.

At the gate, we asked one of the conductors: "Has the 8:30 am train left already?"

"That train is 20 minutes late today," he answered, pointing at a train which was just pulling into the station.

I was surprised and glorified God. I then looked at the wife who was talking to her husband saying: "Just believe!"

### **A story of true redemption**

In the 60s, the fashion in Europe was all about short and tight clothes for women. As Egyptians often tend to copy everything European without distinction between what is appropriate or not, most of the girls and women and in Egypt started copying this fashion. This trend upset a lot of priests and bishops



and they often warned against it during their sermons. Sadly, these words were lost and some girls even stopped coming to church altogether to avoid the looks of condemnation about what they are wearing.

The aggressive and/or patronizing attitude of several of the church servants and priests pushed these girls even further away from the church.

That is except for Father Bishoy Kamel, whose love and wisdom changed souls and would lead people - through a spirit of meekness and true love - to redemption.

In one of the liturgies on a Sunday morning, a woman in her thirties came to church wearing wildly inappropriate clothes. Several people who were at church that day were shocked by how she looked. Some looked at her with condemnation, while others commented at what she was wearing with disgust and contempt.

It was the habit of Father Bishoy after the liturgy to stand at the door of the church and greet the people of the congregation one by one, and with a big smile on his face share words of consolation or encouragement. In the middle of this multitude, stood the woman. With an encouraging smile, he greeted her, not mentioning anything about



her clothes. It was the first time that he sees her at church. “Where do you live?” he asked her.

The woman gave him her address. He memorized it immediately.

That same day in the evening, he visited them. It was the first time he had visited that house. He opened his Bible and spoke simple words which touch the heart and lead to Christ.

The whole family changed as if their eyes had opened. His visits to them became regular and with them their blessings increased and they were in joy and constant spiritual growth.

After a few weeks, the woman insisted that she burns the inappropriate clothes. Father Bishoy tried to dissuade her, saying :”You can donate the clothes to the poor.”

She refused, saying: “No one should wear such clothes.”

As for Father Bishoy, he did not say a word about the clothes.

He wanted to reach her heart to cure it and bring it back to Christ. Appearances will be fixed automatically, as external appearances are nothing but a reflection of what is in the heart. Father Bishoy followed what the Bible tells us “to first clean the inside of the cup and only then will the outside be cleaned”. This is what Father Bishoy cared about...to spread Christ’s love and care and to save souls and bring them





back to Jesus' loving arms.

## **An example of gratitude in sickness**

Our saintly fathers have placed the thankful patients, who endures their sickness and pains without complaining and consider it a heavenly blessing, as the most favourite to God and those to receive the heavenly crowns, similar to those who live in virginity and piousness and which have placed themselves as slaves in their obedience as part of their love for Christ.

I have witnessed in my life rare examples of gratitude for sickness and gratitude despite bodily pains.

I got to know a pious woman, a servant in the church, in 1965. At that time I was serving in the church of Archangel Michael in Kafr El Dawar. This pious women, along with her kind husband and her two little children, were an example of the meek Christian family whose only concern is a life with God. For them, the church with its secrets and its feasts was their utopian society where they grow spiritually; the church for them was like a nest to birds.

As God says, the house which is built of rock - built on Jesus Himself - can be subjected to winds and storms, but that



only increases its stability.

One of the woman's son went through a very cruel experience at the start of his 20s. He was practicing his favourite sport, which was swimming - in one of the pools. As he dove into the water, he lost his balance and hit the floor of the pool. He was immediately transported to the hospital unconscious. After intense medical interventions, he became conscious but the impact had injured his spinal cord, leading to the total paralysis of his lower half as well as some trauma to the upper vertebrae, leading to damage to his hands.

It was a terrible experience by all accounts, which affected all those who loved the boy. This young man who was at the start of his youth had become an invalid on a wheelchair, requiring constant help even for the most basic of functions. This was physically and mentally taxing on his family.

However, everyone witnessed how his pious woman with her love for God and her husband with his unshakable faith went through this experience with complete confidence in God, to the extent that their tribulation became a lesson in perseverance and a condolence to many.

The kind hand of God turned this tribulation into a positive experience: the young man became a rock and support for 50



many. He learned IT and used computers to connect with many handicapped to support them and encourage them. He never stopped supporting people.

Years passed and the mother never stopped serving her son or complaining. On the contrary, she served him thankfully without saying anything about her pains as a mother. No one ever saw her complain or disgruntled. She became an example of endurance.

Years later, the father had heart problems, but God was glorified in him and with the prayers of all those who loved him, was cured.

Three years later, the mother felt some lumps in her chest, but she hid it from everyone. She knew how much her son depended on her fully both physically and mentally. She feared telling anyone or complaining.

However, after a few months, she could no longer keep it to herself. One of her relatives who was a physician was visiting her, when he noticed that she didn't look well. When he insisted that she tell him what was wrong, she finally revealed what was going on. He immediately took her to the hospital, where they conducted investigations and scans to find that she had cancer and that it had spread to all her



body, including her bones.

Her relative the physician came to me in a state of shock and told me about her condition. I immediately went to their home and was surprised to find her in a state of indescribable peace. The only thing she cared about was that her son not lose his faith in God. She wanted him to accept what God had ordained thankfully. As for herself, she said: “I don’t deserve that God gives me these crowns. Father Bishoy always said that this particular disease is a chance for repentance and that the disease clarifies the soul so that it is accepted by God.”

The words of this pious woman reminded me of what Father Bishoy told me when we were in London in 1977. He literally told me: “You know why God gave me this disease? So that I can repent myself, because a priest must live a life of repentance in order to lead others to repentance.”

When I returned to what the early fathers of the church had written, I found it written that a priest who repents himself leads those who repent to the path of heaven.

How beautiful is a life where we leave everything in the hands of God and how wonderful is a life of thankfulness, especially by those who have experienced bodily pain.



## A beautiful icon

I am in awe at this beautiful icon of a young women in her thirties. A poor woman who loved the poor and dedicated herself to serve them. She dedicated a large portion of her time and her heart to the sick in them. She would visit them and support them, praying with them and reading the Bible for them, and taking care of their issues despite her limited resources. After all, service should never be limited by lack of resources. For Jesus Himself sent His disciples to serve with no money.

The strange thing is that when she would serve them with her loving heart, she would pray to Jesus to take away their sickness and tribulations and give them to her. However, she would also wonder to herself if that wish would make Jesus upset; that she would wish to take over their sickness and exchange their bodies for her.

She had gotten married a few years earlier and God had given her a little boy who was now three years old.

One of the famous surgeons and a servant in the church was telling me, while I was visiting a patient in Victoria hospital in Alexandria during one of my visits to Egypt, about this



young woman who was a patient in the hospital and on which he had operated to remove her breast, but found that the sickness had spread in all of her body and that her life was in danger because of it.

I visited her in her room and I testify in front of God that I saw in this young woman determination like that of saints. Her radiant smile, reflecting the peace in her heart, did not leave her face for a second. She said: “I have asked Jesus to give me peace, so he gave me peace. I have never slept more peacefully or comfortably as I have slept tonight. When they put me on the operating table, I felt that I was with my beloved Jesus sprawled on the cross. I told Him: ‘In your hands, I render my soul’, convinced that He will do with me as He deems fit and according to His love which He loved me with before the start of the world.”

The woman’s words and her desire to share with those in pain and to carry some of their sickness reminded me of the Saint Father Agathon who wished to trade places with a man who had leprosy, whereby he would take the man’s deformed body and gave him his healthy body in return. It also reminded me of that priest who is said to have prayed saying: “Dear God, afflict me with what afflicts my sick and weak brethren.” 54



I left the room of this strange patient and returned once more to the surgeon to enquire in further details about her condition. He told me that the cancer had spread to all her body and that she would not live more than a few weeks. I left Egypt that night and returned again to visit seven months later. When I asked about her, I was told that she is still alive and when I met her I found her happy with uncontrollable joy. God had miraculously granted her health, a new soul and a new love, especially to those who are sick and suffering. Her service to them was no longer words and feelings of condolences and pittance, but was that of a shared experience of the love and hope in Jesus Christ who carried our sickness and overcome the thorn of death on our behalf.

### **Traveller litany**

It is not haphazard that the church puts in its prayers special litanies for the traveller which it prays every day of the week during early prayers, except for Saturday (when the church prays the Departed litany), as well as Sunday (when the church prays Oblation litany, following the tradition from the time of the disciples when Saint Paul asked that everyone offers their offerings on Sunday in order to collect them and send them



to the poor people of Jerusalem).

As travel has always been surrounded by danger since the beginning of times, it was necessary to pray that God facilitates peoples' travels, whether by sea, road or air.

The church prays that the Lord accompanies the travellers and to be with them throughout the trip and to return them to home safely. The prayers then continue about eternal life which we all aspire to, with the priest saying: "As for us, O Lord, keep our sojourn in this life without harm, without storm, and undisturbed to the end."

Many fathers and saint have experienced the work of God in their travels. For example in his second letter to Corinthians, Saint Paul documented that when his ship capsized and he spent a day and a night drafting on a piece of wood and he had given up on life, God miraculously saved him in order to teach him to not depend on himself, but to depend on God. Ever since, many of the believers have documented the works of God which have saved them from a definite death and which have astonished many.

I remember in 1967, I travelled from Alexandria to Cairo for service. I travelled on a Saturday. I prayed Sunday morning in the Cathedral in Ezzbakiya and when I went at the end of 56





the mass to receive the blessing from the then Pope Kyrillos VI, he received me as always with fatherly love and his sweet smile and asked me about my service and about Fathers Bishoy Kamel and Tadros Yacoub. When I excused myself, as I was travelling right after the church, he asked me: “Where are you going, son?”

“I’m travelling back to Alexandria,” I answered.

“When?” he enquired.

“Today,” I answered.

“But today is Sunday my son. No one travels on Sunday. That is the day of the Lord,” he answered.

“Give me your permission and blessings please,” I answered.

“I have engagements back in Alexandria and a wedding to perform in the afternoon.”

“But on Sunday we do the Oblation litany and not the Travellers litany,” he insisted.

“I’m very sorry my Father, so are my circumstances,” I said.

“Please grant me permission and pray for me.”

“Ok, but don’t do this again,” he answered and uncustomary, he held my head and prayed for me a long prayer. He then dismissed me with a sweet blessing and a wide smile. I kissed his hand and left.



I took the train, which in these days was a small train only made of three little carriages: one first class carriage and two second class carriages. My seat was right behind the driver's cabin and I could see the driver through the glass partition between us. The train travelled around 25 km from Cairo. Right after the city of Banha, there is a crossing. About one kilometer away from the crossing, this terrifying scene unfolded before my eyes: the crossing was open and there was a cart pulled by a donkey which had gotten stuck on the tracks in the crossing. The cart was full of large glass bottles. It seems that the load was too heavy for the donkey, who had totally collapsed under the weight of his cargo right in the middle of the tracks. God only knows what was in these large glasses. Chemicals maybe?

The train was travelling at its regular speed. The driver tried in vain to slow down the train and to use the breaks, but the distance was too short and we were approaching the donkey and the cart at almost full speed. I heard the train driver scream about 200 meters away from the crossing and I saw him open the door next to him and was about to jump out and leave the train to its doomed future.

The passengers sitting behind the driver, like me, and who 58



were witnessing this terrifying scene started to scream. I also screamed from all my heart, asking for God's assistance. We all faced death.

Miraculously, some of the farmers who had witnessed this scene congregated and pushed the cart with all their strength. It was a miracle: the cart slid off the tracks in the same moment that the train approached the crossing.

There was only 20 meters between us and a definite death. The train continued without colliding into the cart or any of the farmers.

I immediately remembered the words of the Pope and felt my head which he had held firmly when he had prayed for me. He had already foreseen this danger and had interceded on my behalf to save not only me, but all those with me. That day, I praised the Lord and thanked Him for His miraculous work.

After several weeks I was in Cairo. I met the Pope who jokingly asked me: "Will you travel again on Sunday?" "No," I answered him. "I have learnt my lesson."

I recounted to him what had happened, even though I knew very well that he knew exactly what had happened. At the end of my story, I confessed in front of him, saying: "Your



prayer saved me from death.”

In his regular humbleness he said: “That was the prayers of the saints my son.”

## **Examples of faithfulness**

The more the world we live in drowns deeper in sin and promiscuity and the more the darkness surrounds us, the more important becomes the need for a strong light, for examples of living saints who have the light of Jesus in them.

Despite that these spiritual examples are rare, they are of high value in the eyes of God and the people. Just like precious stones, Christian virtues are often like that. They are eternal and sparkle both on earth and in heaven because they come from Jesus and lead to Jesus.

One of the valuable virtues is faithfulness. The history of the church is full of examples which are often like fiction. These include the example of Pope Zakarais, the 64th Pope who was persecuted by the then sultan of Egypt, to the extent that he threw him twice to the lions, but - with the help of God - no harm came to him because he was a pious and humble person. History tells us that this Pope had an Abyssinian disciple who accompanied and served him day and night and was extremely faithful to him. When the sultan of Egypt would throw the 60



Pope in the lions' den, the disciple would hold on to the garment of the Pope and follow him into the den. Something incredible to believe! However, because of this loyalty, the Lord saved the disciple from the lions and just as they did not harm the Pope, the lions also did not harm the faithful disciple.

This spiritual faithfulness is not the faithfulness of this world or the social faithfulness which exists in this world, where often the faithfulness of interests and benefits turn into hostility. For the world is passing and changing and all its values change, while when a virtue focuses on the soul, it is eternal.

Another example of faithfulness is that of the Christian minister who when the Wali came to visit him at home saw an old sick depilated woman in his house. When the Wali asked who she was, the Coptic minister answered: "That is my wife, sir". To show his love and pity for his minister, the Wali sent a present to the minister: three beautiful young women, telling him to marry whomever he wishes from the three". Immediately, the minister went to the Wali and thankfully returned his present, saying: "Sir, in my eyes, my wife is the most beautiful women on earth and I'm happy to be with 61



her and no one else.”

This is deep faithfulness emanating from the holy spirit embedded in Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, the sacrament of eternal union; the sacrament of two becoming one both in spirit and in body. This Christian minister confirmed that faithfulness is much deeper than the flesh and the needs and lusts of the flesh which will all turn to dust.

However, why should we limit ourselves to old examples, when our church is filled with recent examples of spiritual faithfulness, many of which I have witnessed myself:

- I was visiting one of my loved ones in Alexandria. He is a successful teacher, renown for his knowledge and faithfulness to his job. In her 40s, his wife started to suffer from Rheumatoid, which put her in a wheelchair and deformed her extremities. Whenever I would visit him, he would sit next to his wife with great gentleness and love, kissing her deformed hands and saying: “This is my dear wife and my blessing in life. I am not worthy of her.” All his neighbours and family members knew how he served her without complaints and went over and above in his love to her. He went on serving her with increased faithfulness for years. When God chose



her beside Him, the people could not believe how devastated the man was and how much tears he shed. This faithful husband exemplified with his life and his manners that the Christian union transcends the flesh.

- Another example of faithfulness which I witnessed was that of a young woman at the start of her life. Her husband worked in a cotton mill. One day, one of the machines in the mill fell on him breaking his back and resulting in the complete paralysis of his lower half, rendering him an invalid for life. The young faithful wife, a pious woman who prayed and fasted regularly, served her incapacitated husband. Many around her tried to dissuade her or pressure her to change her mind about serving her invalid husband, telling her that she had the right to get an annulment and to lead a normal life, but her faith was greater. She would insist that in church and in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony we are not united only on the basis of the flesh, but that we have become one soul, and that the flesh will return to dust anyway. She stayed faithful to her husband till the end and God used to support her to the extent that she would



encourage her husband to pray and thank God for his affliction.

- Another example of faithfulness which I witnessed was that of a brother priest who God tried his wife with a harsh experience. The woman got a mental disease and would go crazy inside her house. Medication had no effect on her. This faithful priest closed the windows and doors of his house and served his wife with faithfulness and unparalleled diligence. As she was unconscious most of the time, he served her like a slave. He would do everything she needed with patience and thankfulness. This went on for 15 years and no one from his congregation or loved ones knew how much he did for his wife, for he kept it all secret, as if it was a secret from God. He would often tell me: “Believe me, father, God has loved me and chose me to serve and I feel that I’m not doing enough to serve my wife.” Truly, how wonderful is the spirit of God which works in us and pushes us to do more.

And while we glorify these spiritual examples of faithfulness, we also see around us examples of selfishness and unfaithfulness. I will share these examples to show how





important faithfulness is:

- There was a rich man, a chief from one of the villages in Upper Egypt, whose wife contracted a disease making her confined to a wheelchair. The wife was sick for years and due to her condition was unable to conceive. The man and his family wished that he would have an heir who would carry his name and inherit his fortune. His relatives expected that his wife would soon die, after which the man would be able to remarry and have children. When the woman's sickness dragged on and she didn't die, some of his relatives advised him to go to the bishop and request an annulment although his wife was still alive. When he went, the bishop asked him if his wife was still alive, to which the man answered yes and that she has been in a state between life and death since years. The bishop tried to dissuade him saying: "My son, patience is a virtue. Life and death is in the hands of God and it is better that you wait." But the man insisted saying: "Father, you know how life in the countryside is. I have no one to take care of me, my food, my washing, no one to serve me in general. If any woman comes into my house to serve me, you know how people in the



countryside will start talking. I am really tired and have no more energy.” The bishop feared that the man does something rash, such as change his religion or something equally dramatic, so he asked the man again: “Tell me son, do you want to remarry so that you have someone who serves you or so that you can have children?” The man answered: “So that I can have someone to serve me.” The bishop then told him: “Ok, then go marry, but know that if you marry 10 women, you will never have an heir.” Indeed, the man went and married another woman and months later, his first wife died. His new wife was a young woman who had never married before. She did not bear him children. They both visited many physicians and did many tests, which all confirmed that both the man and his wife had no problems and should be able to conceive. In vain, the man tried to have children. Finally he died without children or an heir, just like the bishop had told him. What the man did affected so many people to the extent that he became an example for everyone who decides to forget about his principles and be unfaithful and live according to his desires.



## January 11

Father Bishoy Kamel worked as a teacher in El Raml high school after he graduated from the Faculty of Science in 1951. At that time, he was close in age to most of his students and thus became close to them. They loved him very much and got very attached to him. They respected him not only due to his knowledge but due to his gentle nature. He was a wise character despite his youth.

His students later on boasted that one day they were amongst his students. They saw in his mannerism and character, an example and model of perfection. This was especially true for his Christian students who counted themselves very blessed for their luck.

Amongst Father Bishoy's students were two brothers. One is now a professor of radiology in the university of Alexandria. Their father Dr. Maurice Michael, God bless his soul, was a pious Christian man. He loved Father Bishoy dearly and we would often visit his house to pray.

During one of these visits, which was at the end of the month of December, we found the full family there, including relatives and loves ones. Among the attendees was the



brother of Dr. Maurice, a naval captain who spent most of the days of the year on his ship, sailing from one country to another. He was a quiet man, few of words and in his 50s. He lived alone as he had never married.

The man was sitting there looking preoccupied. Father Bishoy, who knew him quite well, asked him: “What is wrong with you?”

“Thank God, Father...” the man started to answer, but was interrupted by one of the daughters of Dr. Maurice who said: “I can tell you what my uncle’s problem is, Father.” I answered her, laughing: “My daughter, the man lives alone with God and has no problems.”

“My uncle is convinced - and I don’t know why,” she continued, “that he will die on 11 January. Therefore, every year at the end of the December, he appears preoccupied to the extent that he can even get sick. Once January 11 passes, he becomes healthy again, welcoming of life and totally normal again.”

“Did you uncle ever complain to you?” asked Father Bishoy. “Father, we live in Christ. No one lives for himself or dies for himself,” answered the captain. “If we live, we live for God and if we die, we die for God. So whether we live or die,



we are for Him.”

Father Bishoy took these beautiful words and started talking in general about how we are sojourners in this place and that no matter how long our days are, we should be vigilant about praying and fasting to keep ourselves in faith and piety and to be prepared. As Saint John said: “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming”. When we finished our visit, we prayed and left.

When we got in the car, I - amazed by what I heard - asked Father Bishoy: “How true can what they said of how he feels be?”

“There are lots of mysteries which we don’t understand,” Father Bishoy answered.

“So, is it true?” I asked again.

“Believe me, the soul has secrets with Jesus above our understanding or our intellect. Those who spent a lot of time alone in the wilderness or at sea, their soul starts to meditate and doesn’t find except Jesus in front of it. So a person often reaches to a truth about itself without distractions and has a relationship of love and truth with Jesus, which reveals to him secrets.”



“So you believe him?” I asked.

“Why would I think he is a liar?” answered Father Bishoy.

“Suppose that the man has a relationship with God. Why would that offend people? ”

With that our conversation ended as we were headed to another visit. Time passed and I completely forgot about this incident.

Later, I went to visit the house of Dr. Maurice. When I asked about the captain, they answered: “He is fine. January 11 has passed and he is good”.

Many years later, the daughter of Dr. Maurice came to me crying. “My uncle the captain passed away.”

“When?” I asked.

“January 11,” she answered.

I remembered that day when we were invited to their house and the words of Father Bishoy. I was amazed and repeated in my head what Father Bishoy had told me: how mysterious are the secrets of the human soul when it finds Jesus and has a relationship with Him.