

*St. George Coptic Orthodox Church
Sporting, Alexandria*



**The Personal Memoirs
of Fr. Louka Sidarous**

*The Personal Memoirs of
Fr. Louka Sidarous*

Copyright © 2021 Louka Sidarous

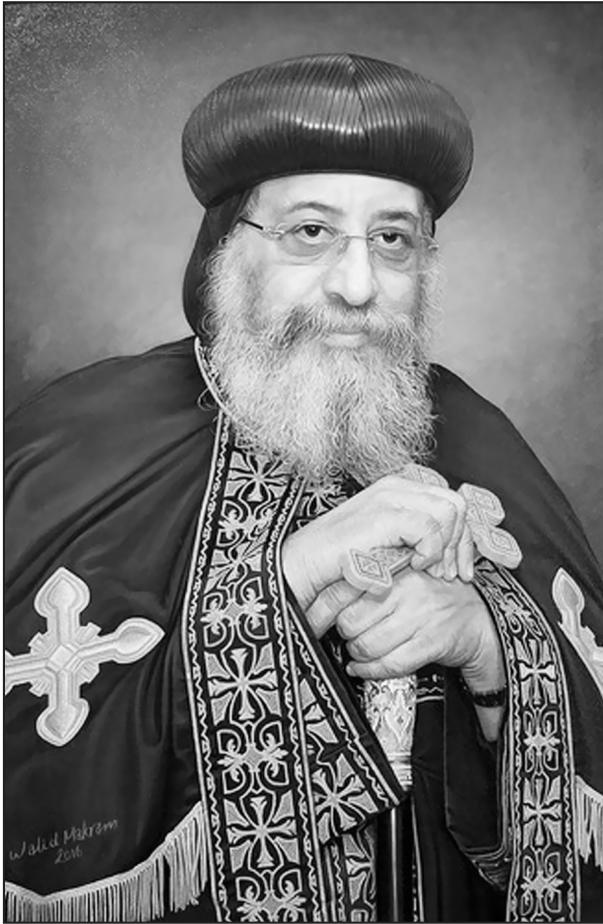
All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under the copyright reserved above, no part of the publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior written permission.

ISBN: 978-1-956395-00-6

Printed In The United States Of America
First Printing August 2021

Published by St. George Church- Sporting, Alexandria, Egypt

<http://www.stgeorge-sporting.net>



Pope Tawadros II
Pope of Alexandria
And the 118th
Patriarch of the See of St. Mark



Pope Tawadros II
with
Fr. Louka Sidarous
The 50th Jubilee of St. George Church

Table of Contents

Preface	9
Chapter 1	11
My Early Life	12
Learning Various Trades	24
Friendships	27
Youthful Indiscretions	29
Chapter 2	33
A New School in Cairo (1957 to 1964)	34
“I will help you, declares the Lord...”	35
The Lord Had Done Great Things	50
Chapter 3	53
Alexandria	54
Meeting Baba Sadek	61
Chapter 4	67
The Priesthood	68
Chapter 5	81
Marriage	82
Chapter 6	89
Ordination Plans and Meeting Pope Kyrillos VI	90
The Ordination	95

Chapter 7	101
The Forty Days After Ordination	102
Chapter 8	113
Special Moments	114
Chapter 9	119
Fr. Bishoy’s Travels to America	120
Chapter 10	123
Traveling to Los Angeles	124
Chapter 11	131
My Final Testament	132
Conclusion	135
Epilogue	137
The Last Year and a Half	138
A Brush with Death	140
Smells Like God!	143
Interactions with Medical Personnel	143
“I Thirst”	145
One Last Good Friday	145
We Thank You For Everything	146
An Encouraging Letter	147
The Verse	148

Preface

As St. Serapion said to the disciples of St. Antony after his departure: “The world lost a great elder, and the heavens have gained a great man. The One above has found the one he has sought; the one below has lost the one he possessed. Today, there is a festival above because of his passing on high, but there is great desolation and anguish for us who remain below because of his departure from us.”

Our beloved Fr. Louka Sidarous was an ideal priest and father who was ordained by a saint, served with the saints, and discipled saints. His spiritual children would always run to him to hear the words of the Holy Spirit that provide comfort, guidance, and encouragement.

Farewell to the great priest of God, who Christ led in triumph, and whose fragrance, the fragrance of Christ, is diffused in every place in the world.

May the Lord repose his pure soul in the paradise of joy, comfort the blessed family, faithful congregation, beloved priests, and impressive servants whom he served so faithfully, so lovingly, so perfectly, for his whole life.

Glory, praise, and abundant thanksgiving be to our loving Lord!

Bishop Kyrillos
Auxiliary Bishop of Christian Education
in the Diocese of Los Angeles
and Spiritual Son of Fr. Louka

HOLY
BIBLE

Chapter 1

My Early Life

I am now in the 69th year of my life as I write these words. The Lord has blessed me with a great memory, and I thank Him for it.

If I sit and recall the span of my memories, it goes all the way back to the year 1944. I have remembered that far since I was very young.

My family and I were very poor and lived in the area of Rod El-Farag in Cairo before we moved to El-Zakazeek.

My father, may God rest his soul, was a man from upper Egypt who was simple and poor, yet very intelligent. In the early days of his life, he followed the peers of his generation and he did what they did, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and staying out late.

My mother was a very holy and pious person from a very young age. She loved the Lord with all her heart and lived a true Christian life of perfection. Reading the Bible brought her comfort and joy, and she never read anything else-not any other book nor any newspapers. The Bible, however, never ceased to remain open and she read it with understanding and discernment, memorizing many of its verses by heart.

My mother was unhappy with my father's behavior in his youth, even though he only considered his antics to be child's play, insisting he was not committing evil or sin of any kind. In any case, his wayward behavior did not last very long, as my father's core was kind and he eventually distanced himself from those friends.

My father had a cousin whom he considered more of a sister. Her son, whom my father regarded as a nephew, worked as a clerk for the railroad, thereafter becoming a legal consultant and a head judge in the criminal court. That nephew suggested to my father that he work on the railroad, as at that time, he was working as a fish salesman, carrying fish around town trying to sell it. My father barely made enough money to care for his poor family. His nephew told him rather honestly, "Uncle, maybe this new work would provide you with better income, even though the job is so demeaning that I would be embarrassed to tell my friends that you are my uncle."

My father, not caring much about appearances, accepted the job and we moved immediately to the city of El-Zakazeek.

He rented for himself a small and humble place next to the railroad station, nestled in a very small blocked alley. Everyone who lived in that alley were Muslims of lower-class, both economically and morally.

Among the women of the neighborhood, my mother was considered a beauty queen, and she offered them all the most innocent and purest love with her utmost simplicity. She loved her neighbors with all her heart, which was a natural consequence of being a very simple country girl. In her private life, she clung to her Bible, and to praises and spiritual songs. She used to attend the church of Archangel Michael in Kafr El-Nahal every Sunday finely clothed and with the utmost dignity. She would then return home, and that would be her only outing every week. She would save her Sunday church clothes in a corner of the house on a small clothes line, and they would fill the house with the smell of incense. The smell of her clothes filled my soul as a child, and kindled within me an amazing spiritual feeling that was beautiful and has remained with me since I was a little boy. I was always stuck to her side, and many times I would stick my head inside her clothes as they were hanging.

My father worked as a luggage carrier on the railroad. The luggage carriers were given an oval identification card that they would display which named the station name and official post on it. This was given to official employees so as to be identified from non-official workers. My father used to hang this identification card on his chest. The luggage carriers would switch between three shifts, each shift with six carriers working. They would organize themselves in different groups to serve the three platforms in El-Zakazeek station based on the arrival and departure of the different trains from the station.

This job was hectic and the travelers' luggage, whether they were bags or baskets, were extremely heavy to carry, especially without the use of carts or dollies available to assist in transporting them. As a result, my father regularly carried an abundance of weight on his shoulders, tying the bags with a leather belt and carrying two on each side. Often, if there were other things to carry, he would add to the burdensome weight on his shoulders and would walk them down to the front of the station, go down the station steps, and then go up another set of stairs to the platform. It was a relentless and exhausting job.

None of his colleagues were Christian. The ethics and morals of luggage carriers were generally very poor. Their behavior was vulgar, their habits were terrible and their language was foul, but that was their way of life. My father was like a lit candle in the midst of them, his language was extremely different than that of his colleagues. His family dynamic, his way of life, and his morals and behaviors were on the opposite end of the spectrum, and were nothing like the pit his colleagues were living in.

My father was illiterate; he did not know how to read or write, but my mother had learned to read as a young child from one of the American missionaries that had visited their village in upper Egypt and had encouraged her to read the holy Bible and pray. My maternal grandfather was a deacon in the church of the village and was a man of prayer and praise. He was kind and compassionate. He was pious and had graciously served the Lord during his life.

When my father married my mother, who was his cousin, she taught him how to read the holy Bible. When he worked in El-Zakazeek, the newspaper sellers became like teachers to him. He used his free time to practice reading and to broaden his education with a wealth of

knowledge in a variety of disciplines, from politics to literature to science.

My father dedicated as much time as he could to church, and to serving its priest, Hegumen Fr. Boutros Yacoub. He attended the liturgy every Sunday, and fasted and prayed as much as he could.

One year, on the feast of Nativity in the late 1940s, Fr. Boutros gave a simple sermon about the offerings of the magi to the Lord. In his sermon, he said that anyone can offer anything to Christ. A person can offer up a habit or an addiction, or something that he owns that he can offer to Christ. My father was extremely touched by the sermon and, afterwards, he entered the sanctuary and told the priest, "With the grace of God, I have made up my mind to give up the habit of smoking as an offering to the Lord and I will give it up completely even though it's been 30 years." He then asked the priest to pray for him. That was all it took for him to quit smoking once and for all.

My father stayed working in the city of El-Zakazeek from 1944 to 1957- a full 13 years.

I started school in El-Zakazeek, beginning with kindergarten, then elementary school, middle

school and up until the second year of high school (or secondary school as it is called in Egypt).

I was educated most of my years in the school of El-Masaee El-Mashkoura, which is translated as “Thankful Endeavors.” It was a private school that was owned by Mr. Bishay Megaly. He was an entrepreneur from upper Egypt and was a Protestant Christian. He loved my father and respected him very much because my father was very polite and respectful to everyone and was keen to educate his children, regardless of his poverty and no matter the cost. Mr. Bishay was a revered man, and both the students and teachers feared him. All the teachers were Christian except for the Arabic language teacher.

One day, I found a very expensive pen in the schoolyard, worth 25 piasters at the time. So, feeling as though I need to return it, I went into the office of the superintendent and I gave it to him, which is when he asked my name and thanked me. The next morning while we lined up to get ready to go to our classes, he called me over and I was terrified. He ended up thanking me and praising me in front of the whole school, and he gave me a gift of five notebooks, he wrote on them, “A gift for the honest student: Kamal Khalaf Sidarous.”

In the second year of secondary school, I transferred to a different school because I chose to study mathematics, and that major was not available at my previous school. Both my teachers and the superintendent of the school tried very hard to persuade me to choose biology as a major and remain at the school, but I refused. Even my father tried to persuade me to pursue biology, but I refused.

The new school was owned by a Muslim superintendent, a strong man named Mr. Fouad Helmy. Most of the teachers were Muslim and among the 600 students at the school, there were no Christian students except for me. Needless to say, when I arrived at the school, I found a completely different environment than what I was accustomed to. All my previous years were spent in a Christian school among Christian teachers and students.

During my first week at the new school, when it was time for religion class, the teacher, Sheikh Sayed, wrote the word “RELIGION” on the blackboard.

I raised my hand, which prompted the teacher to ask, “What do you want?”

“To exit the room,” I said.

“Why?” He asked.

“Because I am Christian,” I answered.

“So what?” He said.

“This is a Muslim religion class and I am Christian,” I replied.

Sheikh Sayed got upset and told me to sit in my place, but I got up and went towards the door, so he said to me, “Why don’t you become a Muslim and leave this infidelity?”

I approached Mr. Sayed (I was 16 at the time and I was skinny and short), held his shoulder and said to him, “Why don’t YOU come let us baptize you and make you a Christian?” He became so angry that he cursed at me, physically kicked me and then kicked me out of the classroom. The superintendent, with a thick stick in his hand, found me in the courtyard.

He came toward me yelling, “What are you doing in the courtyard?! Why aren’t you in your class?”

“Because I am Christian, and in class right now, they are having a religion lesson,” I answered.

“Are you the transfer from the Endeavors school?” He asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“What am I supposed to do for you? We don’t have a religion teacher for you. Just sit here until the lesson is over,” He said.

When I returned home after school, my father asked me how it went and I told him the story of Sheikh Sayed. The Sheikh used to live near us on the same street. The area was newly-built with small countryside simple homes in the midst of fields. Around sunset the next day, as my father was coming back from work, he passed by Sheikh Sayed’s house. He found him sitting in front of his house dressed in his white *galabeya*.

My father addressed him angrily saying, “What did you do with my son at school? And why did you curse at him, calling him an infidel? Don’t you dare talk to him like that again. If you do this again, you’ll see the result of it!”

The man apologized to my father and told him, “The boy ridiculed me in front of the whole class and told me, ‘Let’s baptize you and make you Christian.’”

The next day I was surprised to find that our Arabic language and religion teacher had been replaced with someone other than Sheikh Sayed and the situation was over.

I was very active in school and it was noticeable. I created a bulletin board on a wall at the school, and made somewhat of a wall magazine, where I interviewed the superintendent and posted that interview on it. I had a very good relationship with all the teachers and all the students loved me. The year ended and I excelled over all the other students and my grades were the highest in the whole district of El-Zakazeek.

Unfortunately, my father's economic situation became very tight in El-Zakazeek. He began thinking of returning to Cairo and so, in the summer of that year, we moved back and he resumed selling fish with some of his relatives who were still in the industry of selling fish on foot, roaming the streets.

My father then went back to El-Zakazeek to transfer my papers to El-Eyman El-Thanaweya (Faith High School) in Cairo. He was surprised to find out that the superintendent, Fouad Helmy, adamantly refused to do that. He was so persistent in keeping me saying, "This boy is a treasure! I must keep him. I will personally be responsible for all his expenses until he finishes his high school degree from the school."

What I remember in the time between 1944 to 1957, are things that pertain to my childhood. I enjoyed a childhood that was completely pure and naïve, and similar to what other children go through in their various stages of development, as well as the situations and people they faced, both good and bad.

I remember the first time I lied in my life. It was when I was probably five or six years old. My mother, may God repose her soul, had sent me to see whether there was a liturgy in church on Sunday, since the church was going through some remodeling and they were changing the floors. When I went, I found that the liturgy had already begun and was in progress. I lied to my mother and told her there was no liturgy that day so she would not have to leave the house and could stay with me instead. That day I felt an intense feeling of sadness and regret that I can still remember to this day. I realize now how sin defiles the purity of the white gown that resides inside our soul.

I was very obedient to my mother-it was a true submission and obedience. She was also extremely kind and compassionate toward me in an unsurpassed way.

Learning Various Trades

When I had grown a little bit and reached almost 12 years of age, we built a small house with very simple amenities on a small piece of land next to a field in the outskirts periphery of El-Zakazeek. I used to help the builders make the bricks, bring them the water, and help them prepare the cement. The building was built from raw brick, which was made out of mud and straw. So, when I read the book of Exodus, and what the Israelites went through in making the brick, I understood it very well and I could fathom the extent of the suffering they endured. I thank God that He gave me the opportunity to live through these situations and events.

When my mother baked, I used to travel great distances with youth my age to gather straw, sticks and branches, because my mother, may God repose her soul, would bake every week for her family, which would increase by one every two years. She had five boys and two girls in addition to the three girls that she lost when they were very young.

Next to our new house was a slaughterhouse, and the female neighbors would take animal excrement and make fuel from it to light up their

ovens, and to this day, I do not understand how I was able to help them with this. I would go with them to the slaughterhouse and carry the dung of the slaughtered animals, despite its extremely awful smell. Close by was a soap factory that used to dump its leftover material and trash in a dumping area. These materials contained chemicals that could burn the skin. I would go there and cut a piece from the leftover chemical and soap remnants, and I would carry it on a basket on my head all the way home. Then I would mix it with the dung to make a type of fuel that would burn readily at high heat. In many cases, the fuel that was only made out of pure dung would rot, develop worms and gather maggots and so all would be ruined. I did this job for two years all summer long and on the weekends.

The Lord granted me intellect that allowed me to be successful in my education. I started at age 12, helping other students who were struggling by giving them private lessons for a fee. Teaching became my hobby since I was very little. I taught my younger brother, Ibrahim, at home. He was six years younger than me, and I saved him his first three years of school. I used to use the bottom of the washing pan, which was a flat round shallow large pan people used at

that time to wash clothes in, as my blackboard. I would gather some limestone remnants from the street to use as my chalk and I would teach him. Since his early childhood he was calm and submissive, and God had given him an open and highly intelligent mind. By the time I reached 16 years of age, I had a total of six students I was teaching private lessons to.

In 1953, an Evangelical priest came to our area. His name was Fr. Sammy Labib Abdel Messih, and he was a part of the Church of Christ. At first, he started attending our church liturgies at Archangel Michael, in Kafr-El-Nahal. He would stand in the last few rows and then after the liturgy was over, he would introduce himself to one or two people and invite them to his house.

Over a period of time he was able to gather a big group of Coptic parishioners to start his own meetings and church, without the priest of the Coptic church realizing. He would visit the houses around us. He came to visit us and would open the Bible and read and explain. I joined my family for these meetings, though I was very young. My knowledge about the Holy Bible and the church was very little, but I used to love my church deeply. So even though I was young with little knowledge, I used to argue with him a lot.

I used to confront him during his meetings and he would stay very calm and humble and wasn't confrontational. He was a pious man that prayed fervently, in his own way. A wonderful loving relationship was created between him and our family, yet he could not shake any of us from our Orthodox faith. My relationship with him lasted till the days I became a teacher in the Faculty of Engineering in Alexandria. There, he came to the University to meet me to ask for a favor. I also saw him again after I was ordained as a priest, but I will tell that story later.

Friendships

One occurrence that I cannot forget happened when I was 16 years old. On our days off from school, I used to play games like soccer or backgammon or chess with the young Christian boys in the neighborhood. One of the boys, who was a couple of years older than me, came by one day and called out to me to meet him. My mother had been standing on the roof of our house and saw something in our interaction, whether it was a mannerism or a word that was inappropriate from the boy, I do not remember. She called me once and twice, but I ignored her calls and ran off with the boy to play soccer and

spend some time with him. When I came back home at sunset, my father, may God repose his soul, had returned from work. He met me with unusual anger, reproached me for not listening to my mother, and beat me. This was the very first -and last time- that my father ever beat me. I do not remember ever being beaten that way before, because it was usually enough for him to give me a look or a talk and I would change my ways or fix my mistakes. My father's words had a deep effect on my soul. But that time he hit me until I wept, and warned me not to keep this boy as a friend.

As a child, I tried several times to sneak out and play with that friend without anybody knowing, but sure enough my father would find out and I would get in trouble and then I would feel bad and regret what I'd done.

Not too long after that, we left the city of El-Zakazeek anyway and went back to Cairo. That resulted in our relationship ending, and we lost touch with one another.

Seven years later, I had graduated from the University and had worked as a teacher in the faculty of engineering in the University of Alexandria. On one of my holidays, I visited Cairo and I got on the bus. The ticket inspector (the

person who works on the bus to check that each passenger had bought a bus ticket, and if not, collects the fare-a very humble and low-paying job) approached me in first class, asking for my ticket. I pulled out my money to buy a ticket, and I lifted my eyes up to look at him only to realize that he was my old friend! I stood up and cried out his name. He recognized who I was and we hugged and caught up. I told him I worked in the faculty of engineering in Alexandria and when I asked him about himself, he sadly answered, "Just as you can see!" Shortly after, I arrived to the stop of my parents' house, exited the bus and never saw him again. That day I held on to my father's hand and I kissed it. I said to him, "These hands of yours that beat me when I was young, are the same ones that enabled the good in me," and I told him the story of my friend the ticket inspector.

Youthful Indiscretions

Often, young children are pressured by their peers, and often those peers come from different environments. We used to spend a lot of time out in the fields studying. We would walk outside the city, carrying our books, walking along the narrow paths, studying and memorizing

our material with loud voices, since our houses weren't equipped for that. When we would meet each other, we would tend to waste a lot of time, talking and chatting about both good and bad things. Some of us would come across a fruit tree or a vine, we would look around to make sure no one was there, and then pick one of the fruits, even if it wasn't its season or it wasn't ripe yet. If someone happened to see us, we would bolt, escaping before they could catch us and punish us.

One evening around sunset, I remember some of the boys and I went into a cornfield and we cut some of ears of corn, which was pretty noisy. Because of the noise, one of the guards in the field realized we were there and ran after us. We ran so fast and were barely able to escape their hands. I went straight to my house with some of those ears of corn with me. My mother asked me where I got that corn from, so I lied and told her that some of the farmers had given them to us. My mother was not convinced, and felt in her spirit that this was not the truth. That evening, news came around, reporting that some young boys had cut ears of corn from the field near and the guards of the field tried to catch them and failed, but if they ever found them, they would kill them. I felt greatly disgraced and exposed.

From that day on, I never came close to that field. I would walk far away from it, fearing the threats I'd heard.

The days went by and we moved to Cairo. I entered university and graduated, and then worked as a teacher in the faculty of engineering at the University of Alexandria. I was helping some of the students in mechanics, to whom I used to teach private lessons. One of my students wanted to speak to me at the end of the lesson, so I introduced myself, and he did the same. I found out that he was from the city of El-Zakazeek. He talked to me about his family and their land, his father owned a very big cornfield. We reminisced over old stories and he brought up the incident of the young boys that stole from his father's field, and how the guards had set traps for them and were ready to capture them and punish them severely.

I lifted my eyes up to heaven and said, "Oh Lord, how awesome are your plans, that you've given me a chance to confess my sin, so that you can wipe away from my conscience this pain."

I told my student, "Do you know who stole from your father's field?"

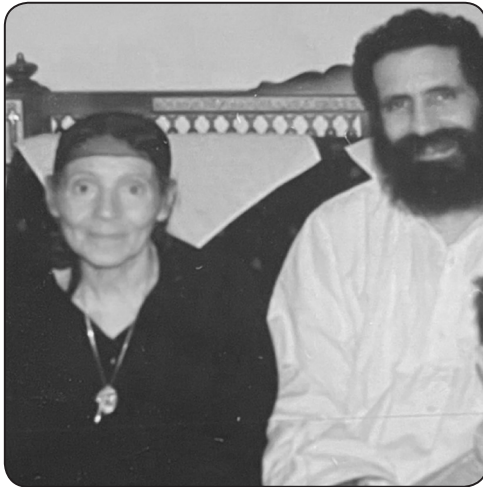
He answered, laughing, "Of course not!"

I said, "It was I who did that."

The young man was shocked. "Sir, the whole field is yours and even the owner of the field belongs to you."

I said, "Believe me, I felt as though I was greatly in debt and I finally paid it off by confessing to you this secret."

The student laughed and said, "Seriously? To that extent you can remember this incident?" I said, "Yes." We then greeted each other and I went on my way, feeling an extreme sense of peace and comfort. How wonderful and good God is, and how compassionate that He planned this situation miraculously.



Abouna and his mother



Chapter 2

A New School in Cairo (1957 to 1964)

We moved to Cairo in the summer of 1957 because it was becoming increasingly difficult for my father to make a livelihood in the city of El-Zakazeek.



He initially went to Cairo by himself for a few months. He worked during that time with his nephew who was his sister's son, and his neighbors and friends as a door-to-door fish salesman. He would come back to us in El-Zakazeek once a month. After a few months, he made up his mind that we should all move back to Cairo, as circumstances might be a little better for all of us there. We put up the house that we had built for sale, selling it for a mere 50 pounds.

In Cairo, we rented a small house made up of two rooms and a living space. My father used to work very hard to take care of his large family. And though his mind was bright and he was more intelligent than his peers, they were luckier than him in the trade.

“I will help you, declares the Lord...”

Isaiah 41:14

When I realized my father was going through hard times, I went with him to the fish market. In the wholesale fish market, a young salesman would be able to get a basket of fish, and take it to the streets of Shobra or other areas of town, to try to sell them. It would make a very small amount of money at most. Of course, for anyone who works in a particular trade, there are trade secrets and they live a unique lifestyle, with its own language and culture that immerses anyone in it. It is as though you are travelling to a foreign country with a foreign language and different rules and laws that you must become accustomed to.

Little by little, I became acquainted to this culture, and in a very short time, I became one of them. I bought fish every day from the wholesale merchants as one of the subs, or helpers, to a well-known large merchant. They used to give me merchandise and I would be given till the next day to pay for it, sponsored by one of our friends. I trained and I practiced in the knowledge of the trade until I was able to buy and sell. I was able to distinguish good merchandise from the bad, which would give me a better profit. I used

to place the fish neatly in a large basket, I would put some crushed ice on it, and I would cover it with a burlap sack, to protect it from the sun. I would carry that basket on my head and would walk the streets barefoot. I would walk from the area called Der El Malak where the wholesale fish market used to be, to all the streets and alleys of Shobra, which was the area that I was familiar with.

I would call out with a loud voice, offering the varieties of fish I had that day. And that was what I did seven days a week in the summer of 1957. It was an extremely fatiguing job, as my body was slim and weak, and I wasn't used to carrying heavy loads. Some days would pass me by, and I would feel as though my neck was ready to break in two. Additionally, that large basket left a scar on my scalp, as it used to cut and scrape me. As the months went by, that spot on the top of my head where the basket rested was calloused from the amount of scarring and cuts. That scar still exists on my head to this day.

From the summer of 1957 until I started school again at Faith High School when I was a senior (or as they call it in Egypt, the third year of secondary school), I helped my father sell fish.

When fish was scarce or expensive, we would go to the fruit and vegetable market in the area of Road El-Farag and we would buy whatever was available, whether mangoes, strawberries, vegetables or grape leaves, and even garlic or artichokes, we would go door to door around Shobra and the surrounding areas to try to sell. This was an extremely demanding job, carrying heavy loads and walking all day. Though I made little money, it at least helped support this large family of nine members.

Throughout this time, I faced many awful situations and I was of very little experience socially, but the Lord saved me from all the evil I faced, especially people that were unholy or forceful. Later, I successfully received my high school diploma, even though I had spent the last two months of studying going to the fish market from morning to evening. I studied as much as I had time and effort. But the Lord blessed the little that I had and I passed high school and I was accepted to university, in the school of sciences. However, though I was enrolled in four classes: physics, mathematics, chemistry and geology, I couldn't keep up and was unable to succeed. I failed all my classes except for math.

Our family went through a very tough time financially. They really needed my help so I worked most of the year. When summer vacation came, I continued to work. And when the second year started, I didn't even have the money to pay the tuition of 14 Egyptian pounds for that school year. That was a large sum of money at that time, so I didn't attend class for the first half of the year, and then again for the second half. The school ended up expelling me. I could do nothing except leave it up to God. I started looking for a job that would accept my high school diploma. I knocked on all doors that gave me even the hope of opportunity, with no success. I used to spend my nights crying, as the future was looking very grim.

Several times, as I walked around selling fish, I would be surprised to find myself at a flat that belonged to one of my peers at school. But I suppose my appearance, with my torn, dirty *galabeya* (tunic) and cap, my fishy smell and my bare, dirty feet distracted them and they couldn't see that I was the same person who attended university with them.

Despite all this, I remained a bright student, especially in mathematics, which I used to love, and in which I received the highest grade in high school. When I would find youth coming out of

a test in high school, standing and debating the answers to the problems that were on the exam, I would ask them to show me the test despite my horrible appearance. I would answer all the problems for them in a matter of minutes and they would be amazed at the sight.

In my third year of college in 1960, I used to go to the church of Saint Mary in Road El-Farag, with a group of our relatives and friends. All of them were fish salesmen and peddlers. Each Monday evening, there was a meeting of workers and handymen. The servant responsible for that meeting was from Masr El-Gedeeda (a wealthier district of Cairo). His name was Michael Amin. They would begin the meeting by singing a simple song which suited the simplicity of the group, then they would get up to pray and Brother Michael would say a few simple words explaining a passage from the Holy Bible.

I used to attend the meeting as well, and felt it would compensate for the lack of attending church because of my constant work and extreme fatigue. In March, Brother Michael brought with him another young man from Masr El-Gedeeda, named Kamal Barsoum, and he was in his senior year of medical school. Brother Kamal had experienced some earlier

trauma when he lost his younger brother in an automobile accident. His father was an ophthalmologist, and was chief of staff in an ophthalmology hospital in the area of Sharabea. Both young men enjoyed a life of leisure and financial comfort, and were known for their social and financial status. The accident had affected Brother Kamal and caused him deep pain. A group of the pious church youth gathered around him and joined him in prayer and led him to a deeper spiritual life. He began dedicating most of his time for service. At that time, he became introduced to Pope Shenouda (prior to his papacy), Fr. Matta El-Meskeen in Helwan, and to the servants who pioneered Sunday school.

Brother Kamal accompanied Brother Michael to the worker's meeting maybe once or twice, though he never spoke because he was uncomfortable doing so. They arrived together in their private car. It was unconventional at that time that one of the Sunday school servants owned a car.

After the meeting one evening, we stood with Brother Kamal, and he asked me who I was and what I was doing there. After I told him about myself and that I had been expelled from the

school of sciences, he became very disturbed.

He said, “No way! This would be a great loss if you remain like this! You have to readmit yourself to your college.”

I said, “How? I’m expelled.”

He responded, “That’s a simple matter.”

I said, “How can that be? I have forgotten everything already, and we are now in March. We only have two more months until the end of the school year. That’s in addition to the fact that I do not have the means to pay the tuition of the school.”

He said enthusiastically, “This is all very easy, just leave it up to God. My father is a good friend of the head of the University in Ein Shams. I will talk to him and God will do what is good.”

A couple of days passed and I found Brother Kamal’s car stopping in front of our house in the alley of El-Tarabeeshy. He came into our humble and poor house and sat with us for a little while. Then he took me aside and said, “My father spoke to the head of the university and he is waiting for you tomorrow at 11 o’clock in the morning.”

I asked him where. He replied, "In his office, in the main university building in Kasr El-Zafaran, next to the school of sciences."

I said, "I know that building."

The next morning, I went and I asked for Mr. Abdel Aziz. They guided me to his office, from one story, to the next, and throughout long hallways in this huge building. The building was once a castle belonging to King Farouk, and was very elegant, and its architecture very glamorous. They led me into his office and he looked at me with compassion and said, "Sit down my son. Who are you?"

I answered him. He asked, "And what is your story?"

I began telling him briefly my story and the current situation. He picked up the phone and called Dr. Faris, the dean of the school of sciences.

Listening in, I heard Mr. Abdel Aziz say firmly, "Faris!"

Dr. Faris answered, "Yes sir!"

Mr. Abdel Aziz said, "I'm going to send you right now a young man. Consider him my own son, break all your rules and re-enroll him in the school. Do you understand?"

He responded, "Anything you say, sir."

I thanked Mr. Abdel Aziz and quickly left his office and went straight to the dean of the school who met me with extreme astonishment, and said, "Who are you? And how did you reach the *Pasha* (a greeting used for hierarchy)? Come sit down here and tell me your story."

He rang the bell and summoned the secretary of the school, Mr. Anwar, and asked him for my file. Mr. Anwar hurried to retrieve the file. When Mr. Anwar finally returned, Mr. Abdel Aziz could see where it showed that I was absent the whole year and had thus failed, the previous year. He also saw the order for my expulsion due to my excessive absence, showing no excuses nor explanations, and resulting in "Fs" in all my subjects.

The dean looked at the file and addressed the secretary, "The *Pasha*, wants to re-enroll this young man and to cancel the order for his expulsion."

The secretary answered, "Whatever you say, sir!"

He said, "What's the procedure?"

"He needs to bring a doctor's note for the medical office to authorize it and make it official, then he has to come back to you, sir," the secretary answered. "Then the head of the university has to give the order for his re-enrollment."

I returned home extremely confused and befuddled as to how this whole day had come about. I called Dr. Kamal to inform him of what had happened that day. The next day, he came over bringing me all the required doctor reports from a private hospital dated with prior dates. I took all the reports to the head of the medical office. Dr. Kamal's father had called them and informed them of the request from the head of the university. They officialized the reports and the notes and re-enrolled me on April 1, 1960. My re-enrollment came toward the end of the school year and I had forgotten everything I had learned before.

Dr. Kamal advised me, "Now that you have only one month, I want you to study your books like never before. God will help you."

In the last review class of chemistry lab, the teacher in charge was named Dr. Badee and he was a very humble Christian man. I tried to remember

anything at all, so I took the filter paper and I made it into a paper cone for me to filter some salts. The teacher saw me from his platform, and hurled down to me and said, “What are you doing sir?” I explained to him I was absent the whole year but I have to practice because I have to take the final.

He spoke to me very kindly and said, “This is not how you use filter paper.” Then he helped me and taught me as much as he could.

I devoted that entire month for studying, I did not go to the market except for very few days. I took out all my old books and started anew, the chemistry, the physics and the geology. I would stay up all night studying while asking for God’s help. I took my final exams and, with grace from Heaven, I passed in all three subjects. At that time, the way they did things was they added the grades from the first term and the second term so when they added both grades, I ended up passing, but carried over two subjects to study in the second year: chemistry and geology.

Dr. Kamal took it upon himself to be responsible for all my expenses for all four years of university. He would encourage me with Christian love. He even gave me clothes that

belonged to his late brother. An unsurpassed friendship, full of love and care, developed between us.

In my second year, I passed all my classes including the two I carried over from the previous year. The third year, I received a higher score, an equivalent of a 2.0 GPA or a "Satisfactory." My last year, I specialized in physics and applied mathematics. In the first term of the last year, I earned a 3.0, "Very Good" and in the second term, I received a 4.0, or "Excellent." When they added up both terms, I ended up with an overall grade of "Excellent."

All the while, I did not stop helping my kind father. During every summer vacation, I used to spend each day going to the market to make as much money as God would allow me to help my family.

God was very generous with me as I came to know a kind man who owned a little shop on the street called El-Teraa El-Bolaeaya, his name was "Am" (Arabic for "Uncle") Hanna Iskandar El-Mattaee. He was a devout Protestant man who feared God. Some of his Protestant friends and some Copts used to visit his little store to spend time with him. He started encouraging me to give

tutoring lessons to some of the young kids in their homes, starting with his own children, and then he recommended me to many others, even to his Muslim neighbors.

In my third and fourth year of college, I used to spend three to four hours a day going from one house to the other, giving lessons to children of all different levels of education, from sixth grade all the way to high school. Even though it was a very small amount of money that I made, it was a great blessing, one that replaced my work in the market. I thanked God for that opportunity.

One nice thing that happened was that Am Hanna recommended I give a lesson to the son of a very respectable man who lived in the same apartment building as the small store that belonged to Am Hanna. The man was actually a wholesale fish merchant named Mahmoud Hasanein. That afternoon, I went to their apartment and knocked on the door. The father opened the door for me, and was exceptionally surprised because he recognized me from the fish market. He remembered that I was one of the peddler salesmen that bought fish from him often.

He greeted me and said, “Are you the teacher?”

I answered, “Yes!” and he invited me in and I sat with him for a little bit.

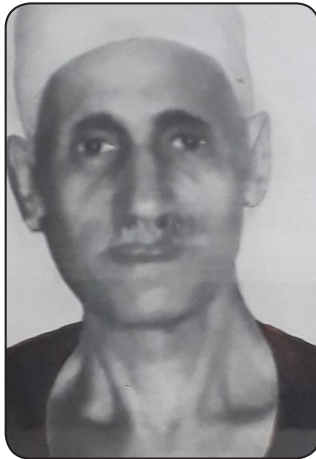
At that time, the boy was in the ninth grade, which was the third year of middle school. I asked the boy what he was learning in his math class, and he explained the subjects and I asked him to bring me the book. When he brought the book, I pulled out a problem and gave it to him to answer. The boy had trouble answering the problem so I started explaining to him how to solve it. Meanwhile, the boy’s father sat and watched me explain the problem and the steps it took to solve it. When he saw that I had come to an answer, he looked at the answer key at the back of the book to make sure I had solved it correctly. He found the number of the problem that we had been working on, and when he looked, he found that the answer was different than what I had calculated.

Firmly he said, “Your answer is wrong, teacher!”

I answered, “That’s impossible.” So I got a hold of the book one more time and reviewed all the steps. There were no mistakes, because

it was actually a very simple problem for me. I opened the back of the book again, where there was usually a supplemental page which contained corrections to any printed mistakes. Under the number of the problem that we were working on, I found the correction to the answer that was printed in the answer page. The printed correction came up identical to the answer that I had achieved and so, I showed it to the father. The man cried out apologetically and happy. I thanked him and continued my tutoring lesson. Eventually, I ended up tutoring all of his children.

Ever since then, whenever Am Hanna would see me among the merchants in his store, he would be especially generous towards me and would sell me items at a lower price. I was very thankful for that.



Khalaf Sidarous, Abouna's father

The Lord Had Done Great Things

I never imagined the extent of God's beneficence toward me, and especially on the day I graduated from university with an "Excellent," the highest grade one could achieve.



Abouna's mother

On that day, the secretary of the school, Mr. Anwar met me and hugged me tightly as he cried out, "From expulsion to 'Excellence!'" The same reactions were displayed by all—from my relatives and friends who knew my story, to the people in Am Hanna's store, and to Dr. Kamal and Mr. Michael Amin and everyone around.

During my last two years at university, I strongly felt the Lord's hand in my life. My younger sister had contracted an ailment in her eye that led her to blindness, but in return, received from God the gift of insight. She was able to see visions and amazing dreams that glorified God, who bruises but binds up the broken-hearted. She would see in her visions that I had passed my exams, weeks or months before my grades would come out. In my fourth year, she woke up from her sleep and said, "You passed! You even got an 'Excellent!'"

I laughed and remarked, “You’re joking.” When my grades came out, I had to apologize to her, cheering her up and consoling her. She often did the same thing with all my brothers and sisters, and with many others who had developed a loving relationship with her.

Two weeks after my results were released, my sister awoke from her sleep very sad. I was worried and asked her why. She answered, “They have assigned you a position as a teacher in the school of engineering at the University of Alexandria, which means you’re going to leave us.” I tried to ignore it and told her there was nothing to worry about. I was surprised a few days later, when I found out of my assignment as a teacher in the same school at the University of Alexandria.



Fawzia (Fifi), Abouna's sister



جامعة الإسكندرية

Chapter 3

University of Alexandria School of Engineering

Alexandria

When I learned of my assignment in the school of engineering at the University of Alexandria, I began to wonder how I would manage to live. Whom should I seek if I needed something? How would I arrange my living amenities? My life? I started asking the few people in Alexandria that I knew at the time. We had a few relatives there, but they lived in a poor area called Gheit El-Enab and it was far away from the school. I had visited them once, when I had just graduated for a week-long job opportunity for graduates with geology degrees. I used this job program as an excuse to go to Alexandria and visit my family for a week, and then returned to Cairo.

One of the dear people that I had met at the store belonging to Am Hanna was a teacher who worked in Alexandria named Mr. Karam. Am Hanna told him where I was going to be working and so he agreed to meet with me. I asked him all the questions I had regarding where to go and what to do. He told me there were homes there for students who had come from out of town and since I would be a teacher, I could probably find a position as their supervisor or overseer. I asked him how I would find such homes and who

was in charge of them. He directed me, saying, "There is a church called St. George in an area called Sporting; there is a priest there, his name is Fr. Bishoy Kamel. Go introduce yourself to him and he will help you with everything."

I asked, "If I come to you in Alexandria, will you lead me to him?"

"Yes of course," he answered.

I jotted down the address of Mr. Karam, and a week later, I traveled to Alexandria and went to stay with my relatives in Gheit-El-Enab. I showed them the address of Mr. Karam and asked them to show me how to get there. He lived in an area called Cleopatra Hamamat. They told me it was very far and they admitted they didn't really know much about the area, but that I could take the bus to the main downtown station and ask how to get to Cleopatra.

In a moment's notice, I got on the bus to downtown and asked how I could reach Cleopatra. People told me I could take the tram, but I asked if it was possible to get there by walking along the seashore. They said yes, but that it would probably take an hour at least. I didn't mind. I walked on foot till I got to my destination and asked how to get to Mr. Karam's home.

When I finally arrived to his apartment, I knocked on the door and he let me in. We sat for a few minutes and I said, "I came here as promised so you can lead me to Fr. Bishoy."

He answered, "Honestly, I'm quite tired right now. I just came back from school and I'm very exhausted and can't go down now." So, I asked him to give me directions. He obliged, saying, "Walk next to the tramway, in the direction of downtown, about four station stops. You will find a wall with cinema advertisements on it, and there you will find a small door. That is the entrance to St. George Church in Sporting. Go there and ask for Fr. Bishoy."

I thanked him and left and walked again till I got to the church. This was in August 1964. I entered the church, which was a small temporary building with roof sheets and red bricks exposed and unpainted. In the church yard, the Sunday school summer camp gathered. The youth were playing backgammon and various other games.

I entered the church to pray, and when I came out again, I asked the youth about the whereabouts of Fr. Bishoy. They told me he wasn't there and that he might not come at all that day.

By that time, I was extremely exhausted from all the walking, so I decided to rest a little before heading back to where I came from. I sat next to the young men playing backgammon and watched them play. They asked if I knew how to play and when I said yes, they let me join them. Less than a half hour later, I found a priest entering the church with a bounding gait. The youth pointed to him and declared that Fr. Bishoy arrived. I got up quickly to greet him. I had imagined Fr. Bishoy to be big in stature and much older. I was surprised to find a skinny, young father with an amazing spirit. He met me with joy and a beautiful smile.

He asked me who I was and I answered, explaining that I had been hired as a teacher in the faculty of engineering at the University of Alexandria. He embraced me and exclaimed, "This is a great blessing!" I was in awe at the way he treated me, completely full of love even though he didn't know me.

I told him, "I heard you may have student residence. I don't know anyone around here and I don't have a place to live."

"Don't you worry about anything at all," he said. "Everything is available."

“How much is the rent?” I asked. “So that I can make my arrangements.”

“Man! Don’t even think of such things. When do you start?” he asked.

“October,” I said.

“Then go, travel to Cairo, and come back then. Everything is easy and simple,” he said.

I couldn’t believe how God had simplified my mission. My first encounter with Fr. Bishoy Kamel left an everlasting impression inside me that could never be erased. When I returned back home to Cairo, I told my family the details of what had happened on my trip; they all praised God and magnified His good work.

Toward the end of September 1964, I returned to Alexandria, where I was, again, met with great joy from Fr. Bishoy. He showed me an apartment in a building close to the university. There, nine young men from different colleges lived and he assigned me to be their super intendant.

The entire experience of moving away was a completely new experience for me. This was the first time I had left my family’s home to live with people that I’ve never known before.

Nevertheless, by the end of the school year, it felt that all of them were my brothers because of the life that we lived. Our life was simple, yet filled with love, prayer, Bible study, regularly attending church and receiving the Holy Eucharist, which resulted in us developing a spiritual relationship and a true friendship.

By the grace of God, I became acquainted with the professors, teachers and overall atmosphere of the college, relatively quickly. Even though I taught mechanical engineering, it was completely different in the faculty of engineering than what I had learned in the faculty of science. But God gave me grace to be able to teach it meticulously and confidently.

My first day, when I went to accept my position at the school, I passed by the secretary of the college and I had my papers and my certificates with me. He congratulated me and greeted me very nicely and said, “Your name is Kamal Khalaf Saeed Arous?”

I responded, “No sir, it is Sidarous.”

He looked at me astonished and said, “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m Christian,” I answered and the man smiled and apologized, “I didn’t mean it that way!”

I also had a very strong connection to some of the pious servants, like Ramses Fahmi, Magdy Anees, and Albeir Nawar, among many others.

I regularly attended liturgies. The Lord allowed me to spend plenty of time with Fr. Bishoy, even though he was very busy. I’d visit him at church or at his house. That gave me the opportunity to get to know him better, and to become a disciple to him which encouraged a deep life with Christ and the life of the Church.



Fr. Bishoy Kamel

Meeting Baba Sadek

One of the students with whom I lived was a student in his second year of engineering. His name was Akraam Boulous. He had gotten into a car



accident a year prior and was beloved to Fr. Bishoy. That young man became attached to me as well, and one night he led me to the home of Baba Sadek and said to me, "Come let me show you an amazing man." This was my introduction to Baba Sadek.

We entered without knocking on the door; he would close the door but not lock it. We found him talking with some of the brethren. He was simple, but his words were so spiritually deep, more so than anyone I had ever heard before. That night, everyone sat in silence without asking any questions or commenting. He spoke for two hours or so without stopping, then ended his speech with a sincere, tear-filled prayer. It comforted everyone. After the talk ended, Akraam introduced me to him.

The 65-year-old man, who had allergic asthma, looked from behind his small glasses and said to me, “Welcome my son. Listen! Today I gave you all I took from Christ. I’m neither a preacher nor a teacher. I am a small *apsaltos* (a chanter, the lowest deacon rank) in church. I do not like anybody wasting my time. So, if you live in Christ, enjoying communion with His spirit that works in you, denying yourself and making your will and self-worth disappear, so that you can live with His will only, then you are welcome, that we could be comforted together with the unity of the faith of Christ and life in Him.

But if you’re not like that, then I beg of you never come here again, as I strive with all my might towards the salvation of my soul. It is as if I carry a small candle, unaffected if 100 people light their candles from it, but I don’t want anyone to extinguish mine.”

I was greatly amazed that night. It was a night like no other, it affected my spiritual life greatly. I not only started visiting Baba Sadek thereafter, but our relationship became stronger over time in a very special way. His relationship with me was different than it was with his other beloved visitors. I had a special place in his heart and I was spoiled by him because he would let me

spend hours at a time with him. He would even invite me to lunch in his home to eat together from his simple table that he shared with immense love.

Later in my life, when the Lord chose me to serve in the rank of priesthood, I went to inform Baba Sadek, as he always discouraged people from this grave responsibility. On the contrary to his usual opinion, he was very happy with my news. He said to me, "I will hold two kinds of love for you in my heart: the love of a son and the love of a father."

I worked as faculty in the university in Alexandria from October 1964 to March 1967. I lived in the dorms for one year, and after that, Fr. Bishoy recommended that I live by myself. He introduced me to an apartment building owner and I rented a fully furnished room in the basement of his building for five pounds a month, and I stayed there until my ordination as a priest. I was introduced to many spiritual friends at the university, like Dr. Fouad Rizkalla, Magdy Anise, and Nashaat Boktor Sawires. By the end of the first year, I had cultivated many friendships with teachers and assistant professors. An especially strong relationship developed between me and Eng. Makram Eskander Nicola (who later

became His Eminence, Metropolitan Bishoy of Demiat). We had a spiritual relationship that grew over time. We became like brothers who lived in a communal life of prayer and Bible study. We often visited each other's homes or went together to the Syrian monastery or St. Bishoy's monastery. Our love for each other and for the church increased daily. We spent most of our time together. I would go to his top-floor apartment, located in a huge building in the area of Menschea. We spent much time there in prayer, often praying most of the night and many times till morning. We lived a life of Heaven on Earth.

Makram and I frequented the monasteries beginning 1965. We had an especially great love for the Syrian monastery (in Arabic, Deir el-Suryan). Our time there was a retreat away from the world. Fr. Wissa El-Suryani ("the Syrian") was the monk in charge of the retreat house and had an angelic nature. We developed a wonderful relationship with him.

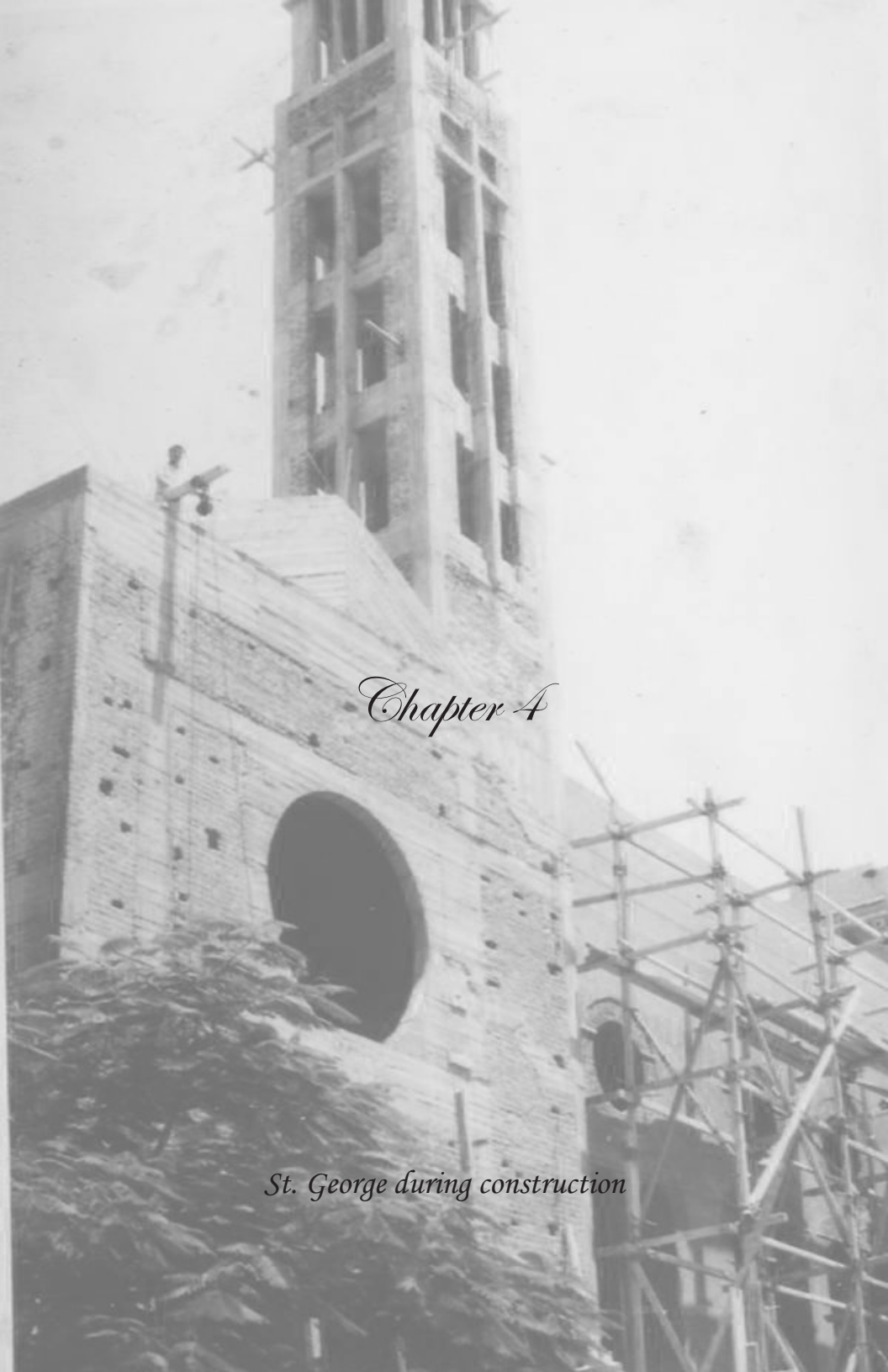
One day, Makram and I decided to visit Saint Mina's monastery. I had never been there before, and we agreed to meet at the train station in Sidi Gaber early in the morning, before the scheduled train arrived traveling to Matrooh, since we were

going in that direction. I went early and I bought two tickets. The train arrived and I got on, but Makram never came, so I ended up traveling by myself. I got off at the designated station, called Bahig. I came upon some Arab Bedouins there, so I asked them how to get to the monastery. They pointed in a direction and told me to walk that way. I took their words for face value and I walked in the desert in the direction they pointed. After half an hour of walking, I found myself in a desolate and barren desert. There were absolutely no signs or houses or any buildings, and every direction looked exactly the same. A person can get lost in the desert, and especially when evening falls, it's easy to get hurt, if not lose a life. But at the time, I had no doubts nor fear. I walked praising God, loudly reciting psalms and hymns with great joy.

After walking for two and a half hours, I found myself in front of Saint Mina's monastery, which, at the time, only consisted of a small chapel called the Church of St. Samuel, another church called the Church of St. Mary, a few simple rooms and a small part of an exterior wall. I entered the church to find a monk praying the liturgy. I had arrived toward the end, and saw that the only people in attendance were the priest, one deacon and two others. I stood outside the sanctuary and

found myself chanting the congregation responses since no one else was doing so. When the monk ended the liturgy, he came and introduced himself as Fr. Mina Ava Mina. He met me with great love and asked me who I was, where I had come from and how I came. After I had finished answering all his questions, he was astonished that I had actually arrived safely. From that day on, there was a great love between the both of us till the day he departed to Heaven.

My yearning for a life of celibacy increased. As soon as I finished my work in the faculty of engineering, I would spend my happiest hours in prayer and Bible study and became more exposed to the treasures of the church. Meanwhile, my relationship with Fr. Bishoy got deeper and deeper. I would spend hours a day with him, whether at church, or at his house, or in his car as he went on visitations. He would leave me in the car by myself and go up to visit, then come back down to me. Accompanying him, for me, brought me the utmost happiness.



Chapter 4

St. George during construction

The Priesthood

In 1966, Fr. Bishoy started talking to me about priesthood. He told me that they needed a priest in the city of Kenna, in upper Egypt, and they asked him to nominate someone to them. "So, what do you think?" he asked.

"It's none of my business," I answered, "I don't have an opinion."

He suggested me and asked my thoughts, but I rejected the offer for many reasons. The first reason having been that I didn't know anything, and the second reason was that I didn't deserve anything, and the third was I was no good for anything. A few days passed, and he forgot all about the matter.

Then, one day we were standing in the courtyard of our church in Sporting with Fr. Tadros Malaty and other brethren. Fr. Tadros mentioned that he was going to visit the family of Dr. Saad Aziz to console them for the passing of their father. The few of us that were standing with Fr. Tadros accompanied him on this visit.

The condolences were offered in a tent that had been set up in the street, lit up and filled with chairs so people could sit and offer their condolences to the family. This was the custom of those days.

We offered our condolences to the sons of Dr. Aziz and sat down, and Fr. Tadros left us after greeting them to offer condolences at the apartment where the women were sitting. We sat quietly for about 10 minutes or more, and Mr. Ramsis Fahmy, who was dear to my heart, approached me saying, “Why are we sitting here, like everyone else? Everyone is talking to the person next to them. This is a waste of time, no one is benefiting from this misused time. Why don’t you get up and speak about the word of God? In such occasions, the souls of people are ready to hear the word of God, even if only one person benefits.”

“Great! Why don’t you get up and speak?!” I said.

“No! Not me,” he answered.

“So then why me?” I asked.

“You’re free to do whatever you want,” he answered. “This is your responsibility in front of God.”

Ramses nagged me the entire time, guilting my conscience until I stood up, signed the sign of the cross and spoke.

I wasn't a preacher or much of a talker, but because of all the pressure that Ramses put me under, I got up and spoke for no more than ten minutes, and sat down again.

I don't recall ever standing up to speak at any meeting at church, except for one time where my zeal got me to speak out. It was a unique moment that's still etched in my memory till today.

Two months prior, a debate at the youth meeting at church was held titled, "The Conservative vs. the Liberal Life." Fr. Bishoy was assigned to speak for the conservative side and Mr. Albert Barsoum was to speak about a life of liberality and social living in the world. Unfortunately, Fr. Bishoy was sick that day, so Fr. Tadros took his place and gave a very simple sermon. He then turned it over to Mr. Albert to present the opposing point of view. He started speaking and was very eloquent and quite convincing. The youth were impressed with his style and rhetoric.

The youth meeting at the time hosted about 800 young men from different universities and different cities who were living in the dorms and had come from very conservative backgrounds. Some people tried to answer him and oppose the liberal view, but they all failed against Mr. Barsoum, who was very convincing. The youth in attendance had several questions and would write them down on scraps of paper. Many of those questions reflected a zeal towards adhering to principles of our faith, conservative behavior and thoughts conferring that the carefree life may be easy in the present, but the end is what is most important. Heaps of comments like this were received.

I remember one youth, however, wrote saying, “80% of the attendees of this meeting today will leave racing to the cinema with a very eased conscience.” We gave all the questions to Fr. Tadros and he was trying to shift the direction of the talk, but with no success. I was filled with zeal and felt that my spirit was largely confined within me; I didn’t know what to do, so I sent up a paper to Fr. Tadros, asking him to give me just five minutes at the end of the seminar to speak.

At the end of the seminar, Fr. Tadros pointed to me, so I walked up to the mic and I opened the small Bible that was in my hand, and I read the first verse of the fifth chapter of the epistle of our teacher St. Paul, the apostle, to the Ephesians. Only one verse and it says: "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children."

In five minutes, I spoke about the behavior of a Christian youth as a true beloved son of God.

I stated that even though we participate in all areas of life, we need to live our life in a way that suits the children of God, which is to live normally, yet refraining from things that do not suit our stature as children of God, even things that are considered permissible.

As I concluded these simple yet powerful words, the whole meeting burst into a thunderous applause. This was the very first time I had seen such a thing at church, as no clapping was ever allowed there, but the youth had expressed themselves spontaneously. Fr. Tadros rushed to stand and ended the meeting with the concluding prayer. That was the very first time I ever felt obliged to speak.

After the meeting was over, I stood with some youth, and was surprised to find Mr. Albert Barsoum looking for me. He hugged me tightly saying, “I am so happy. Even though I wanted to lighten the load on the youth, I found you to be strong, clinging to your love for Christ. I am very proud of you.”

Back at the condolences gathering, after I had finished my speech and Fr. Tadros had come down from the women’s gathering, we went back to church and everyone else returned to their homes. About two weeks later, Fr. Bishoy came and told me a very interesting story. He said, “I just came back from the monastery of St. Mina. Mr. Adly Tadros and I were in a meeting there with His Holiness, Pope Kyrillos the Sixth.”

“Thank God for your safe return. Why were you there?” I asked.

He responded, “Mr. Adly is very beloved to His Holiness and is a member of the board of the church, so we both went to ask for a third priest because the service is very burdensome and Fr. Tadros and I work very hard and we need more help.”

“And?” I questioned.

“We stood with the Pope and we presented our request. The Pope asked us to nominate who we wanted and then he would ordain him for us. So, I asked the Pope to choose for us, but he responded that he doesn’t know our people,” Fr. Bishoy continued.

“I got out a piece of paper and wrote seven names of deacons and servants on it, and handed it to His Holiness and said, ‘Any of these Your Holiness, they are all wonderful, anyone you pick. Just point to a name and put your cross on it.’ So Mr. Adly answered and said, ‘Your Holiness, the young man that gave the sermon in the condolence gathering, and no other.’”

Fr. Bishoy had not been there the day of the funeral of Dr. Saad Aziz’s father and hadn’t heard that I spoke there.

The Pope asked, “Whose funeral?”

“Dr. Aziz,” Mr. Adly answered.

Fr. Bishoy was befuddled and asked if a layman spoke at the funeral. Mr. Adly said, “Fr. Tadros brought one of the servants with him and he stood and spoke briefly, but full of grace and it touched me deeply. I feel no one other than

him should be ordained.”

Fr. Bishoy was still confused and started asking questions about that speaker, trying to identify who he was. Mr. Adly described me as a young man with a mustache and green eyes. So Fr. Bishoy responded, “That is Kamal Khalaf Sidarous, an instructor in the faculty of engineering in Alexandria University.”

“So,” the Pope said, “then God has chosen him.”

I was listening to all this in confusion and astonishment. When Fr. Bishoy saw me like that, he took me in the sanctuary and put his hand on the altar, and said, “In front of God, I have nothing to do with this and it was not my doing. You are free to do whatever you want.”

I remained silent and prayed for several days, then I got the idea of asking one of the spiritual fathers. He was one of Fr. Matthew the Poor’s disciples, and his name was Fr. Dionasious. He fell ill when he was with the fathers in the Valley of Rayan, so he returned to Cairo and met with Pope Kyrillos, who sent him to the Monastery of the Syrian, where Eng. Makram Eskander and I were introduced to him. We enjoyed sitting with him as he discussed

spiritual matters. He was a very humble man who was angelic in nature. Later, he was assigned to serve the newcomers from Africa at the Church of St. Mary, El-Maady.

I thought about visiting Fr. Beimen (the name that Pope Kyrillos had given Fr. Dionasious later) after much fasting and prayer. I would open my heart to him, and I was sure that God would give me a clear answer to my question. I decided that whatever he advised me to do, I would do, word for word without questioning. I approached Brother Makram Iskandar, who had no idea what had transpired between Fr. Bishoy and I, and told him that I wanted to see Fr. Beimen in Cairo.

“Would you like to come with me?” I asked.

“Of course, I miss him very much,” he answered.

We both went together and met with Fr. Beimen. We were comforted with the Word of God, which was full of grace, and we spent a very nice time with him. Then I excused myself and asked to sit with him privately. When we were alone and after we prayed, I started explaining to him the situation of my life and my family, including private things like my parents’ situation, my sister who had lost her vision as a young girl,

my desire for a life of consecration and celibacy, and my love for Christ in the church. As I was talking, and before I brought up the discussion between Fr. Bishoy and I, he cut me off and said, “Why don’t they ordain you a priest at St. George in Sporting? But on one condition, that you pray for me on the altar every liturgy you pray.”

I began to sob uncontrollably, unable to fathom what was happening. Fr. Beiman was confused and tried to calm me down, as he had no idea why I was in that state. When I finally calmed down, I continued my story and told him what Fr. Bishoy discussed with me regarding Pope Kyrillos’ meeting with him. I confessed to him that I came to him to hear the word of God from his mouth as a decision regarding the situation.

The man was greatly touched and said, “The thing comes from the Lord,” quoting Genesis 24:50. “So do not be stubborn because it would not be good for you to go against God’s will.” Thus, I obeyed without questioning.

I went back with brother Makram to Alexandria. I did not tell him anything the whole way there, though he kept asking me what was wrong with me. All I could say was, “*Ashkor Allah*¹ (I thank God), I’m fine.” When we arrived back, I met with Fr. Bishoy and told him everything that happened with Fr. Beimen. He responded, “Believe me, I see God’s hand, and I am sure of His works, but again, it’s all up to you.”

For the few months leading up to these events, it was very curious and rather strange that there was not one day that passed before someone would call me *Abouna* (Father) by accident, or would kiss my hand. Even the porter of the apartment building in which I lived, who was a kind Muslim man, would bring me things that I needed and would always tell me, “You are a man of God. We should call you *Baba* (Father).” These things would occur frequently in church, in the university, and even at home, but at the time, I didn’t pay attention to any of those things. But when the idea of being ordained began to materialize, I immediately remembered these things happening.

1 “*Ashkor Allah*” (“I thank God”) - What Fr. Louka was known to continually repeat till the end of his life.

Yet, I was still heavily burdened by the idea. I didn't feel this was my path in life or that I would be worthy of doing this type of work. Every time I looked to Fr. Bishoy and Fr. Tadros, I would feel belittled and unworthy.



Abouna in his late twenties



Chapter 5

Formal wedding portrait

Marriage

When I went back to Fr. Bishoy, he started preparing everything for the ordination and told me that I needed to think about marriage. That idea did not occur to me and that subject had never crossed my mind, so I told him, “I don’t even know how to think of such a thing.” So he asked if I had any relatives or people that I knew, and I said, “No.”

He said, “I propose a very kind servant, her name is Nadia Adib. Do you know her?”

“No!” I didn’t really speak to anyone at church, let alone women, servants or not.

He said, “Don’t worry then, let me take care of everything. Just pray.”

Fr. Bishoy asked Fr. Tadros who he would recommend as a wife for the new priest, and Fr. Tadros also said Nadia Adib. Nadia would confess to Fr. Tadros at the time. When Fr. Bishoy went home and spoke to his wife, Angel, regarding the ordination of the new priest, he asked her who she recommended to be a suitable wife for him, and so Tasoni Angel also said, “I believe, Nadia Adib would be a good fit.”

With this, Fr. Bishoy was comforted with the idea of Nadia and felt God's hand working.

He asked me, "Do you want to see her or to get to know her?"

I answered, "What you see as good in your eyes, I will do. I have submitted myself and this whole situation to the One who is in control of everything."

Soon after, Fr. Bishoy went to Nadia's house to meet with her father, Am (Uncle) Adib. Unfortunately, he didn't find him there, since he was traveling with his wife to Al Minya. Instead, Fr. Bishoy met with her younger brother, Nadi, who was a teacher in the faculty of science at the time. Fr. Bishoy explained the situation to him. Nadi responded, "My father will come back from his journey in a couple of days, and I will ask him then."

When Am Adib came back from his trip, Fr. Bishoy met with him and described the situation. This happened to fall on the day before Fast of Nineveh. Fr. Bishoy explained that it was an urgent matter and that the wedding had to happen prior to the beginning of the Great Lent, which was two weeks away. Am Adib was shocked that everything had to be so rushed- everything

had to be organized and arranged meticulously, as he was an extremely detailed and organized man. He had worked with the English Army till 1941, when he was 41 years old. Since then, he had retired and dedicated his daily life to his family. He had four children; two girls and two boys and he devoted himself to their upbringing. Nothing was more important in his life than caring for his family. Nadia was his eldest and she had graduated in 1963 from the school of agriculture in Assiut and had worked in the Port Agricultural Department in Alexandria since 1965.

Am Adib became extremely anxious at the urgency and the rush surrounding his daughter's wedding. He didn't know who the groom was or anything about his family. He didn't know anything about him, nor had he even seen him, not even once.

Fr. Bishoy comforted him. Am Adib and his entire family loved and revered Fr. Bishoy, and considered him a true father to all of them. The man agreed to everything that Fr. Bishoy had proposed, and delegated everything to him, since Fr. Bishoy had promised he would take care of everything till the end.

On Thursday of Jonah's Fast, Fr. Bishoy told me we were going to the bride's house that night to perform our engagement. That evening, Fr. Bishoy, Fr. Tadros, Makram Eskander, Ramsis Fahmy, Albeir Nawar and I visited the home of the bride. We sat for a little bit, then Fr. Bishoy and Fr. Tadros prayed over the two bands that I had bought for 5 pounds from Mr. Fawzy, the person in charge of the church bookstore, who also happened to be a jeweler.

Fr. Bishoy put on our bands, and the family offered us a small, homemade cake. We sat a short while, and when they all got up to leave, I got up with them. Fr. Bishoy laughed at me and said, "Where do you think you are going?" I said, "I'm coming with you." He was like, "No you stay here a little bit!"

I went into the living room and sat with Miss Nadia.

I sat quietly and had nothing to say. Everything was happening so quickly around me that my brain could not process all that had occurred. All of a sudden, I found myself in this situation. She finally initiated a conversation between us, and we discussed service and the Bible.

On Saturday, two days after the engagement, I went back to work. My colleagues were surprised to find a band on my finger. They gathered around me, and with curiosity, asked how? When? Who? But when they asked about her name, I had forgotten it, so in a funny and witty way, I took off my band and read her name to them.

The Saturday before the Great Lent, March 4, 1967, was the appointed time for the Holy Matrimony celebration. It was a cold and rainy day. After the vespers, Fr. Bishoy announced that there would be a wedding of the person who had been appointed to be ordained the third priest of the church, so none of the congregants left. Relatives and friends, all my students from the school, many of my colleagues, whether teachers or professors were all there. It was a very crowded event, to the extent that some people had to stand on the pews to see and participate.

Praying the ceremony were the Patriarch Deputy, Hegumen Timothaous El-Moharaky, and around 12 other priests. The ceremony lasted about two hours, with many beautiful hymns and deep prayers. Brother Makram Eskandar commented about that later, and said, "I lived a heavenly wedding during those moments." The

love of all the people attending turned the cold night into a warm, spiritual, and beautiful one—feelings that cannot be described. During the first hour of the ceremony, I couldn't find Fr. Bishoy among the other priests. Finally, he walked in, and prayed a small part of the prayers. When he came near to me, I asked, "Where were you?" "So sorry! I had another wedding I had to go to, as soon as I was done, I came."

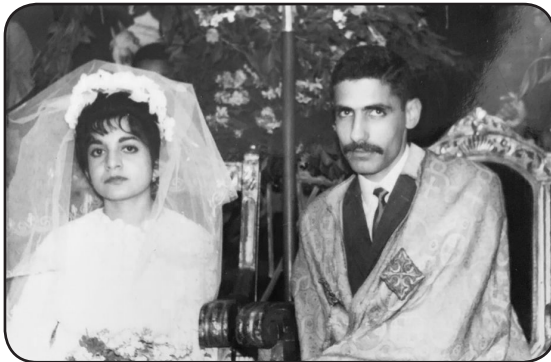
Am Adib had questioned Fr. Bishoy before the wedding about invitations, favors and the reception. Fr. Bishoy reassured him saying, "You're going to see for yourself. All these things cannot be done, because the amount of people attending will be close to 1000. You cannot give out invitation cards, or candy or favors because this wedding is unlike any regular wedding where these little things can be done."

So when Am Adib saw the sheer number of attendants the day of the wedding, he said to Fr. Bishoy, "You were right! With the amount of people here, we couldn't have provided any of those things."

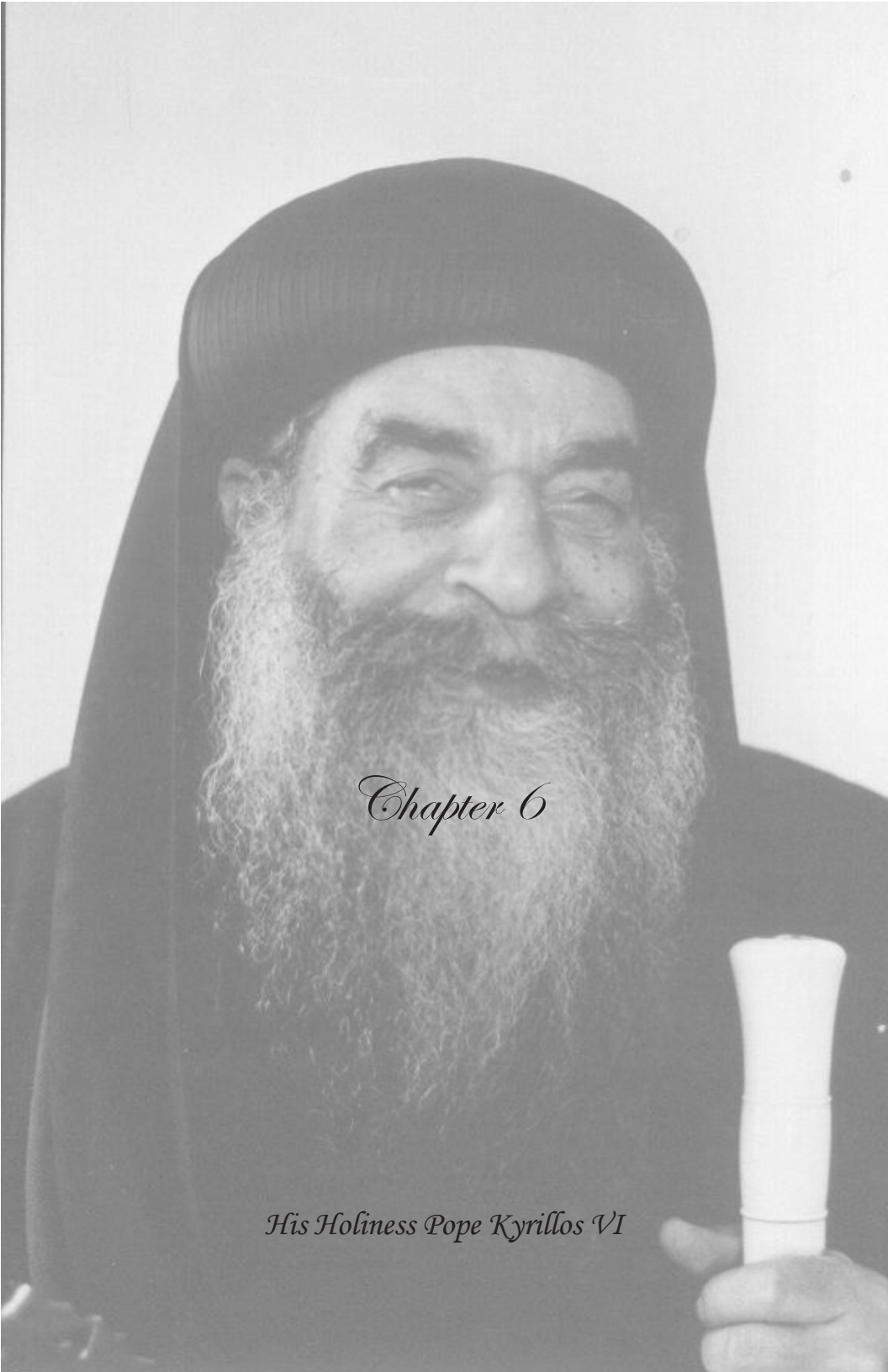
One thing that really touched my soul from that night, was that I received a telegraph of congratulations from Brother Yousef Phillobos

(who later became Bishop Isidorous, abbot and bishop of the monastery of Baramous). His father had just departed to Heaven that same day, and he left the people offering him and his family condolences to go out and send me a telegraph of congratulations. That unbelievably tender and loving gesture brought tears to my eyes.

My parents and two of my siblings attended the wedding. They had no place to stay in Alexandria, so Fr. Bishoy arranged a small apartment for them in which to stay. After the ceremony, we went to Fr. Tadros' apartment, which was in the same apartment building in which Fr. Bishoy lived. The ladies in the church had arranged a large table full of food for everyone who came, and we spent a couple of hours in joy and happiness. After that, Nadia and I went up to Fr. Bishoy's apartment, which he lent to us for three days.



During the ceremony



Chapter 6

His Holiness Pope Kyrillos VI

Ordination Plans & Meeting Pope Kyrillos VI

After those first few days, Nadia and I went to Cairo to spend a couple of days at my parents' house. When we came back, we found out that Mr. Abdelmalek, a pious man that was beloved by Pope Kyrillos, came and relayed to Fr. Bishoy that the Pope had decided that the ordination should be held at St. Mina's Monastery on Friday, March 17. Pope Kyrillos himself, was going to perform the ordination, which was an unusual thing for him to do, since he didn't typically ordain priests himself. Usually, he delegated other bishops to ordain priests, most of the time Bishop Maximos of Banha. But this time he didn't do that; he decided that he was going to do it himself in the monastery, as he was staying there during that time.

The Pope had only seen me once before, two weeks before the ordination. It was two days after our engagement. Fr. Bishoy took Nadia, Angel, and I, in his Hellman car, and we went to St. Mina's Monastery, where the Pope was. That day, the Pope had prayed the liturgy and was in his cell, so we waited till he opened the door for us and we went in. This was the first time in my life that I met the Pope and talked to him. When I was in Cairo, I used to attend some of his liturgies,

which the Pope prayed in the early morning, and I used to take communion from his hands, but I never had the blessing of being alone in his presence, or speaking with him personally.

I remember one day, during Jonah's Fast in 1962, I went to pray the liturgy at the Cathedral of St. Mark, in El-Asbakeya. The Pope was praying the liturgy there, and he had told one of the other fathers to distribute the Holy Body and the Pope was holding the chalice distributing the Holy Blood. It was very crowded, and I remember that there was a man that was in front of me in the communion line, but after he had taken the Body and he came to the Pope, who had started to give him communion, but suddenly he retracted his hand and told him with a very sharp voice, "How long have you not confessed?" The man became scared and said, "A long time, *Sayedna*." So the Pope said, "Hurry go see a priest and confess, then come back and take the Blood." I was terrified at what had occurred. I approached and took communion while my whole body was trembling, I felt a great reverence and other feelings that I cannot explain.

Back to my first visit with the Pope, which was also the first time that I had gone out with my fiancée. When we arrived to St. Mina's Monastery,

the Pope opened his cell and met us in the small reception area in the building that would later be used by Fr. Mina Ava Mina, his disciple.

After he greeted Fr. Bishoy and teased Tasoni Angel, kindly calling her “*Belia*,” (a glass marble ball kids would play with, referring to her size), he looked to Fr. Bishoy and said, “Where do you get them from, all so tall and skinny like that?” He then looked towards Nadia and said, “Come here girl! Nefertiti! You are Eve!” (Because Nadia had an updo that put all of her long hair up high), so Nadia bowed her head.

I confess that on that day, on our way to the monastery, I thought about what our conversation would be like. How could I escape the situation and flee this burden of the priesthood? So, I thought to myself, the Pope loves the Coptic language, the hymnology of the church, its rites and all that is in it, and he does not care for anything else. If he asks me of my knowledge of the Coptic language, he will have given me my escape route (since at the time, I knew nothing).

The Pope addressed me saying, “So is it your desire or did he (Fr. Bishoy) seduce you?”

I answered coldly, now ashamed when I remember how I answered. "Neither I desired, nor did he seduce me."

"So," he said, "Then what?"

I said, "Nothing!"

Then he asked, "Do you know Coptic?"

I was ecstatic for those few seconds when I heard that question. It was exactly what I had wished, it was the escape route that I had thought of.

I immediately answered, full of assurance of myself, and said, "No! No not even one letter."

I waited for his response, but it was a response that crushed my hope. "Tomorrow you will learn and you'll be fine."

I was silenced and could not utter another word until the end of the meeting. The Pope told Fr. Bishoy to marry us before the Great Fast, then he stood up and said, "Come over, let me pray for you."

He lifted his arms up and blessed both of us. When we left, Fr. Bishoy had to hastily prepare for the wedding, without cards or candy or any of those things that consume the minds of normal people. Nadia didn't even have a wedding dress

and instead borrowed it and jewelry from Mary, Fr. Tadros' wife. The wedding was set for Saturday, March 4, 1967 and less than two weeks later, I was to be ordained a priest.



Putting on the priesthood garments

The Ordination Day

On the afternoon of Thursday, March 16, Engr. Albeir brought his car and we all got in: Engr. Makram, Mr. Samir Thabet (currently Fr. Antonios Thabet in London, UK), my brother-in-law Samir Adib, who was in his first year of secondary school, equivalent to tenth grade (currently Fr. Youhana Adib, in Port-Fouad, Egypt), and Mr. Ramsees and we all went to the Monastery of St. Mina.

We arrived to the monastery by sunset, and the Pope had just finished the holy liturgy. Shortly after we arrived, the Pope opened his cell, and greeted us. No one was there except us and the monks of the monastery. The Pope left the reception area and walked toward the outer walls of the monastery. These walls—and the gate to the monastery—were still under construction, and the foundation was being laid. The Pope walked with his staff resting on both shoulders, holding each end looking like the shepherd of sheep.

Though he was simple in appearance and led a harsh ascetic life, the Pope had a holy and godly reverence that everyone who met him perceived. We took his blessings. He had known Engr. Albeir and Brother Samir Thabet, so he spoke

with them a little bit and asked Albeir, "What are you ordained as, Albeir?" He answered, "*Epi-deacon, Sayedna.*" He spoke about the buildings and the works of God in them that was apparent every day, like miracles. We were listening to him speak, and then once in a while he would turn towards me. He looked at me with a piercing gaze that made me immediately look down to the ground. But he didn't say a word to me.

When the Pope had finished inspecting the walls, he headed back towards St. Mary's Church in the monastery. St. Mary's was the big church at that time in the monastery, and there was another small church called St. Samuel the Confessor. The Pope entered the church, so the monks hurried over to turn on all the lights, singing "*Ekesmaraout,*" (a hymn to greet a Pope entering the church). The Pope then prostrated in front of the sanctuary and opened the curtain.

It wasn't a designated time for a prayer, as the Pope had just ended the liturgy. And there are no Vesper prayers in the days of the Great Fast because all the psalms are prayed in the liturgy until the 12th hour. Nevertheless, the Pope opened the curtain of the sanctuary and started praying the Thanksgiving Prayer. Then the Pope, facing west, pointed to me, so I approached the

Pope at the door of the sanctuary.

When I reached him, he put his hand on my head and cried out saying, “*Lucas Piepresviteros khen tiekekleesya ethouab* (Luke, a priest in the Holy Church).” Then he finished the three blessings as dictated by the rites of ordination of a priest. The monks and the deacons responded singing, “*Axios,*” and I stood there in awe and perplexed, not knowing what was happening around me. When they had finished singing, the Pope called Engr. Albeir to everyone’s surprise. Albeir approached His Holiness shaking, and his face turned yellowish white from fear. The Pope put his hand on him while looking at him, and it was as if that moment was a hundred years. Then the Pope cried out saying, “Albeir Deacon,” and finished the blessings. We finally saw color come back to Albeir’s face. We all looked at each other in silence while the deacons and the monks finished their singing and ended the prayer. The Pope blessed us and we kissed his hand and we left the church.

Everyone came to congratulate me, I was very confused. The happiest one was the monk Mina Ava Mina. He addressed me as “*Kods Abouna*” (Reverend Father), but I didn’t allow him to kiss my hand as I was in extreme embarrassment

from such humility and love. It was getting late and we were assigned a room to sleep in that was close to the Church of St. Samuel the Confessor. We tried very hard to sleep but every time we remembered what had happened to Albeir, everybody would burst into laughter. And every time we calmed down, someone would cry out, "Albeir Deacon!" This kept going until we finally slept.

In the early morning, we got up for Tasbeha praises and the Matins raising of incense, followed by the holy liturgy and the ordination. Fr. Tadros had come early in the morning with buses loaded full of the congregation of our church and Fr. Bishoy was praying the liturgy at St. George church which ended at 8:30 in the morning so that he could come quickly to the monastery just before the ordination had started. The Pope asked Fr. Bishoy to do a *metoania* (a prostration) because he was the one who had nominated me. Attending the ordination was the deputy of the patriarch and some other priests who were visiting the monastery that day. Of them was Fr. Mikhail the priest of the church St. George in Kafr el-Dawar, and Fr. Mina Eskander of St. Mina church in Fleming, Alexandria.

At the time of the raising of incense of the Pauline reading, as the Pope was going around the church, he came upon Mr. Morcos Abdel Messieh. The man was in his late 50s, and was a government worker who some people had recommended for priesthood over a small church in a poor area next to Matar el-Nozha in Alexandria. They had promised to pay him only 10 pounds for transportation expenses, as he would soon be receiving his retirement pay from the government and that would be sufficient for his livelihood.

When the Pope saw him standing with the congregation in the pews, he approached him saying, "My son, did you make up your mind?"

The man answered, "Whatever you say Sayedna. I'm at your disposal." The Pope then asked that the deacons bring him a tunic, and with that, he ordained him a priest along with me. When the Pope finished the ceremony, I stood next to him in the sanctuary and he said to me with his sense of humor saying, "What a steal! A priest for only 10 pounds!" It was quite apparent how joyful and happy the Pope was, for his face shone with great grace that day.

I was blessed and adorned by the love of this wonderful and great Pope. He thought of me as a sort of favored child and always treated me with a joy that cannot be explained. I confess I was not deserving of all this love at all.

Despite this love, I felt overwhelmed. I suffered a mix of emotions that engulfed and confused me. I felt unable, deficient and belittled in everything, in addition to feeling the immenseness of the responsibility. I was so burdened by these emotions, that on the day of my ordination, I couldn't avoid drowning in tears and prayers to the One who has control over everything, that He might lift these burdens, for He is the Savior that helps His servants who depend on Him.



Overjoyed Pope Kyrillos



Chapter 7

The nave of St. George in Sporting

The Forty Days After Ordination

I spent 12 days in the monastery. Those 12 days were like days in heaven, with no clouds or darkness, all full of prayer and praise, with fasting, experiencing the ascetic life of the Pope that filled the whole wilderness with its fragrance. I used to spend most of the nights in visual prayer, roaming around in the empty monastery at night not caring much about the extreme cold.

I ended up coming down with some gastric ailment. I'm not sure if it was from the cold or from the food, so I had to stay in my room for a day. To my surprise, I was startled by the compassionate, kind, loving Pope, knocking on the door of my room asking about me. I prostrated in front of him and he said, "What's wrong with you? Don't be careless with your health, and don't be too tough on yourself, the road is still so long for you."

He brought me medicine and anointed me with oil. I was astonished at the great care, love and amazing fatherhood this Pope showed me.

After the 12 days were over, the Pope decided to go to Alexandria. He headed to the church to pray a veneration for St. Mina and at the door of the church he saw me standing, so he told me "Would you like to come with us to

Alexandria, my son, or would you like to stay in the monastery to finish your 40 days?" So I told him, "I prefer to stay in the monastery."

"Whatever you like. Alexandria is just like the monastery. It's called the cell of the patriarch and it's the monastery of St. Mark." "I'm staying at the monastery," I said. The Pope finished the veneration and when he was done, as he was exiting the church, he addressed me another time saying, "Have you changed your mind or what?"

I felt extremely embarrassed because he had brought up the issue again. I felt like he wanted me to accompany him to Alexandria. He didn't want it to seem like an order, but wanted it to be my own personal choice, which was his way with all his children. In turn I said, "I'm at your disposal, Your Holiness."

He was so relieved that he told everyone around him, "Come my sons! Bring his belongings from his cell and put them in my car."

That was how we went to Alexandria. They gave me a room on the second floor in the guest house of the bishops and monks, that I may complete my 40 days. We arrived midday, so at 3 o'clock, I prayed the holy liturgy with the Pope. I continued accompanying him in praises

and matins and liturgies every day, and with that, I received immense blessings of which I am undeserving. The Pope himself used to teach me, little by little, the rites of the sacraments that pertain to the priest. With each small section he taught me, he would thoroughly explain so much of the tradition to me. He would also bring my attention to details of which I was ignorant. He brought to my attention the proper way of entering the church and the proper way of exiting it. To such extreme meticulousness, he gave me the details of all things.

Fr. Yousef Maggaly was the head priest in the Cathedral of St. Mark. He was an elderly man affected by paraplegic paralysis. He was ordained a priest in 1921 and Pope Kyrillos respected and revered him. He was a priest since the Pope was just a young man attending the youth meeting in Alexandria before he became a monk in the *Baramous* (Pi Romaous = the Romans = Sts. Maximos and Dometios) Monastery.

Fr. Yousef sanctified the Pope and loved him a great deal. In some of the liturgies that I had prayed with His Holiness on Sundays at St. Mark's Cathedral, the Pope had asked me to give the sermon after the holy Gospel reading. He would often tell me that 10 words with understanding

are far better than 10,000 words with the tongue. I used to kiss his hand and go out to give the sermon and after, I would come back and kiss his hand again, and he would tell me, "*Shey en Rompi*" (A Coptic expression meaning, "Wishing you a hundred years more," which is a great compliment). He would say, "Beautiful, my son!" and would wish exceeding grace. I used to be so happy with his wishes.

The Pope would ask me to take the permission of Fr. Yousef before I stepped outside. I would go to Fr. Yousef and say the Pope told me that I must take your permission to give the sermon. The old priest would say, "Oh how sinful I am!" And he would hurl over to the Pope, and say, "I am sinful, Your Holiness, how could he take permission from me?" And the Pope would say, "We have to teach the young ones, Fr. Yousef, how to behave." That was the way the Pope showed reverence to the elder priests and retained their respect as the apostle commanded.

One day after the liturgy, the Pope summoned me to meet in his room. He told me to sit down, so I sat. The he proceeded to say, "You know that Fr. Yousef is an old man and ill. And Fr. Philipos is also an older man. Fr. Yousef asked me to keep you to serve with them in the cathedral

of St. Mark. Until you fetch me one or two of your peers so I can ordain them and you could return to St. George in Sporting. What do you think?"

I was shocked. I had been counting the days that I would return back to my church that I love, and to Fr. Bishoy, to be with him so he can teach me and guide me. I answered the Pope, "No I can't."

The Pope said, "My son, it's just a short time, and then you can go back to your church."

I answered, "This is a difficult situation and I am not able to do it."

"Does a soldier tell his sergeant in the army, 'No I can't,' and then doesn't obey?"

I responded, "You ordained me to St. George in Sporting."

He fired back, "No! I ordained you to the church of God!"

I said, "I have the recording."

He said, "What recording?"

Then I uttered words that I regret I said to this day, "Do not make me stumble at the beginning of my service."

The Pope's face changed immediately and he said, "What? What did you say? I make you stumble? OK then!"

And he dismissed me from his presence.

I became greatly confused and anxious. What will happen now to me, Lord? What a mess! I had been living the best days of my life. What have I to do with politics? Why did they request I stay at St. Mark? It's the church of dignitaries and events, and I have no interest or clue about either of those things. I just want to serve in a calm environment and worry about my own salvation and the salvation of those close to me.

Truly, my soul entered a dark and worrisome place, with no peace; especially now that I've lost my beautiful relationship with the Pope and his kind, compassionate, sweet love to me. Now what? Lord...now what??

I called Fr. Bishoy and he came immediately. I told him the whole story in detail, so he calmed me down and to minimize the situation.

The next day, Fr. Bishoy, Fr. Tadros, and the board of deacons at St. George in Sporting came and met with the Pope. I was not with them and don't know what went on between them.

In the evening of Saturday, the vespers of Baptismal Sunday (The Sunday of the Man Born Blind), the deputy of the patriarch told me, "His holiness ordered me to pray the vespers at St. George in Sporting and I am taking you with me."

I agreed.

We went and prayed vespers, and I gave the sermon and the deputy father then said to the congregation, "I relay to you the prayers of His Holiness, the Pope, and his love to all of you. And I congratulate you on your new priest."

Then we returned to the patriarchate. The deputy father spoke with the Pope on the telephone to give him an account of what he had done. I asked the father if he would let me speak with the Pope, whom I had not seen since the time I spoke to him harshly.

I said, "I kiss your hands, Your Holiness."

He answered harshly, "Kiss!"

I told him, "I hope you're not upset with me."

He said, "Does anything happen to a huge tree when a mosquito stands on it?"

I said, “No, your Holiness. I am less than a mosquito.”

So he answered, “Yes, less.”

I said, “I have sinned, absolve me!”

He answered, “May God absolve you,” and the call ended at that.

The next morning, I went to church at matins, and I kissed the Pope’s hand, trembling.

He met me with his beautiful usual smile that made my heart flutter with joy. He never mentioned that incident ever again, and I learned the true meaning of fatherhood.

The end of my 40 days would have fallen on the day of the feast of Holy Resurrection. The Pope left Alexandria on Friday, the last day of the 40 days of lent, so I went and attended the Pascha at the Church of St. George some of the time, and the other times at St. Mark. And on the Eve of the Resurrection, I went to St. George and prayed the feast liturgy. The joy of the Holy Resurrection engulfed me, it surpassed my imagination. From that day on, I started to serve at St. George with as much energy and love as I could provide. I began to delve into the sacraments of the church, and I strived to drink from its fountains of life.

In spite of my many sins and my carelessness and laziness, the Lord did not deprive me of great grace, that I confess I am undeserving of. The love of Fr. Bishoy and Fr. Tadros was the greatest support for me in the early years of my life. And now, after almost 44 years, I still learn and discover more of the sacraments and the secrets of the economy of the church, secrets both big and small, to an unbelievable extent. In its feasts and seasons, in its spiritual rites, and in the Godly hymns that transport the soul from earth to heaven. In every occasion and season, just by singing the hymn, you breathe through the spirit the scents of heaven. Whether the occasion is happy or sad, it's the same. Additionally, is the economy and management of the readings of each day, and the great saint stories and feasts, where they share with us their happiness and their pains which they have experienced with piety. They allow us to share with them the inheritance of Christ. What an amazing great church! Happy is he who discovers its secrets.



*Fr. Tadros Malaty, Fr. Bishoy Kamel
and Fr. Louka Sidarous*



*Fr. Bishoy Kamel, Dr. Fouad Rizkalla
and Fr. Louka Sidarous*



Chapter 8

Special Moments

What I have seen with my eyes with this great Pope, exceeds the imagination. If I had not been there and seen it for myself, I would not have believed.

Two weeks after my ordination, I returned with Pope Kyrillos to Alexandria and lived in a room in the patriarchate to spend the rest of my 40 days.

One day, I was awakened around 3 AM, and heard the Pope's footsteps going down. I could hear them, since the stairs were close to my room and the elevator was not functioning at the time. I rushed to get dressed and went down to the church, to find him standing praying by himself the *Tasbeha* (morning praises). I prostrated and prayed, then I kissed his hand. He interrupted his praising and said with a soft kind voice, "What brought you down at this hour?" I answered, "So I can take the blessing." He said, "Abouna (father) your road is still long. Start little by little, slowly. Don't push yourself too much."

On one of the weekday Great Lent liturgies, I prayed with His Holiness, and at the end, he stood to give the *baraka* (*ologea* or holy bread) to the attending congregation. I stood next to him.

When he greeted one of the ladies, he looked at me and said, "Is this your maternal cousin?" I was quite astonished as this lady was really my relative, except she was my paternal cousin. I answered him playfully saying, "No!" He smiled a childlike smile, very innocent and pure, and said, "OK! So not your maternal cousin, she is your paternal cousin." My cousin was very surprised and said to me laughing, "How did he know?" So I replied, "From above!"

In the year 1969, Fr. Matta El-Meskeen (Matthew the Poor) from Wadie El-Rayan came to Alexandria to be treated for some ailments. No one in Alexandria knew that he was there. Fr. Bishoy took me to where Fr. Matta was and I met him for the first time in my life. We spent with him a few days, as if they were days of heaven on earth.

A few weeks later, I was visiting Cairo. I had to go get the blessing of the Pope as soon as I arrived to Cairo. He always said, "You come here first. I am your father before your biological father." I did as he asked and before I went to any other place, even before I went to my parents' home in town, I would visit him.

I went as usual and greeted him. He was always so happy to see me, and with his nice witty spirit said, "Here is the countryside priest! Here he comes!" so I responded, "*Sayedna*" (literally translated, "my dear lord," but equivalent to "Your Holiness"), I am not even as worthy as a countryside priest." He answered, "Believe me, my son, there are a lot of good blessed people in them."

The Pope would always ask me about my brothers. At first, I thought he meant my biological brothers, but he really meant Fr. Bishoy and Fr. Tadros. I would always respond that they are my fathers, not my brothers. He would then praise me and say, "Yes, my son! Humility is good."

That day the Pope asked me and said, "Did Fr. Matta come to you?"

I knew there were misunderstandings between the two of them, so to avoid confrontation, I thought to myself that Fr. Matta didn't come to us in our church or to my house. So I answered, "No, *Sayedna*."

But what the Pope really meant was had Fr. Matta come to Alexandria, and he answered, "Are you lying to me?"

My face changed and I got anxious and I said, "Sayedna! If I lie to you then I shouldn't ever come here again."

The Pope felt that I got upset, so he patted me on the shoulder and said, "Are you upset or what?!"

So I answered, "No, Sayedna!"

He then started talking about other subjects and humored me. A few minutes later, he started asking me questions that were off topic. He pointed to my white shirt I was wearing under my black robe and said, "You're wearing an old shirt?"

The shirt was a dress shirt, that had cuffs that required cufflinks. The edges of the cuffs were worn-out but when they were turned over and pressed, they looked as good as new.

I asked, "This is old?"

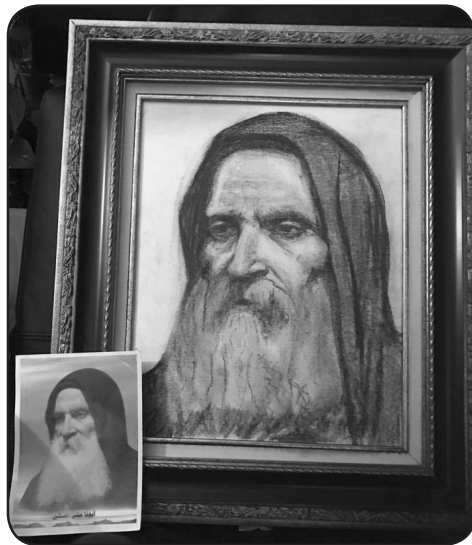
He replied, "Yes, it is old."

Laughing, I showed him how pressed and new looking it was.

He said, "No it's old. The cuffs are just turned over and it's torn from the inside." His words fell on me like a shock to my soul, as the shirt truly was old and the cuffs were turned over

because the edges were torn, even though the torn part was hidden inside. I laughed loudly and said, “How did you know that it’s torn?”

He laughed and said, “Isn’t this your wedding shirt.” And that was true as well. It was indeed my wedding shirt. I began to understand what the Pope was trying to relay to me. He had true insight and was enlightened by the Lord in a great manner, that nothing could be hidden from him. I knew that he was trying to tell me that he knows everything. I kissed his hand and left almost unbelieving what I had seen and heard. His pure heart, and perfect life had entitled him to know everything.



A charcoal portrait of Fr. Matta El-Meskeen



Chapter 9

Fr. Bishoy Travels to America

Fr. Bishoy traveled for the first time to America in 1969.

It was an emotional time for his congregation. Traveling abroad was very rare in those days and his travel was due to very difficult circumstances. It was decided that he should leave the country, due to extreme pressure from the government and fear for his safety. The situation in Alexandria was very turbulent. There were several rumors that he was christening Muslims and other rousing things that caused some people to demand his murder. The government had asked the Pope to send Fr. Bishoy out of the country until things calmed down, and so it happened.

Thus, Fr. Bishoy traveled to Los Angeles. Communications were only through letters, that would arrive after three weeks. Both Fr. Tadros and I were always eager to receive his letters, and whenever we got one, we would read it with eyes full of tears. The hope of bringing Fr. Bishoy back to his church in Egypt was very slim, to the point that we almost lost all hope. Pope Kyrillos had promised us that Fr. Bishoy would only travel for six months, so we counted the days, and when the six months had ended, we decided we would

go to the Pope.

The Pope was residing at the Monastery of St. Mina at the time. Fr. Tadros, Albeir Nawar, and Mr. Adly Tadros and I all went, and the Pope greeted us with his warm, compassionate, fatherly love. We talked about Fr. Bishoy's return, but he didn't give us a clear answer. Feeling compelled, I burst out saying, "People are saying that you're scared of the government, that's why you don't want to return Fr. Bishoy."

The Pope turned toward me and said with a stern voice, "What are you saying? Who am I scared of?"

Defensively, I said, "It's not I who say this, it's the people." He answered, "Tell him to come back."

"You mean, we could call him on the phone and tell him to come back?"

"Call him." Those days a telephone call to America was very expensive, it was around 530 piastres for three minutes.

After that, the Pope was very nice to us and sweet in his conversations with us. He joked around with us and played around with words. To the point that I didn't understand what he was

saying and Albeir had to explain one of the jokes later on, after we had left.

We reserved a call to Los Angeles and around 50 people gathered in the house of one of the beloved congregants, until the operator connected the call, after many failed attempts. We spoke to Fr. Bishoy and we told him that the Pope is telling him to return. The attendees were so loud that we couldn't even explain the details to Abouna.



Taking Fr. Bishoy to the airport



Chapter 10

Traveling to Los Angeles

I served in Los Angeles from 1977 to 1979 until Fr. Bishoy Kamel departed to heaven in March 1979. I was so grieved with sadness, that I could not comprehend it. Fr. Bishoy used to visit me in my dreams to comfort me and ease things that troubled me. He used to appear to me in my dreams daily. They were more realistic than regular dreams and we used to talk about things as if nothing had happened. We would have normal conversations, talking about what is happening in Alexandria or Los Angeles in details that are very difficult to explain.

The Lord had blessed me with His grace, for I never thought or imagined a day that I can live without Fr. Bishoy because my soul was so attached to him and his love. He was to me as a father, a brother, a friend and a life companion, to the extent that one dream was almost like a vision and I told him I was very sad and upset with him because he left me. He patted me on my shoulder and said, "My brother, forget that story. We are together now. Forget about that, don't waste time, let's talk and catch up."

In those days, the Lord comforted me and opened doors that kept me fulfilled. I was visiting

a sick woman in the hospital, and I prayed for her and anointed her with oil. As I was exiting her room, an African-American man greeted me and said, "Are you a priest?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Can you pray for my sick wife?" I said, "Happily!" So I entered the room and prayed for the sick woman. We started conversing, he got introduced to me and said, "I would like to come and visit you in your church."

Sure enough, after a few days, I found him and his wife visiting me after she had left the hospital. I talked with them, with love, on the life with God through the church and its sacraments. They accepted my words with great joy. A few days after, he came again and brought with him some of his friends, and we spent a beautiful time around the Bible and the rites of the church with the grace of living in Christ. In a period of about two weeks, the turnaround was about 40-50 people. And they started meeting with me twice or three times a week. They accepted the words with great joy with prayers and fasting. They refrained from their old habits and they acquired great change in their life, similar to the first days of the first church. All my beloved children of the congregation were astonished at the work of God and they glorified Him.

Not long after, they all accepted the grace of Holy Baptism, with great joy and happiness that filled everybody. That was at the end of the Holy Great Lent. Many of the people that were there can testify to how Bright Saturday was, and how amazing they were, as they stayed up all night in vigil with us in extreme joy and spiritual happiness. They then shared in the Eucharist. The works of Christ's Holy Resurrection from the dead had filled them with great power and flowed through their hearts. Before knowing that group, I had gotten to know a white American, who was the prime fruit of this work. He later on became a Coptic Orthodox priest by the name of Fr. Bishoy Mikhail Brownfield. When he saw how this group kept coming and increasing in numbers every day, he glorified God and said, "You don't even know who these people are, and where they are coming from." That was true, I did not know much. But him, being American, knew the culture and its interweaving and social configuration. It was true, most of them were from poor environments, or from gangs and drug-addicted.

Pope Shenouda sent for me to return to Alexandria, after the departure of Fr. Bishoy in March 1979. I had promised him to return after my children were done with their school year.

His request was because he wanted to keep St. George Sporting strong.

I had to leave Los Angeles at the beginning of July 1979. The congregation of the church came to Los Angeles Airport to bid us farewell. It was an extremely touching moment that brings tears to my eyes till this day, every time I remember it. What touched me the most was that new group of African-Americans, who cried so hard, that their love surprised everyone.

I arrived to Alexandria after the Holy Apostles Feast. I stopped on my way back to Egypt to visit some beloved people in London and Fr. Salib Sourial in Germany. After I returned, a series of events occurred, beginning with Christmas Eve in 1980 when a bomb was placed in our church of St. George in Sporting. Then in 1981, I was captured as one of the priests that were imprisoned under President Anwar Sadat¹ I was in prison for seven months. After my discharge, I served in different churches in Alexandria: St. Mary, Archangel Michael, and St. Takla, without being able to go back to our own churches.

1 Read details of the period of imprisonment in separate book, *'The Memoirs of My Imprisonment'*

After the Nativity Feast in 1989, we went as a group of clergy from Alexandria to congratulate His Holiness, Pope Shenouda for the feast, at the monastery of St. Bishoy. I was surprised to find one of the African-American brothers there in the monastery. Later on, I found out that after I had left Los Angeles, some Ethiopians who were in Los Angeles, went to church and made him a priest for them. So, he had come to Egypt before the Nativity Feast and prayed with the Pope the liturgy of the feast. When he saw me, he ran towards me and hugged me with tears and great love. When the Pope saw that, he asked how I knew him. I told the Pope the story. The Pope was very touched and declared, "We have to take care of them. I have to send you back so you can take care of their service."

So I told the Pope that God willing, I can go in the summer, after my children finish their school to check on them and see their needs.

And so it happened that I came back to Los Angeles in August 1989². I had not served there for 10 years. I tried to find any of those people I had baptized, but I didn't have anybody's

2 Abouna wrote a book in Arabic named '*God's Work with Us*' elaborating more on his service in Los Angeles since 1989 it will be translated to English soon.

addresses or phone numbers and nobody had taken care of their service or followed up with their lives. Most of them had returned to their previous lives and had left the church. I was able to reach a few of them who were steadfast in the way and continued. One of them was a deacon. He and his wife, a son and a daughter, were in a different state, serving with Fr. Sedrak. I found one other that I saw every once in a while. I was deeply saddened by that. To me, it was like a field that was full of growing little small plants, which seemed as if it were about to flourish with goodness, but was not cared for, so all the plants died and withered.





Chapter 11

My Final Testament

- I am the most sinful and most weak of all people. If it was not for the mercy of God and His promise of salvation, I would have no hope. Yet holding steadfast to the promises of Christ made me feel with great trust that I am accepted by Him. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more (Romans 5:20). I thank Him that He kept my heart steady always depending on him.
- I received the news of my terminal illness, steadily. The grace of the Lord supported me as if this illness pertained to some other person, not me.
- Recently, my mind has been occupied with improving the living conditions of the poor amongst our people. I thought of many ways to help, whether teaching them a skill or a particular trade. I discussed the matter with Pope Tawadrous, Metropolitan Serapion, and some of the fathers. I also met with Mrs. Yosreya Loza Sawiris, Mr. Naguib Sawiris's mother. I said that the raising of the status of a young man or young woman in one family raises the whole family up. I said I am ready, with the grace of Christ, to gather millions of dollars for this

work. And it truly happened that without me asking anyone, a great amount of money was gathered and I put it under certain fathers for management. I put a clause that none of this money should be used on any building or project but only for the poor. This money is for investing in others and raising them out of poverty and taking care of their spiritual needs. I stressed to the fathers that this money should go directly to the deserving with true great honesty.

- I have loved the congregation of Christ from all my heart, and I have not served them enough. May God forgive my shortage. It was the happiest moments of my life the days of Holy Covenant Thursday when I washed their feet.
- The Lord enriched me with His word because I love the Holy Bible. I did not learn theology in schools nor did I read a lot of books, but He has filled me with His grace so I spoke with love and truth and from the depths of my soul. I have hated intellectual speeches, philosophical talks and trivial rationalizing sermons.
- My soul hated arguments among the people, whether legitimate or not. What's been happening recently in the church, from insulting the fathers, accusing some of heresies

and others with dissensions took over people's minds and converted the church into groups and parties and led them into conflicts, partisanship and arguments leading to animosity and cursing. All of this has changed the form of the church and has diverted many souls away from worship, piety, and repentance. May God have mercy on all of us.

- I ask from the depths of my heart that the church would return to its previous era. That its main interest would be worship and the salvation of souls, away from the many administrative bodies and board members and organizations, which made the church similar to worldly organizations.
- The richness of the church is in the work of the Holy Spirit in its children.
- I asked of Christ many times that He would sanctify His church, as many entered it as thieves and have defiled the covenant of priesthood. If the church would pay attention and sanctify its insides, God would bless her, for He is the Holy of all holy ones.
- How many times have I entreated Christ, my God that he can spare the church the danger of deceitful appearances and empty façades. So it

has become that appearances are the primary concern of many people and sadly shepherds. Each one seeking to appear better in people's eyes.

Conclusion

I used to always say, how weak are our words and letters that we speak or write to describe the life the righteous had lived.

Truly, for life cannot be described. The life of the righteous is a daily practice, a normal daily life. Their works reflect the actions of their enlightened spirit, which they have received by special grace, from the graces of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, knowing of righteous people is one thing, and living with them, close to them, is another. Recording their lives, even if it was limited to their behaviors in everyday life, is useful in all cases.

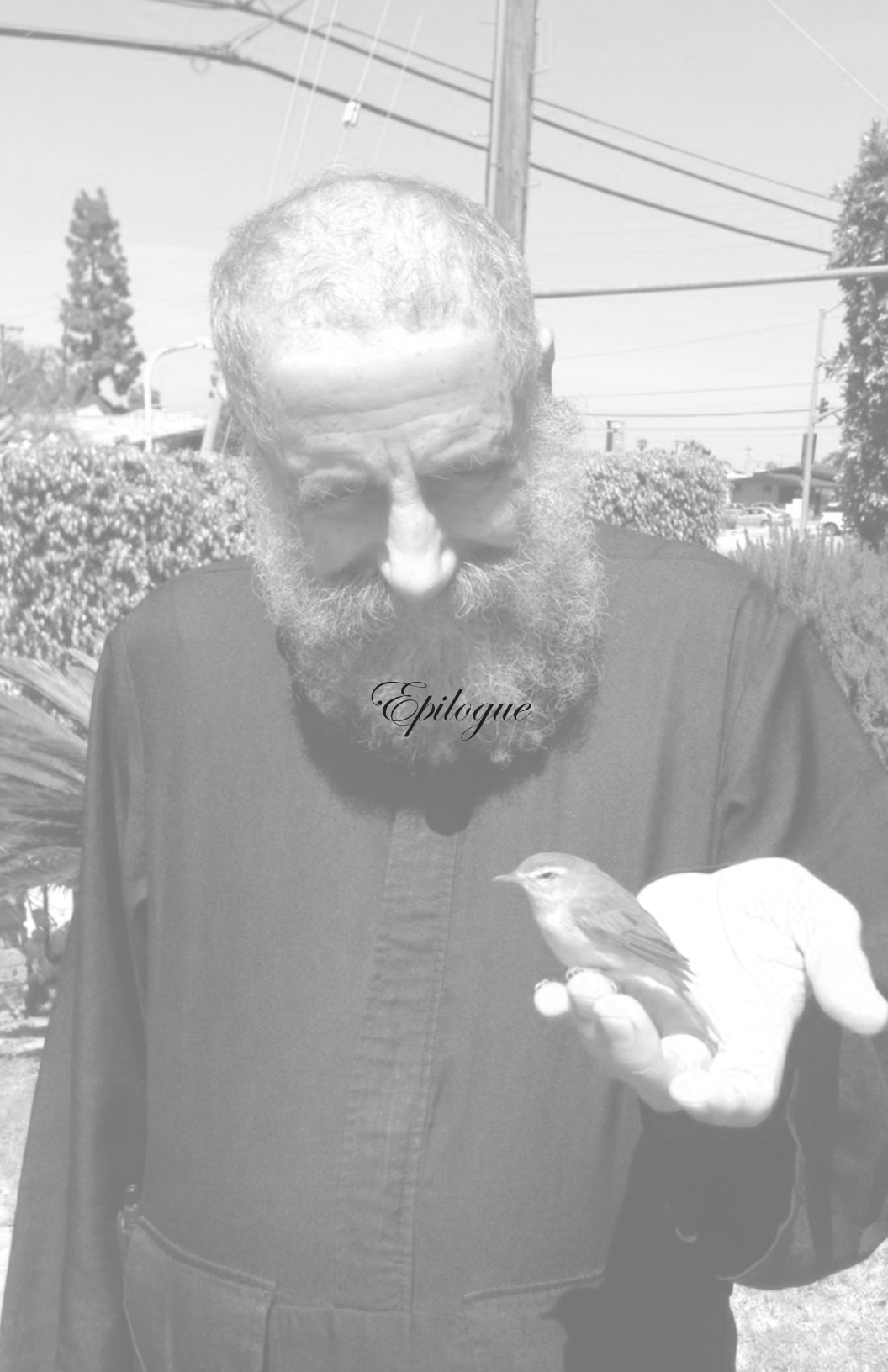
We have inherited a great number of records of the righteous, who became for us models on their way to righteousness. If it wasn't for those records, we would have not known anything about our forefathers, the prophets, the pure apostles or the holy martyrs.

Many thanks to God, who has kept true, honest witnesses to Him, in every generation and from all types of people, all walks of life and intelligences, and all countries and languages. Ones who loved His name, and lived and died in the faith. They confessed His love and chose faithfully the Way of Salvation.

Thank God who made saints, for He is the worker in all of us, that we may want and work. If it was not for the work of the Holy Spirit, there would be no saints, for He is the one that adorns the souls with virtues and lifts up the lowly and the oppressed. The real lesson is the submitting of one's soul to the work of the Holy Spirit, and struggling to retain the sanctity and the commandments of Jesus.

Here is the patience of the saints...

(Revelation 14:12)



Epilogue

The Last Year and a Half

Note: What follows is a chapter not written by Fr. Louka Sidarous, but by eyewitnesses to his final year and a half, after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Abouna started feeling ill in June 2018. This was followed by severe back pain in December of the same year. After a myriad of tests and lab work, Abouna was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on March 26, 2019. It goes without saying that those close to him were devastated, but Abouna was resolute and accepting of this cross with great courage and a comforting spirit. In the months that followed, Abouna managed, in the face of great pain, to continue to teach, exhort and comfort those around him, even though he once confided to one of his spiritual sons that he felt as if his whole body was on fire.

Of particular importance are the interactions that he had with the nurses and doctors that were tasked with taking care of him in his most difficult moments. One doctor, from City of Hope, developed an incredibly special relationship with Abouna. This particular doctor, the Head of the Department of Surgery and Chief of Staff, mentioned on a few occasions that he was

blessed to have met Abouna. This surgeon, with a busy schedule, felt as if Abouna was his father, and would go out of his way to accommodate Abouna to fit him into his tight schedule. Regardless of how busy he was, this doctor would answer emails immediately and would always show great care and compassion for Abouna.

There was also another doctor, a gastrointestinal specialist who was tasked with operating on Abouna in March of 2020. Immediately before sedating Abouna in the operating room, this doctor asked Abouna to bless him and his staff before they began the surgery. What great faith! Abouna mentioned how proud he was of this doctor, and that he felt as if he had known this doctor for years, as though he were one of his youth. This GI doctor encouraged family members to reach out to him day or night on his personal cell phone if Abouna needed anything at all.

After one particularly difficult procedure, Abouna had a rather tough recovery. This doctor came to see Abouna after the procedure and said to him, "Father, I have sinned, forgive me," saddened that his friend had endured a difficult recovery as a result of the procedure that he had performed. Abouna jokingly answered, "You will SEND me home."

This doctor also was also extremely kind to Abouna after Abouna's oncologist had been very blunt with a painful prognosis, comforting him and telling him that he would be okay.

On another occasion, this doctor sat with Abouna for over half an hour during his rounds and listened to Abouna as he talked about faith, the Church, and Abouna's love for Christ. On another occasion, this doctor held the gurney, that was carrying Abouna, down to the operating room, walking through the hallways, which is normally a job of a nurse assistant rather. A humble act of love. Abouna mentioned that he truly loved this man.

A Brush with Death

On Monday, March 9, 2020, Fr. Louka woke up feeling unwell and decided that he could not attend Liturgy for the Feast of his beloved father, Pope Kyrillos VI. Later that afternoon, Abouna started vomiting blood and was rushed to the emergency room at the local hospital. There, they admitted him and couldn't transfer him to City of Hope, as was requested, due to lack of rooms and transportation. Abouna was weak and frail but knew that one of his spiritual sons from out of state had flown in to Los Angeles to see him, so he asked his daughter to call this man and have

him come visit him in his hospital room. Outside the room, the man offered any organs from any of his immediate family in order to help Abouna. The love between the father and his spiritual sons was so great and deep!

Abouna was transferred from the local hospital to City of Hope after a couple of days. The first night after being transferred to City of Hope, Abouna's internal bleeding was severe that he Coded Blue (an alert in hospitals meaning "patient dying"). They miraculously revived him and transferred him immediately to the ICU (Intensive Care Unit), and was then rushed into emergency surgery. They confirmed the internal bleeding, likely caused by radiation treatment of the tumor on Abouna's pancreas. The doctor performing the surgery informed family that while the procedure was quite simple, the challenging part would be finding the source of the leak. After being told that the family would be praying while the doctor was performing the surgery, the doctor responded that he, too, would be praying, and that he also believes in the power of prayer and that we are all in God's hands. This brought great comfort!

The doctor came out an hour later and said that the procedure went well and they had found

the gastroduodenal artery gushing blood. He explained this vessel as the main plumbing pipe in a house. The doctor explained that Abouna was minutes from death and any small delay would have been fatal. The experience was made even more frightening as there was no real warning as to what was happening. It was only the act of God that Abouna was saved from this terrifying ordeal. A few days later Abouna had to endure another similar procedure to make sure there were no further leaks.

Throughout this ordeal, Abouna was not shaken. Even though he had faced death at least twice and went through multiple procedures in a matter of a few days, Abouna was not afraid. He was discharged from the hospital on March 18, 2020, just as the Covid scare was unfolding. Later that month, Abouna joined a zoom session with a group of the youth from church who were reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the closure of schools and churches. He urged them not to be afraid, telling them that he had stared death in the face only a few days prior but he was not afraid and trusted God. He implored them to continue to trust the Lord and have faith in Christ always.

Smells like God!

After a long spell at City of Hope, Fr. Louka was finally discharged and was being taken care of by a Romanian doctor who was Eastern Orthodox. This doctor had seen Abouna a few times while he was a patient in the hospital. Finally at the time of his discharge, Abouna put on his robe and *farageya* and exited his room into the corridor where this doctor was standing with a nurse. When Abouna walked past them, this doctor was taken aback and exclaimed “Oh, you smell like God!”

As was his nature, Abouna headed to the adjacent room to pray for a Coptic man that had just had surgery, and then went back to get on to the wheelchair that was waiting for him to escort him out of the hospital.

Interactions with Medical Personnel

During his last months, Fr. Louka never gave up an opportunity to exhort anyone that was in front of him. There was an Indian head nurse that had asked Abouna to pray for her and could not help herself from crying when he did, as she was also a cancer survivor and felt the immense blessing she received when he prayed

on her head as she stood there bowing her head in reverence. She was really touched by him, and she felt bad for causing Abouna to move rooms.

Another young nurse was very kind to Abouna, so he commended her for her honesty in her work, saying, "You are compassionate, and this job will give you a great reward in Heaven, as you are serving Christ, so you should see Him as the sick one in every patient." The nurse stopped, got teary eyed and stared at him. He felt she needed to hear more so he continued to talk. She said to him, "You don't know how much I needed to hear this today, thank you Father, I wish you well."

A physical therapy assistant was asked if she wanted Abouna to bless her and she exclaimed, "Would he really?!" This was two days before Abouna's departure and he was no longer capable of speaking, so all he did was hold his hand up and pray inaudibly and then sign the Cross on her from afar. The caretaker remarked that Abouna had given her more than she could ever give him. She later said that Abouna had healed her pain from a tragedy that she had endured five years earlier. She had only seen him twice and both times, he was unable to utter a word and was very frail.

“I Thirst”

After the surgery to repair the internal bleeding, the doctors gave an order that Abouna Louka not drink any water so that they could be assured that the proper amount of blood was being expunged by his body. Abouna was extremely thirsty not only because he was not allowed to drink but because he had lost so much blood. All the doctors allowed was a small wet sponge to be used on Abouna’s lips. He even dreamt about drinking!

Abouna later expressed how during these thirsty moments, he experienced Christ’s thirst on the Cross. He said, “It’s the worst pain a man can endure, the thirst caused by hemorrhaging.”

One Last Good Friday

Fr. Louka’s last Good Friday was spent at home with his family along with the whole congregation as the Covid-19 pandemic had forced the churches to close their doors to in-person services.

That day, Abouna was not feeling particularly well, but he sat with his family who were logged into a Zoom session with the rest of the Church for 6th and 9th hour prayers. Suddenly, Abouna

asked his daughter to get him his censer and incense and his garments so that he could offer incense during the 6th hour prayer in front of the Crucifix of our Lord. When his daughter went to Abouna's car to retrieve Abouna's box carrying the censer, she found the car battery had died from lack of use and had no way of opening the trunk. She ran next door to an auto repair shop to ask them for help and ran back. Abouna asked her about the delay and his daughter assured him she was getting what he needed. The time was running short and the delay became more pronounced. Suddenly, something in the garage caught her eye. It was another briefcase! She opened it and found a censer to use and rushed to get a shamla (a linen head cover, part of liturgical priest garments) and *bornos* (Cape like robe, part of liturgical priests garments), and Abouna was able to offer incense to the Lord whom he loved one last Good Friday.

We Thank You for Everything

In the early morning hours of August 25th, 2020, Abouna, under the influence of pain medication, suddenly went into a daze. He sat up with his eyes open, though he was unresponsive to family members talking to him. He was,

however, alternating his gaze between a picture of Pope Kyrillos VI and one of Fr. Bishoy Kamel that were hung opposite him. Later that evening, he spoke and said he couldn't breathe and asked for oxygen. He also pointed to his daughter to move him over to his bed from the chair in which he was sitting. He was very aware and alert as of what he wanted. As she lay him down, he held very tight to their embrace, patted her on the back and then let go. It was fitting then that Abouna's final act was to kiss the front and back of his hand, the Coptic symbol for thanking the Lord Christ for both the good and bad, before he lay down to eternal rest.

On August 26, 2020, at approximately 1:50 am, our beloved Hegumen Father Louka Sidarous departed to Christ, his Beloved. Abouna always lived a life of thanksgiving and continually remembered the Lord in all his work.

An Encouraging Letter

After Abouna's departure from this world, his family recounts a story about how he was always the one to comfort them. During one particular episode after his passing, Abouna's beloved wife, Nadia, was having a difficult and moving conversation with someone on the

phone. Abouna had left his desk with his personal writings and thoughts and, while Tasoni was engaging in that conversation, Abouna's daughter looked and found a handwritten message written by him some time ago, which started with "...Let not your heart be troubled." After being given the note, Tasoni Nadia was comforted to know that the Lord was intervening and comforting her through her beloved Abouna Louka. The whole family was extremely comforted by this letter and it was an important reminder that the Lord is not the Lord of the dead, but of the Living.

The Verse

Abouna's family recounts another story that reminds us that, in Christ, there are no coincidences. The family was designing a card for Abouna's funeral day, and watching an old sermon, Abouna mentions a verse from Isaiah the Prophet: "...O Lord...The desire of our soul is for Your name, and for the remembrance of You." The verse was deep and comforting, so the family agreed to include this verse on the card. Abouna also loved very much the Book of Isaiah and used to read it often. Much of this book was memorized by Abouna, so the family was excited to use a verse from one of his favorite books of

the Holy Bible.

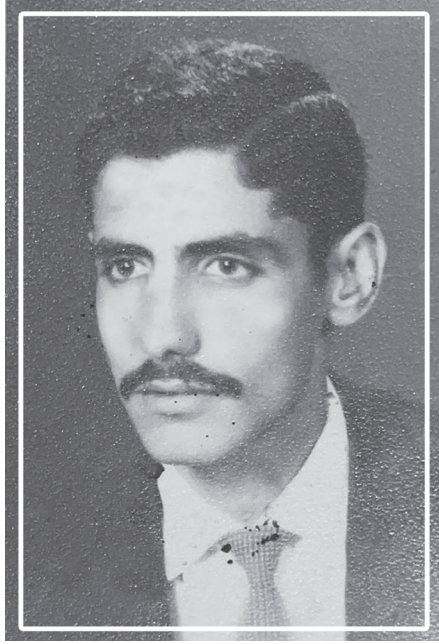
The family was sharing this verse when one of the youth pointed out the verse's number, Isaiah 26:8, the day of Abouna's departure (the 26th day of August as in non- American format).

We truly believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come. May our resurrected Lord unite us one day with Him, that we may enjoy eternal life all together in His kingdom, forever.





*This is only the beginning,
not the end.*





Abouna with his mom Cassia Garas and sister Fawzia (Fifi)



Abouna with his mom and siblings



One Last Good Friday



*“...They left everything
and followed Him.”*

Luke 5:11



ISBN 978-1-956395-00-6

