

ARABIC-ENGLISH EDITION · FREE TO READ

زمان غربتي

The Time of My Exile

From the memoirs of
Hegumen Mikhail Saad

Original Arabic with a facing English translation.
All photographs and pages of the scanned booklet.

September 2026

johnsaad.com/books/mikhail-saad-memoir



A note on the edition

This edition pairs an English translation with all forty pages of the scanned Arabic booklet, including its covers and photographs. Page references in the reader follow the scan; the printed page number is also shown where present. The Arabic remains a facsimile of the original.

The English was prepared using the existing translation draft and checked against the scanned pages. Names, omitted phrases, dates, and land measures were corrected where the Arabic was clear. The author's recollections and historical assertions have been retained. This is a reading edition, not a critical historical edition.

Hegumen translates the Coptic priestly title qummus. Feddans and qirats are retained as Egyptian land measures. A.M. refers to the Coptic Era of the Martyrs. Biblical references and Psalm numbering follow the source.

The memoir refers to a separate chapter on Iskandar Hanna and to further discussion of church societies; those sections are not present in this scanned booklet. The source gives differing date ranges for the transfers (1935–1946 and 1937–1947), and both are retained. The initial land area is described as 1,100 square meters; a later account gives the earlier holding as 1,286.43 square meters. Both figures are retained as printed.

[Childhood and family · scan 4](#)

[The monasteries · scan 13](#)

[The call to the priesthood · scan 24](#)

[The church in Smouha · scan 31](#)

Prepared for free distribution through John Saad's website. Arabic source: the forty-page color scan of [زمان غربتي](#). The source files and photographs are preserved without retouching.

The Time of My Exile

From the memoirs of our father, Hegumen Mikhail Saad

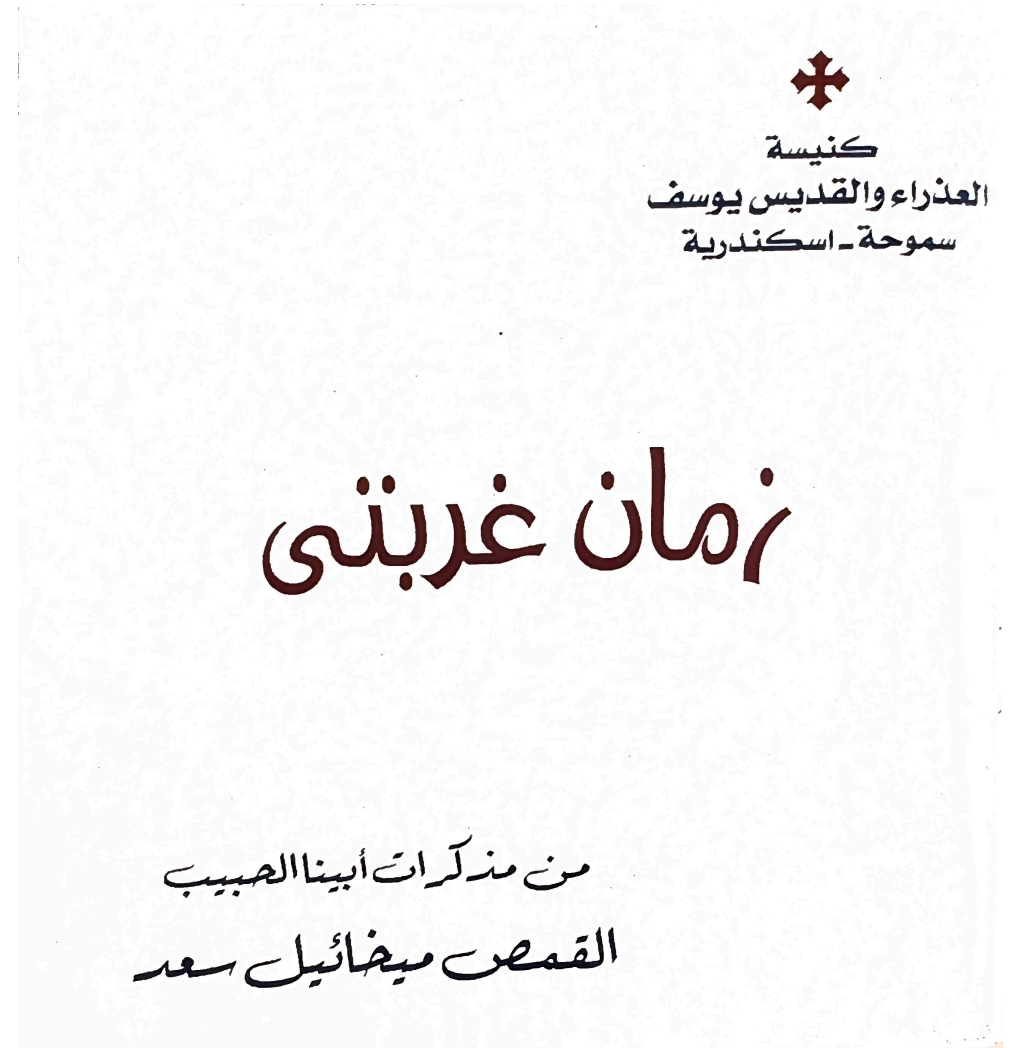
Cover note: the background repeats portions of the opening memoir page, translated on scan page 4.



Church of the Virgin and Saint Joseph
Smouha, Alexandria

The Time of My Exile

From the memoirs of our beloved father, Hegumen Mikhail Saad



His Holiness Pope Shenouda III consecrating the church's altars on Sunday, October 27, 1996.



قدااسة البابا شنودة الثالث
يقوم بتدشين مذابح الكنيسة في يوم الأحد ٢٧/١٠/١٩٩٦

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

Praise and Thanksgiving to God

I thank You, my Lord, for I was born in the first decade of this twentieth century, and by Your grace I have now reached its last decade. I bow before You with praise and thanksgiving, repeating with the psalmist: “Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will receive me into glory” (Psalm 73:23).

Memories and Successive Images

I recall these decades and the memories they hold, passing before me like a fleeting shadow. Some are general, others personal. I could find no fitting title for them except the words of Moses, the chief of the prophets, in his song: “There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides the heavens to help you, and the clouds in His majesty. The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deuteronomy 33:26–27).

Born in Alexandria

I was born in the city of Alexandria at noon on Friday, February 19, 1909, which corresponds to the 12th of the Coptic month of Amshir, in the year 1626 of the righteous martyrs. I am happy with this timing for several reasons: Alexandria is the first fruit of the preaching of St. Mark the Apostle in the land of Egypt, midday on Friday is the time when our good Savior was crucified and made redemption for the world, and the twelfth day of the Coptic month is the commemoration of the Archangel Michael. He is the namesake I carried when I was called to the priesthood.

The Parents

My father was the late Saad Ibrahim Ibrahim al-A'sar. He was from the village of al-Safiya, in the Desouk district of the Gharbia Governorate. This village is located on the Nile and at that time only had two Christian families.

باسم الرب والابن والروح القدس الله الواحد آمين

الحمد والشكر لله :

اشكر ربي لأنى ولدت فى العقد الأول من هذا القرن العشرين، وها قد وصلت بنعمتك إلى العقد الأخير منه، ولذا اسجد أمامك بالحمد والشكر، وأردد مع المرنم قائلا « لكنى دائماً معك. أمسكت ببدي اليمنى. برأيك تهدينى وبعد إلى مجد تأخذنى » (مز ٧٣ : ٢٣)

ذكريات وصور متلاحقة :

أذكر هذه العشرات من السنين وما حملته من ذكريات، وهى تمر أمامى كطيف عابر، بعضها عام والآخر خاص ولم أجد لها عنواناً يناسبها إلا قول موسى رئيس الأنبياء فى نشيده « ليس مثل الله يايشورون، يركب السماء فى معونتك والغمام فى عظمته. الاله القديم ملجأ والاذرع الأبدية من تحت » (تث ٣٣ : ٢٦-٢٧)

الميلاد بالاسكندرية :

ولدت بمدينة الاسكندرية ظهر يوم الجمعة ١٩ من فبراير ١٩٠٩ الموافق ١٢ من شهر امشير عام ١٦٢٦ للشهداء الابرار.

وأنا سعيد بهذا التوقيت لأن الاسكندرية هى باكورة كرازة القديس مرقس الرسول بأرض مصر ولأن منتصف نهار يوم الجمعة هو الموعد التى صلب فيه مخلصنا الصالح وصنع فداء العالم ولأن الثانى عشر من الشهر القبطى هو تذكار رئيس الملائكة ميخائيل... وهو صاحب الاسم الذى حملته عند دعوة الكهنوت.

الوالدان :

والدى هو المرحوم سعد ابراهيم ابراهيم الاعسر : من بلدة الصافية مركز دسوق محافظة الغربية، وهى بلدة تقع على النيل ولم يكن بها آنذاك إلا عائلتين مسيحيتين فقط واقرب

The nearest church was in Kafr al-Khair. My father was born in this village in 1861. He learned to read and write and then, through personal diligence, became proficient in accounting. This qualified him to manage the accounts for the former "Domaine" authority, now the "Amiriyya" property authority. His first salary was a "binto," which was equivalent to seventy-five piastres. In addition to this, the authority provided him with a buffalo for milk, a servant, grains, vegetables, and free housing in the village of Sakha, which is part of Kafr El Sheikh.

When his skill in accounting became known, he was invited to work in the city of Alexandria for the Max Dehana estate, one of the large capitalist institutions that has a well-known street named after it. This was at the beginning of the twentieth century. He passed away in 1940 at the age of 79. May God have mercy on him and reward him with heavenly wages for his efforts on our behalf.

My mother was the late Agia Azar Moussa from Rashid. She married in 1884 and passed away in 1933. I grieved for her deeply and wept bitterly for about six months. She was inclined to simplicity, as were the women of her generation, and loved cleanliness, while humility was a natural part of her life. I remember an example of her humility: on some occasions, four families would gather at our house for a feast. She would delay sitting at the table with them and would eventually gather the servants and eat with them with complete simplicity and without ceremony.



Migration from Alexandria to the Countryside

In 1914, the First World War began, and the cost of living rose sharply. Along with the dangers of war in the cities, my father bought 17 feddans in an estate near Damanhour. We built a house and the family moved there, living until the war ended in 1919. We then returned to Alexandria. At that time, I was ten years old. I had learned to read, write, and do arithmetic, and from my father, I had learned to love the Holy Bible, which I read and understood as much as my comprehension allowed.

During this period from 1914 to 1919, my relationship with God began to form. I would pray "Our Father" and the prayer of thanksgiving. I also recited Psalm 50 on my way to and from school. It happened that my father gave me a beautiful handwriting notebook written by Najib Bey Hawawini, the calligrapher of His Highness Sultan Hussein Kamel, and advised me to imitate the handwriting as much as possible. However, one of the boys in the class secretly stole it. I was sad and returned home without telling anyone. In a dream that night, I saw the boy who stole it writing in it.

In the morning, I went to the teacher and told him what happened. He told me to wait and not say anything. During the handwriting class, the teacher searched the boy's bag, found the notebook, and gave it back to me without discussion.

Beginning to Understand the Truths of Faith

Once, I sat with my father to understand some of the truths of faith. I told him that I was sorry because I had understood that God sent Moses to the Jews, Jesus to the Christians, and then Muhammad to the Muslims. However, it seemed that these people had abandoned God and were preoccupied with the messengers. At that point, my father began to explain the truth of Christ to me in a way that was appropriate for my understanding.



For me, this was like boarding the train of faith on the path of life, and the following seeds were planted in my life:

My love for prayer with a special joy while walking.

I became attached to the Holy Bible, following the daily example I saw in my father.

I began to understand the truth of Christ more and more.

Return to Alexandria

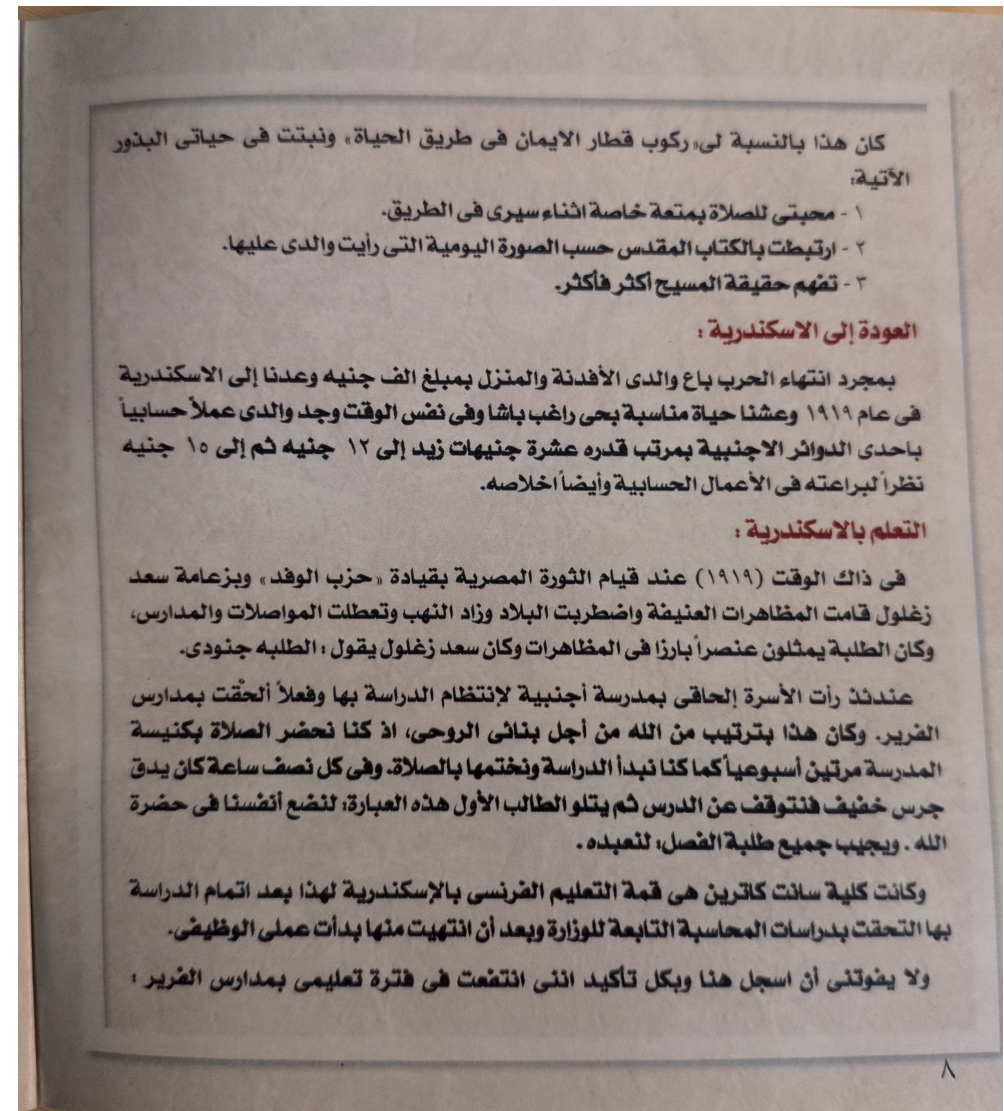
As soon as the war ended, my father sold the farmland and the house for a thousand pounds, and we returned to Alexandria in 1919. We lived a comfortable life in the Ragheb Pasha neighborhood. At the same time, my father found an accounting job in a foreign firm with a salary of ten pounds, which was increased to 12 pounds, and then to 15 pounds due to his skill and dedication.

Education in Alexandria

At that time (1919), during the Egyptian Revolution led by the Wafd party and Saad Zaghloul, there were violent demonstrations. The country was in turmoil, looting increased, and transportation and schools were disrupted. Students were a prominent element in the demonstrations, and Saad Zaghloul used to say, "The students are my soldiers." At that point, the family decided to enroll me in a foreign school so that I could have a regular education. I was enrolled in the Frères schools. This was God's arrangement for my spiritual development, as we attended prayer in the school church twice a week and began and ended our studies with prayer.

Every half hour, a small bell would ring, and we would stop our lesson. The first student would then recite the phrase, "Let us place ourselves in the presence of God," to which all the students in the class would respond, "To worship Him."

Saint Catherine's College was the pinnacle of French education in Alexandria, so after completing my studies there, I enrolled in the accounting studies affiliated with the ministry. After finishing, I began my professional career. I should mention that during my time in the Frères schools, I benefited greatly from



a deep respect for quietness, order, discipline, and cleanliness. Reverence and quietness during worship were natural and precious to me, and I recall them with deep regret whenever I encounter a different situation among my people.

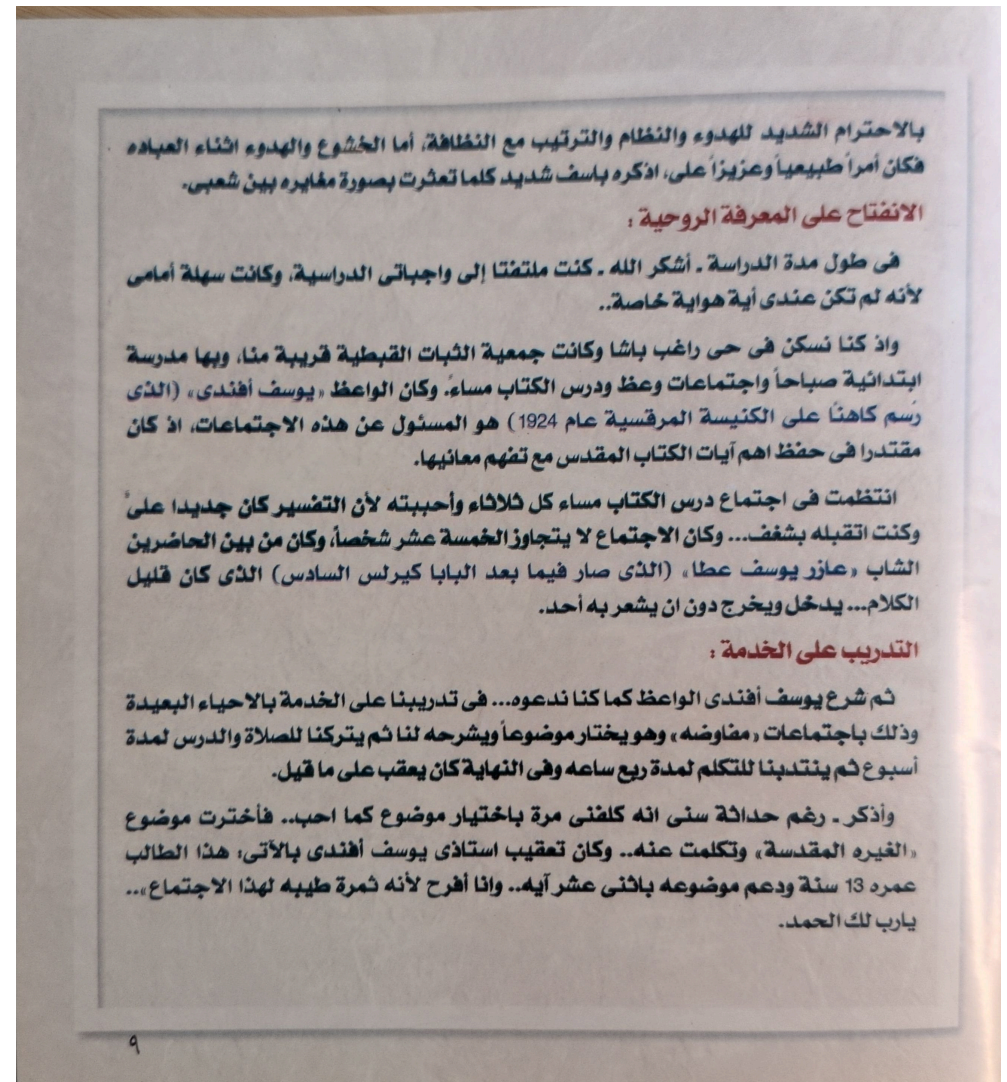
Opening to Spiritual Knowledge

Throughout my studies, I thank God that I was attentive to my academic duties, which were easy for me because I didn't have any specific hobbies. Since we lived in the Ragheb Pasha neighborhood, the Coptic Steadfastness Society was close by. It had a primary school in the morning and meetings for sermons and Bible study in the evening. The preacher, Youssef Effendi, who was ordained as a priest for the St. Mark's Cathedral in 1924, was in charge of these meetings. He was skilled at memorizing the most important verses of the Bible and understanding their meanings.

I regularly attended the Bible study meetings every Tuesday evening and loved them because the interpretation was new to me, and I eagerly accepted it. The meeting did not exceed fifteen people, and among the attendees was a young man named Azar Youssef Atta, who later became Pope Cyril VI. He was a man of few words, entering and leaving without anyone noticing.

Training for Service

Youssef Effendi, the preacher, then began to train us for service in distant neighborhoods through "discussion" meetings. He would choose a topic, explain it to us, and then leave us for a week for prayer and study. Afterward, he would assign us to speak for fifteen minutes, and at the end, he would comment on what was said. I remember that despite my young age, he once asked me to choose a topic of my liking. I chose the topic of "Holy Zeal" and spoke about it. My teacher, Youssef Effendi, commented by saying, "This student is 13 years old and supported his topic with twelve verses. I am happy because he is a good fruit of this meeting." Lord, to You be the praise.



The Arrival of Iskandar Hanna in Alexandria

Around 1922, news spread among the brothers who loved the word of God that a man named Iskandar Hanna, the chief clerk of real estate, had come to Alexandria from Suez and was a powerful spiritual preacher. We will only mention this briefly here, as we have dedicated a separate chapter to this important topic.

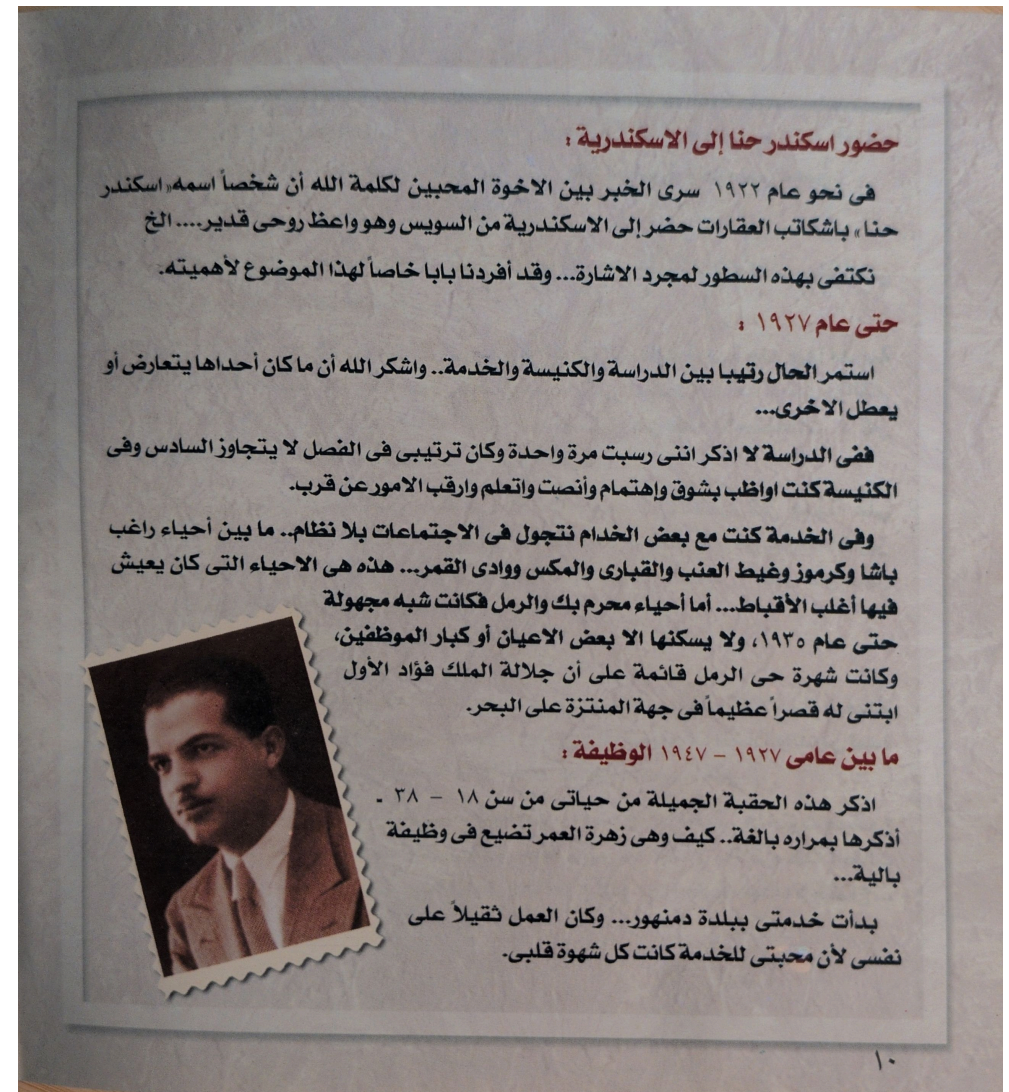
Until 1927

Life continued in an orderly fashion between my studies, the church, and my service. I thank God that none of them conflicted with or hindered the others. I don't remember failing a single time in my studies, and my class rank never went beyond sixth. In church, I attended with eagerness and interest, listening, learning, and observing things closely. In service, I and some other servants would go to meetings without a set schedule in the neighborhoods of Ragheb Pasha, Karmouz, Ghayt al-Enab, al-Qabbari, al-Maks, and Wadi al-Qamar. These were the neighborhoods where most Copts lived.

As for the Moharram Bey and al-Raml neighborhoods, they were mostly unknown until 1935 and were only inhabited by some notables or high-ranking officials. The fame of the al-Raml neighborhood was due to His Majesty King Fuad I, who built a magnificent palace there in the Montazah area by the sea.

Between 1927 and 1947: The Job

I remember this beautiful period of my life, from the ages of 18 to 38, with great bitterness. How could the flower of my youth be wasted in a lifeless job? I began my service in the town of Damanhour, but the work was heavy on my soul because my love for service was the sole desire of my heart.



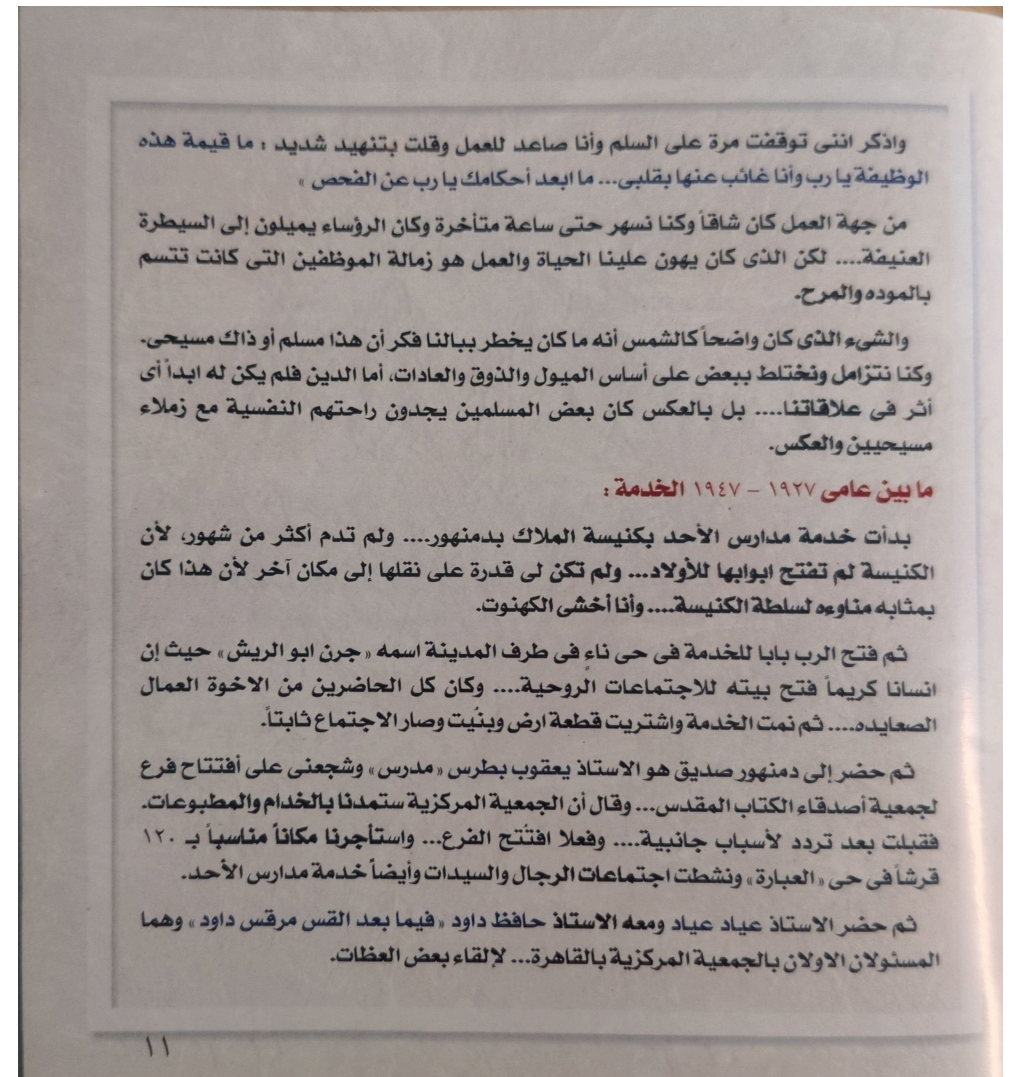
I remember stopping on the stairs once as I was going up to work and sighing deeply, "What is the value of this job, Lord, when my heart is absent from it? How unsearchable are your judgments, Lord!" The work itself was arduous, and we would stay up late. The managers tended to be very domineering. However, what made life and work bearable was the camaraderie of the employees, which was characterized by affection and fun.

What was as clear as the sun was that it never occurred to us to think of someone as Muslim or Christian. We associated with each other based on our inclinations, tastes, and customs, and religion never had any effect on our relationships. On the contrary, some Muslims found comfort with Christian colleagues, and vice versa.

Between 1927 and 1947: The Service

I began serving Sunday school at the Church of the Angel in Damanhour. It did not last more than a few months because the church did not open its doors to the children. I was not able to move it to another location because that would have been seen as opposing the church's authority, and I was fearful of the priesthood. Then the Lord opened a door for service in a remote neighborhood on the outskirts of the city called "Jurn Abu al-Rish," where a generous man opened his home for spiritual meetings. All the attendees were Coptic workers from Upper Egypt. The service grew, and I bought a piece of land and built on it, and the meeting became permanent.

Then a friend, Mr. Yaqoub Boutros, a teacher, came to Damanhour and encouraged me to open a branch of the "Friends of the Bible Society." He said that the central society would provide us with servants and publications. I accepted after some hesitation due to side issues, and the branch was indeed opened. We rented a suitable place in the al-Abbara neighborhood for 120 piastres. Meetings for men and women, as well as Sunday school service, became active. Then Mr. Ayyad Ayyad and Mr. Hafez Daoud, who later became Father Markus Daoud, the first two officials of the central society in Cairo, came to give some sermons.

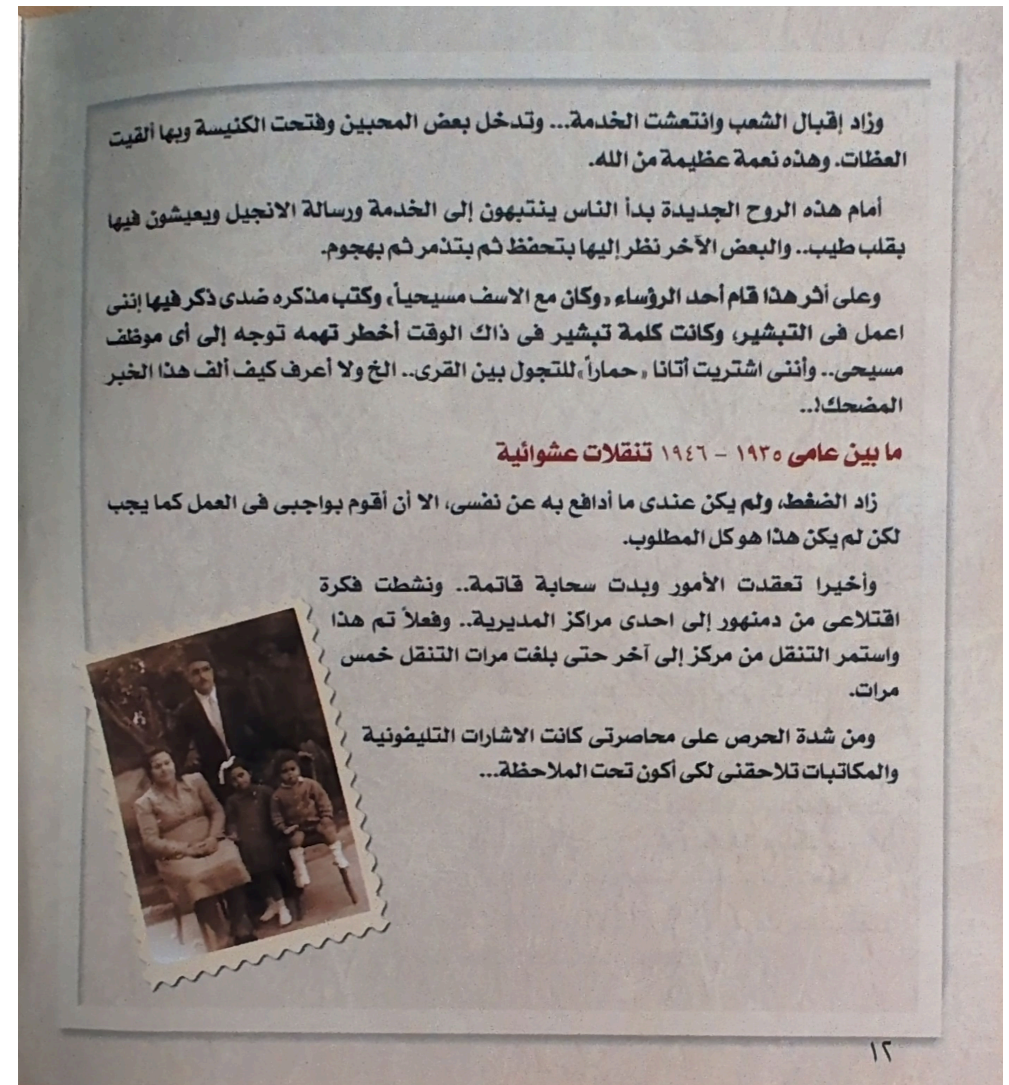


The people's turnout increased, and the service flourished. Some loving people intervened, and the church was opened, where sermons were delivered. This was a great grace from God.

In light of this new spirit, people began to pay attention to the service and the message of the Gospel, living it with a good heart. Others viewed it with caution, then with resentment, and then with hostility. As a result, one of the managers, who was unfortunately a Christian, wrote a memo against me. In it, he stated that I was doing missionary work, which at the time was the most dangerous accusation that could be directed at any Christian employee. He also claimed that I had bought a donkey to travel between villages. I don't know how he fabricated this ridiculous story.

Between 1935 and 1946: Arbitrary Transfers

The pressure increased, and I had nothing to defend myself with except to do my job as I should. However, this was not all that was required. Finally, things became complicated, and a dark cloud appeared. Efforts began to uproot me from Damanhour and send me to another district center. This was indeed carried out, and the transfers continued from one center to another until I had been transferred five times. So determined were they to keep me hemmed in that telephone messages and letters followed me, ensuring that I remained under surveillance.



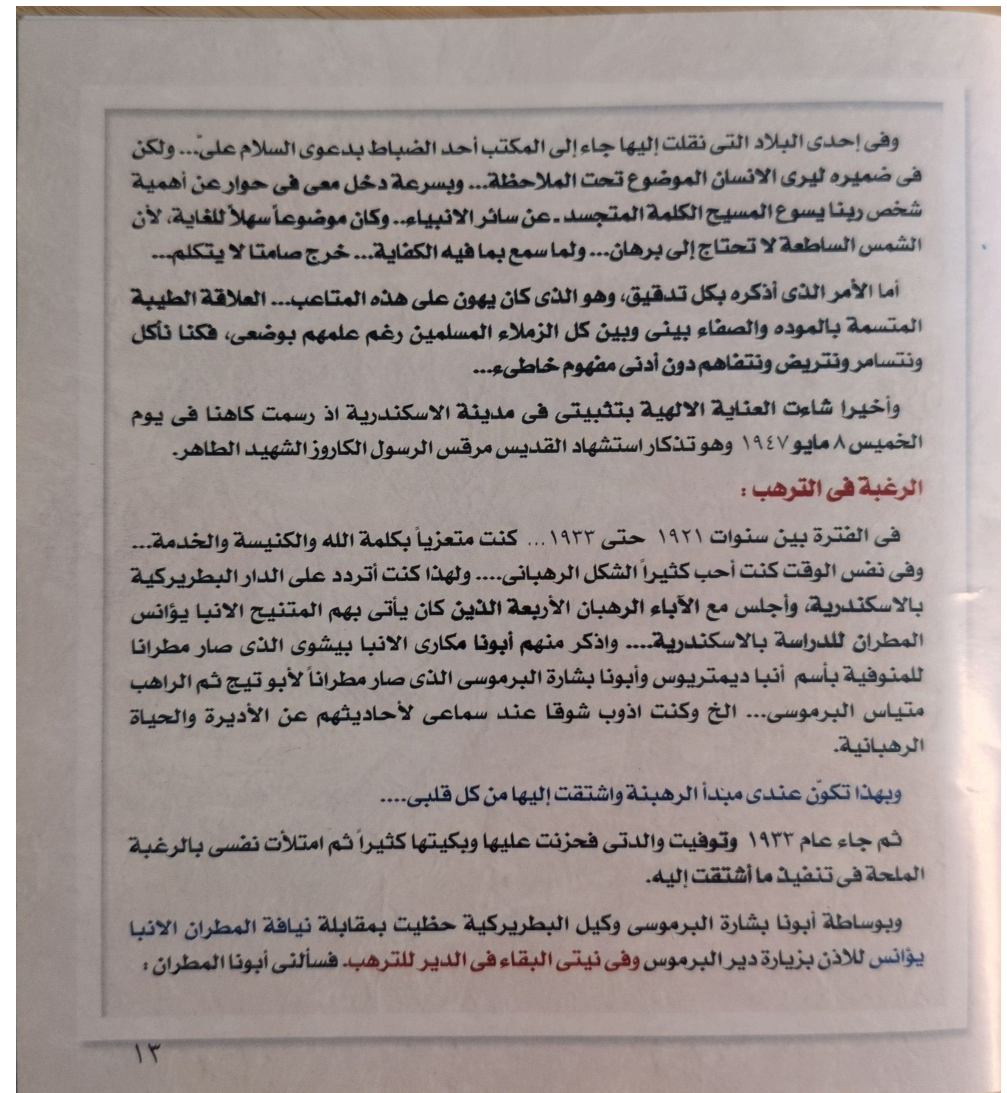
In one of the places I was transferred to, an officer came to the office under the pretense of greeting me. His real purpose was to see the person who was under observation. He quickly entered into a discussion with me about the importance of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, over all other prophets. The topic was very simple, as the shining sun needs no proof. When he had heard enough, he left silently. The thing I remember most accurately, which made these troubles easier to bear, was the good relationship of affection and openness between me and all my Muslim colleagues, despite their knowledge of my situation. We would eat, chat, take walks, and understand one another without the slightest misunderstanding.

Finally, divine providence settled me permanently in the city of Alexandria when I was ordained as a priest on Thursday, May 8, 1947. This was the commemoration of the martyrdom of St. Mark the Apostle, the pure evangelist and martyr.

The Desire to Become a Monk

During the period from 1921 to 1933, I was comforted by the word of God, the church, and the service. At the same time, I greatly loved the monastic way of life. For this reason, I would frequent the Patriarchal residence in Alexandria and sit with the four monastic fathers whom the late Metropolitan Yoannis would bring to Alexandria for study. I remember among them Father Makary al-Anba Bishoy, who became the Metropolitan of Menoufia under the name Anba Dimitrios, Father Bishara al-Baramousy, who became the Metropolitan of Abu Teeg, and the monk Matthias al-Baramousy. I would melt with longing when I heard them talk about monasteries and monastic life. This established the principle of monasticism in my heart, and I longed for it with all my soul.

Then came the year 1933, and my mother passed away. I grieved for her and wept a lot, and my soul was filled with an urgent desire to fulfill what I longed for. Through the mediation of Father Bishara al-Baramousy, the patriarchal vicar, I was granted an interview with His Grace Metropolitan Yoannis to ask for permission to visit the Monastery of Al-Baramous, with the intention of staying there to become a monk. Father Metropolitan asked me:



"Is your father living?" I said yes.

"Is your mother living?" I said, "May God have mercy on her."

"Did your father marry after your mother's death?"

I said, "My father is an old man and did not get married."

After that, he said firmly, "Go, get your father's blessing. It is better than monasticism."

I accepted this guidance in silence and without discussion, because in that era, we did not dare to argue with the great fathers but accepted their words as if they were from heaven. Hegumen Bishara al-Baramousy, the patriarchal vicar, was present and asked the Metropolitan to allow me to visit the monastery. The Metropolitan replied, "Give him a recommendation card for the visit and his return."

My First Visit to the Monasteries in Wadi El Natrun in 1933

In July 1933, I took a two-week leave and went to visit the monasteries. I arrived at the Khatatba station at noon by train and met Basil Effendi, the telegraph agent, who put me on the small train consisting of ten cars. Nine of them were for transporting coal to the "Hawkeriyya" and the last car was for passengers. I sat in this car with some workers and with us was an Ethiopian monk named Tefa Marian, which means "servant of Mary." The train continued to move from three in the afternoon until eleven at night. Since the road was mostly inclines and declines, they would require us to get off at the beginning of the inclines to lighten the load on the train.

We arrived at Hawkeriyya around eleven at night. I then went to the house of "Hassan al-Jaziri" because I was told he was the person responsible for transporting visitors to the monastery. The man welcomed me, and I found his blind wife with him. She had cooked baked fish



and served dinner. We then slept for a short while, about two hours, on a mat and a pillow. Around two in the morning, the man woke me up and said, "It is better to start our journey to the monastery now, before sunrise and the intense heat." I agreed. Hassan al-Jaziri put me on his mount and walked beside me, telling me about the lives of the monks as if he were one of them. When we arrived at the Monastery of St. Anba Bishoy after two hours, he rang the bell. A monk came and said, "Who is it?" Hassan al-Jaziri replied, "I am Hassan, and I have a guest from Alexandria." The monk father welcomed me, then went to get permission from the monastery's abbot. He opened the door, and I entered the monastery for the first time.

Despite my youth, the old father, Hegumen Bishai, the abbot of the monastery, and the monastic fathers welcomed me with great love and kind hearts. I remember Father Monk Abd al-Masih al-Maliji, who had just arrived with a large quantity of watermelon, enough to fill a small railroad car. When he cut open a watermelon from this load, he could not bear to eat it alone, so he carried it from Hawkeriyya to the monastery to share with his brothers. The traits of kindness were on their faces, as if they were innocent children. They were truly poor in their dwellings, clothing, and food. Their number did not exceed ten, and the monastery's area was two feddans and sixteen qirats.

Around five in the morning, the divine liturgy began in the monastery's beautiful church, which has a single, elongated vault and is named after St. Anba Bishoy. In the evening, we all recited the Psalms and then went for a walk in the vast valley opposite the northern gate of the monastery. In the valley, we met the fathers of the Monastery of the Syrians, and the two groups formed a large circle on the sand. The conversations were sweet, the news was good, the sky was clear, and the moon was shining with its gentle light. As for me, I was lost in thought, "Blessed is your great and holy name, O Lord."

وقد تمت العشاء... ثم نمنا قليلاً نحو ساعتين على حصيرة ووسادة. ونحو الساعة الثانية صباحاً أيقظني الرجل وقال من الأفضل أن نبدأ طريقنا من الآن إلى الدير قبل شروق الشمس واشتداد الحرارة... فوافقته أركبني «حسن الجزيري» على دابته ومشى بجواري يحدثني عن أحوال الرهبان كأنه واحد منهم ولما وصلنا إلى دير القديس الأنبا بيشوي، بعد ساعتين، ضرب الجرس وجاء أحد الرهبان وقال مين؟... فرد حسن الجزيري وقال «أنا حسن» ومعى ضيف من الاسكندرية فرد الاب الراهب مرحباً... ثم ذهب واستأذن امين الدير، وفتح الباب ودخلت الدير لأول مره.

ورغم حداثتي فقد استقبلني الأب الشيخ القمص يشاي أمين الدير والآباء الرهبان بكل محبة وقلب طيب.. واذكر الأب الراهب عبد المسيح المليجي الذي حضر لتودد معه كمية من البطيخ نحو ملء عربة سكة حديد صغيرة... ولما كسرت منه بطيخة، عز عليه أن يأكلها وحده فحملها من الهوكريه إلى الدير ليأكلها مع أخوته. وكانت سمات الطيبة على وجوههم وكأنهم أطفال أبرياء، وكانوا يحق فقراء في المسكن والملبس والمأكول، وكان عددهم لا يتجاوز العشرة، ومساحة الدير فدانان و١٦ قيراطاً.

ونحو الساعة الخامسة صباحاً بدأ القداس الالهى فى كنيسة الدير الجميلة ذات القبو الواحد المستطيل باسم القديس الأنبا بيشوي؟

وفى المساء تلينا جميعاً المزامير ثم خرجنا نتمشى فى الوادى القسيح قبالة باب الدير البحرى.

وفى الوادى التقينا بالآباء رهبان دير السريان وكون الاثنان حلقة كبيرة على الرمال... وكانت الأحاديث عذبة والأخبار طيبة والسماء صافية والقمر ساطع بنوره الهادى... أما أنا فكنت غائباً حتى عن نفسى «مبارك يارب هو اسمك العظيم القدوس».



١٥

Here I pause for a moment to express my feelings with the beating of my heart. When the small train was moving slowly in the wilderness, or at a speed of six kilometers per hour, I imagined this wilderness filled with hosts of hermits and ascetics who had preceded us. I didn't see it as a wilderness but as gardens and paradises filled with delicious fruit-bearing trees, which the bride church presented to her Savior, the King of ages, throughout time. She sings, "Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits" (Song of Solomon 4:16). This is how I saw it, and this is how I was happy when I lived with the fathers of the wilderness, whose breaths still perfumed the valley.

The Monastery of St. Anba Bishoy at the End of the Twentieth Century

I toured the monastery with one of the monastic fathers. The monastic cells were very old, and the condition of the fathers showed real poverty. The closest description of them is: "as if dead, yet we live." I went up to the top of the great fortress until I reached the Church of St. Michael the Archangel. Since I was tired from walking and climbing, in addition to the previous nights when I had only slept for two hours, I felt a strong need for rest. I sat by the northern window of the Church of the Angel and from there I saw the wilderness in all its beauty, tranquility, and gentle breeze.

It was as if the whole world had gathered for me in this place full of peace. I rested and relaxed, then sleep overcame me. When I woke up, I felt the everlasting arms carrying me to the sweetest pastures.

هنا أقف قليلاً لأعبر من مشاعري بخفقات قلبي، عندما كان القطار الصغير يسير بهدوء في البرية أو بسرعة ستة كيلو هي الساعة كنت اتخيل هذه البرية وقد امتلأت بطوائف السواح والتسائك المجاهدين الذين سبقونا... وما كنت انظر إليها أنها برية بل جنت وهرايس كلها أشجار محملة بالثمار الشهية، قدمتها الكنيسة العروس لناديها ملك الدهور على مر الأزمنة وهي تنشد:

« ليأت حبيبى إلى جنته ويأكل ثمره النفيس » (نش : ٤ : ١٦)

وهكذا كنت أرى وبهذا كنت أسعد حينما أعيش مع آباء البرية الذين مازالت انفسهم تعبق الوادى...

دير القديس الأنبا بيشوى في نهاية القرن العشرين

طففت بأرجاء الدير بصحبة أحد الآباء الرهبان... وكانت القلالي قديمة جداً وحالة الآباء تنم عن الفقر الحقيقي واقرب تعبير عنهم هو : « كمائتين وها نحن نحيا » وصعدت إلى أعلى الحصن الكبير حتى وصلت إلى كنيسة الملاك ميخائيل، وإذ كنت تعبت من المشى والصعود بالاضافة إلى الليالي الماضية التي لم أنم فيها إلا ساعتين... عندئذ أحسست بحاجتى الشديدة إلى الراحة فجلست بجوار النافذة البحرية لكنيسة الملاك ومنها رأيت البرية... بجمالها... وهدوئها.... ونسيمها الرقيق.

وكان الدنيا كلها بالنسبة لى جمعت فى هذا المكان الملىء بالسلام فاسترحمت واسترخيت ثم غلب على الناس ولما استيقظت أحسست بالأذرع الابدية تحملىنى إلى أشهى المراعى.



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The Monastery of the Virgin Mary, "The Syrians"

The next day, one of the monastic fathers guided me, and I reached the Monastery of the Virgin Mary, "The Syrians." I was welcomed and embraced by Hegumen Raphael, the abbot of the monastery, and Hegumen Samuel Tawadros. After a short rest, I visited the two large churches and then a small church called the "Church of the Forty." In the afternoon, I visited the Church of St. Michael the Archangel, at the top of the great fortress. The area of the monastery is one feddan and thirteen qirats. The cells of the monastic fathers, although they appeared to be a little more advanced than the cells of the previous monastery, still bore the character of complete asceticism. The number of monks was around fifteen.

I spent three days in this monastery, full of bliss and peace of mind. The fathers, especially Hegumen Samuel Tawadros, would spend long evenings until after midnight in the guesthouse. The conversations mostly revolved around church affairs and hopes for a better tomorrow. They did not know that these hopes would one day be realized, and that this monastery would be their source.



The Monastery of the Virgin Mary, "Al-Baramous"

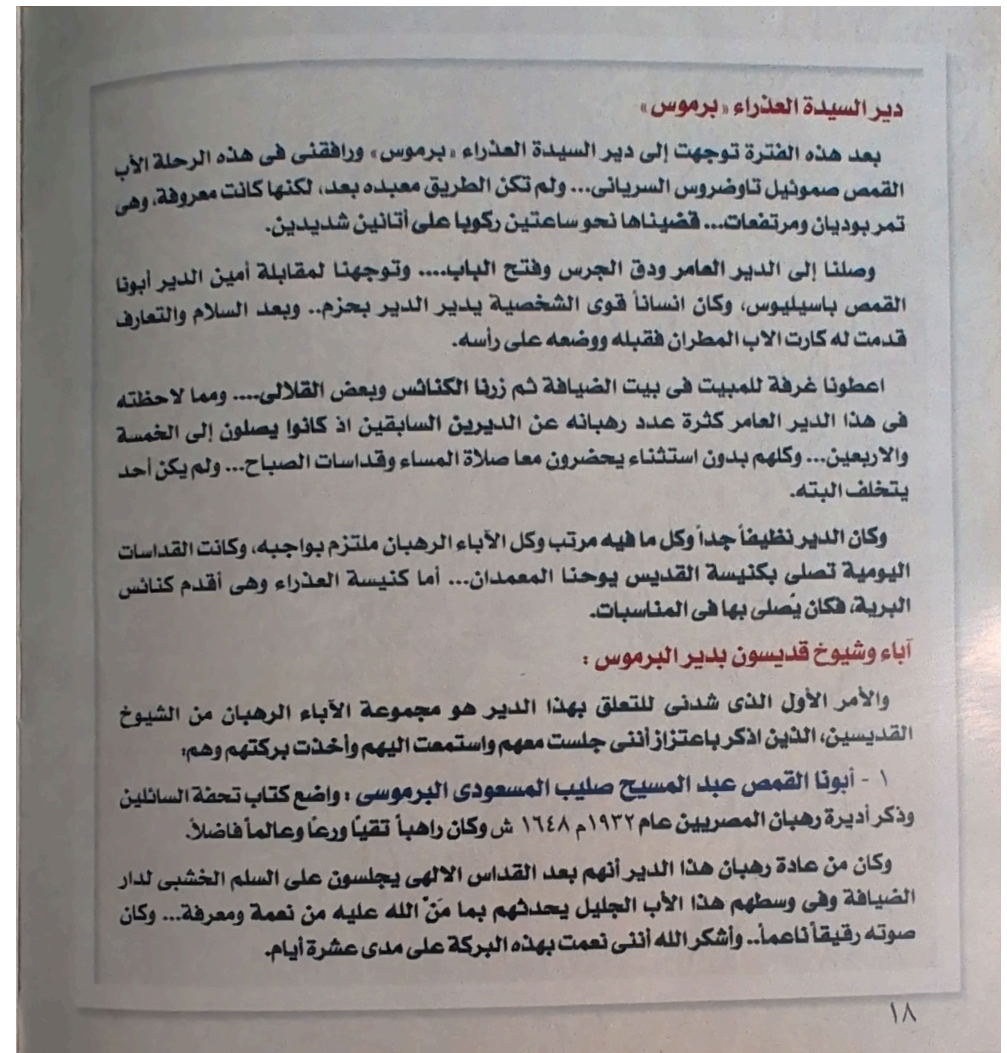
After this period, I headed to the Monastery of the Virgin Mary, "Al-Baramous," and I was accompanied on this journey by Hegumen Samuel Tawadros al-Souriani. The road was not yet paved, but it was well-known, passing through valleys and high places. We spent about two hours riding on two very strong donkeys. We arrived at the thriving monastery, the bell was rung, and the door was opened. We went to meet the abbot of the monastery, Father Hegumen Basilios, who was a person with a strong personality who ran the monastery with firmness. After greeting him, I presented him with the card from the Metropolitan Father, which he kissed and placed on his head.

They gave us a room to sleep in the guesthouse, and then we visited the churches and some of the cells. What I noticed in this prosperous monastery was the large number of monks compared to the two previous monasteries, as there were around forty-five. All of them, without exception, attended the evening prayers and the morning liturgies together, and no one was ever absent. The monastery was very clean, everything was well-ordered, and all the monastic fathers were committed to their duties. The daily liturgies were prayed in the Church of St. John the Baptist, while the Church of the Virgin, which is the oldest church in the wilderness, was used for services on special occasions.

Holy Fathers and Elders at the Monastery of Al-Baramous

The first thing that attracted me to this monastery was the group of monastic fathers who were holy elders. I remember with pride that I sat with them, listened to them, and received their blessing. They included:

Father Hegumen Abd al-Masih Salib al-Masoudi al-Baramousy: He wrote the book "A Gift to Inquirers and an Account of the Monasteries of Egyptian Monks" in 1932 (1648 A.M.). He was a pious, devout, and virtuous monk and a knowledgeable scholar. It was the custom of the monks of this monastery that after the divine liturgy, they would sit on the wooden stairs of the guesthouse with this venerable father in their midst, and he would speak to them from the grace and knowledge that God had bestowed upon him. His voice was soft and gentle. I thank God that I enjoyed this blessing for ten days.



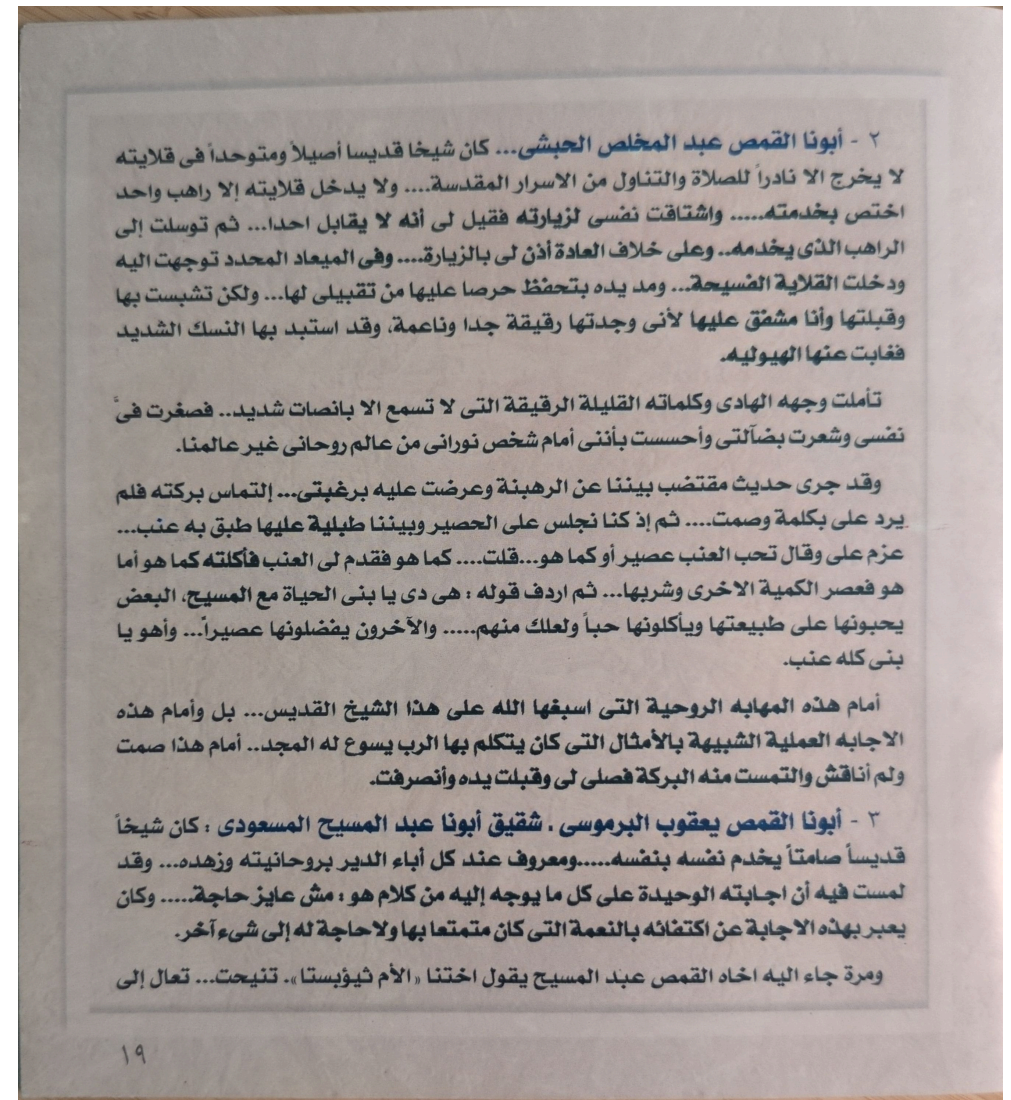
Father Hegumen Abd al-Mukhlis al-Habashi: He was an elder of authentic holiness and a hermit in his cell, rarely leaving except for prayer and receiving the Holy Mysteries. Only one monk was chosen to serve him and was allowed to enter his cell. My soul longed to visit him, but I was told that he did not meet anyone. I then pleaded with the monk who served him, and contrary to his custom, he gave me permission to visit. At the appointed time, I went to him and entered the spacious cell. He extended his hand cautiously, fearing that I would kiss it, but I held on to it and kissed it.

I felt tender concern for that hand: it was so delicate and soft, worn by severe asceticism until it seemed almost immaterial. I contemplated his calm face and his few, gentle words, which could only be heard with great attention. I felt small in my own eyes and felt my insignificance, and I felt that I was in front of a luminous person from a spiritual world different from ours. A brief conversation took place between us about monasticism, and I presented my desire to him and asked for his blessing, but he did not respond with a single word and remained silent.

Since we were sitting on a mat with a tray between us on which there was a plate of grapes, he invited me, saying, "Would you like grapes juiced or as they are?" I said, "As they are," so he offered me the grapes, and I ate them as they were, but he juiced the other portion and drank it. Then he added, "This, my son, is life with Christ. Some people love it in its natural state and eat it with love, and you might be one of them. Others prefer it as juice... but it's all grapes, my son."

In the face of the spiritual reverence that God had bestowed upon this holy elder, and in front of this practical answer that resembled the parables that the Lord Jesus, to Him be the glory, used to speak, I remained silent and did not argue. I asked for his blessing, and he prayed for me. I kissed his hand and left.

Father Hegumen Yaqoub al-Baramousy: The brother of Father Abd al-Masih al-Masoudi. He was a holy, silent elder who cared for himself. He was known among all the fathers of the monastery for his spirituality and asceticism. I noticed that his only answer to everything that was said to him was: "I don't need anything." He expressed with this answer his contentment with the grace that he was enjoying and that he had no need for anything else. Once, his brother, Hegumen Abd al-Masih, came to him and said, "Our sister Mother Theopista has passed away. Come to



the guesthouse to receive condolences from the fathers." He immediately answered, "I don't need anything... I don't need anything... you go and receive the condolences. I don't need anything."

Father Hegumen Matthias al-Baramousy: He was one of the monks whom the Metropolitan Anba Yoannis would bring to Alexandria to acquire knowledge. He was fair-skinned with a calm, angelic face, and he loved to pray fervently. He was interested in church books, copying and renewing them. He was the uncle of Hegumen Samuel Thabet in America.

Father Hegumen Bakhum al-Baramousy: He was a holy elder who cared for himself despite his old age and poor eyesight. He would spend his free time copying and binding books and keeping them in the church.

The hermit monk, Hegumen Mina al-Baramousy: He was in his thirties. He came to the monastery from the cave where he was living and stood alone in the sanctuary during the divine liturgy. Since I knew him from Alexandria, I greeted him and asked for his permission for confession and absolution. He listened closely and questioned me carefully about what I said. After the prayer, I asked for his permission to visit him in the cave where he lived, west of the monastery, and he granted it to me.



Two days later, in the afternoon, I went to him accompanied by Hegumen Samuel al-Souriani. When we arrived at the cave, we found it had only one entrance, which was an opening at the top. When we called out to him gently, he opened it and offered us a small ladder, and we descended into the cave. The atmosphere was beautiful, and it was furnished with a clean mat. In a corner were some books, a pillow, and a blanket. The three of us sat in silence for a while. Then each of us asked the other about his condition. He was naturally a man of few words.

However, what captivated us was the awe and quietness of the place. The spirit of the place spoke more than its inhabitant. Since we knew from the words of the fathers that when you enter a monk's cell to visit him, you should not sit with him for long, we asked for permission to leave. He offered us the small ladder, and we climbed up, and he came up to bid us farewell.

After these ten happy days that I spent at the Monastery of Al-Baramous among the blessings of the divine liturgies, evening prayers, and sweet conversations with the old and holy monastic fathers, a storm of disturbance hit the monastery, destroying the quietness and tranquility it enjoyed. The Metropolitan Anba Yoannis arrived at the monastery with a group of his church workers, their children, and close friends. I learned that the visit was for two weeks, which was the period of the fast of the Virgin Mary. The younger monks began to entertain their guests, and so on. Since my leave had ended, I returned to my workplace in peace.

The Impact of the Visit on the Idea of Monasticism

During this visit, I met a monk who was not faithful in his monastic life in the monastery. I did not know this at the time. He tried by all means to convince me that the path of monasticism was not sound and that it was of no use. He said that those who had followed it, including himself, had come to regret it but were unable to return. This conversation found a place in my mind because I had not yet reached the level of maturity to put things in their proper place. Also, it came from an old monk. I connected this to what Father Abd al-Mukhlis said about the grapes: "...but it's all grapes." I left the monastery, and the heat of my desire for monasticism had been extinguished.



Marriage, too, held little attraction for me. My attitude was: "I neither turn away from you nor set my heart on you."

Resuming Work and Service

I returned to my job and resumed it with energy, as well as my spiritual service. My mind was now free from the idea of monasticism, and I was not convinced about marriage, which is why my output was doubled in both areas. Regarding my spiritual service, it increased in several places and cities, especially in Alexandria. People saw in me a young man who was inclined to spiritual things and enthusiastic in his words, and who expressed his opinion with honesty and clarity about things that were crooked. They loved me.

A Remarkable Event in My Life

Once, the Friends of the Bible Society in Alexandria held a week of spiritual revival. The speakers were Archdeacon Iskandar Hanna and Archdeacon Ayyad Ayyad, the two leading preachers of that time. The society added my name as the third speaker in this revival. Privately I was very happy because God had placed me in this honorable position, which was beyond me, but at the same time, I



felt a deep awe. For this reason, I poured out my soul in complete humility before God and opened my heart for God to fill it with His spirit. My hope was fulfilled, and the service was successful. Thanks be to God.

Troubles Coincide with the Expansion of Service

At the same time that the area of service expanded and people began to rejoice and talk about this new image, troubles also began to rear their head like a snake at my workplace. Unfortunately, some of my Christian colleagues would make empty jokes to entertain themselves or to mock. The churches at that time, and before it, were not fertile ground for the message of the Gospel. Their doors were only opened for the liturgies on Sunday and Friday, and in most towns, only on Sunday. The church servant would then lock them and go home with the keys.

As for the other services, such as Sunday school or meetings for sermons and Bible study, they had no place and were not recognized by the church administration. Because of this, societies that opened their doors for Sunday school and spiritual services became active. For this reason, two societies were founded in Damanhour in the mid-thirties: the Friends of the Bible Society for the service of the people in the city, with sermons for men and women and Sunday schools for boys, in addition to the Faith Society in Jurn Abu al-Rish for the service of the workers. The more the service grew, the more troubles increased around it.

No Heart for Marriage

While I was drowning in the troubles of service and work, my family descended upon me and pushed me into a marriage I had never contemplated. Without any preliminaries, and almost before I knew what had happened, I found myself a married man.

احسست بالرهبة الشديدة... ولهذا سكبت نفسي بانسحاق تام أمام الله وبسطت قلبي ليملاه الله بروحه... وقد تحقق أملى وتمت الخدمة بنجاح... فشكراً لله.

تزامن المتاعب مع اتساع الخدمة :

في الوقت الذي اتسعت فيه مساحة الخدمة، وبدأ الناس يفرحون ويتكلمون عن هذه الصورة الجديدة... في هذا الوقت بدأت أيضاً المتاعب تطل برأسها كالافعى على موقع الوظيفة، ومع الأسف كان بعض الزملاء من الموظفين المسيحيين يتندرون بكلام فارغ للتسلية أو للسخرية. لم تكن الكنائس - مع الأسف - في هذه الحقبة وما قبلها... موقعاً خصياً لرسالة الانجيل... وكانت أبوابها لا تفتح إلا لقداسي الأحد والجمعة وفي أغلب البلاد للأحد فقط... ثم يغلقها خادم الكنيسة ويذهب إلى بيته ومعه المفاتيح.

أما باقى الخدمات مثل مدارس الأحد أو اجتماعات للوعظ ودرس الكتاب فلم يكن لها موقع، ولا معترف بها من إدارة الكنيسة.

وبسبب هذا نشطت الجمعيات التى فتحت أبوابها لمدارس الأحد أو الخدمات الروحية. ولهذا تأسس بدمنهوور في منتصف الثلاثينات جمعيتان هما : جمعية أصدقاء الكتاب المقدس لخدمة الشعب بالمدينة... اجتماعات وعظ للرجال والسيدات ومدارس أحد للبنين . بالإضافة إلى جمعية الإيمان بجرن أبو الريش لخدمة العمال.

وكلما ازداد نمو الخدمة... ازدادت المتاعب حولها.

زواج بلا قلب :

بينما أنا غارق في متاعب الخدمة ومتاعب الوظيفة... هجمت على أسرتي وزججت بي في مشروع زواج.. ما كنت افكر فيه أبداً... ففعلنا وبدون مقدمات وبقدرة قادر.. رأيت نفسي انساناً متزوجاً..



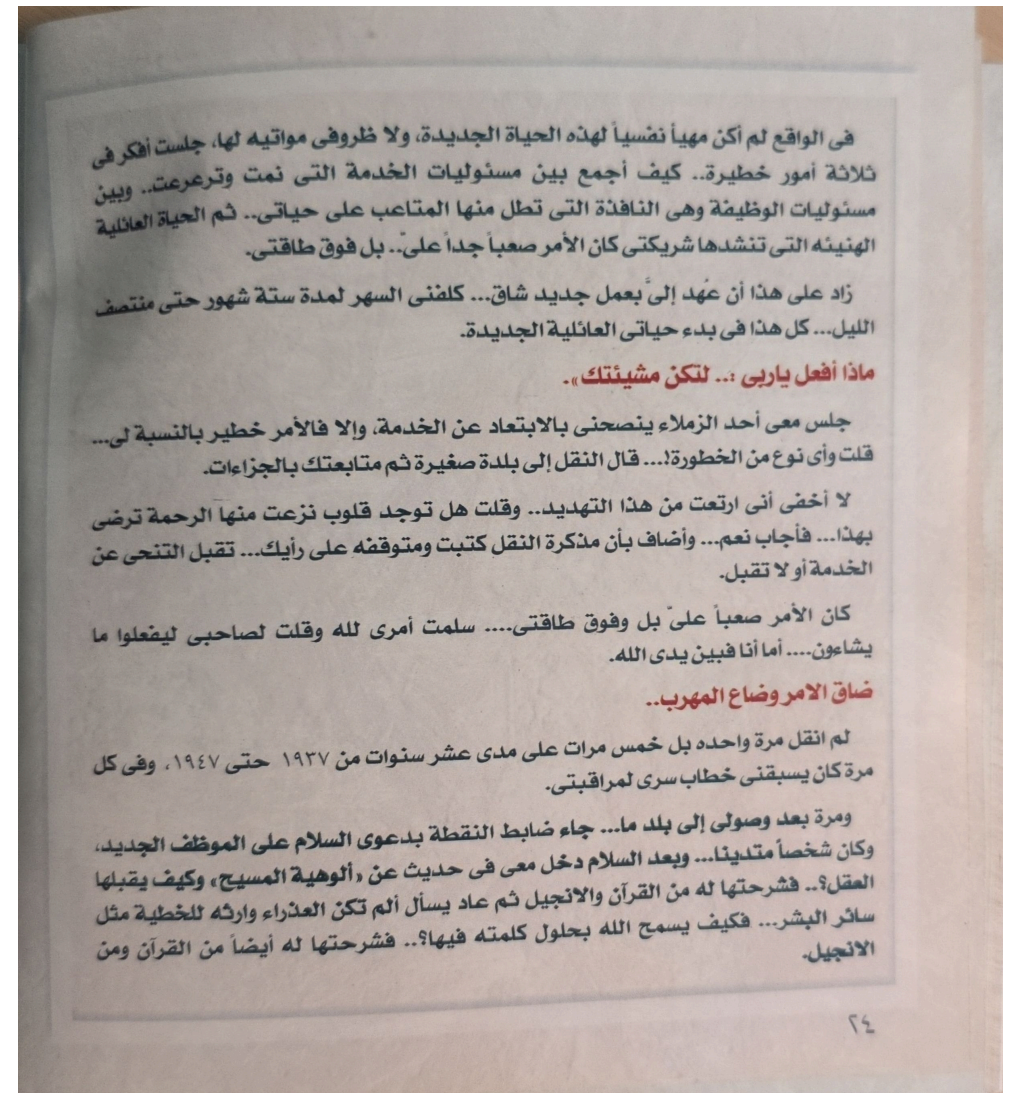
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In reality, I was not psychologically prepared for this new life, nor were my circumstances suitable for it. I sat and thought about three serious matters: how to combine the responsibilities of the service that had grown and flourished, the responsibilities of the job that was the window from which troubles looked into my life, and the happy family life that my partner longed for. The matter was very difficult for me, even beyond my capacity.

To add to this, I was entrusted with a new and arduous job that required me to stay up until midnight for six months. All of this was at the beginning of my new family life. "What should I do, my Lord... let Your will be done...."

One of my colleagues sat with me and advised me to stay away from the service, otherwise, the matter would be dangerous for me. I asked what kind of danger, and he said, "Transfer to a small town and then follow-ups with punishments." I will not hide that I was terrified by this threat and said, "Are there hearts from which mercy has been removed that would be content with this?" He replied, "Yes," and added that the transfer memo had been written and was pending my opinion: either I accept to withdraw from the service, or I don't. The matter was difficult for me, even beyond my capacity. I surrendered my affairs to God and told my friend to do whatever they wanted, and that I was in God's hands.

My circumstances closed in, and every escape disappeared. I was not transferred once, but five times over ten years, from 1937 to 1947. Each time, a secret letter preceded me to put me under surveillance. Once, after I arrived in a certain town, the station officer came under the pretense of greeting the new employee. He was a religious person. After greeting me, he entered into a conversation with me about the divinity of Christ and how the mind could accept it. I explained it to him from the Quran and the Gospel. He then asked, "Wasn't the Virgin an heir to sin like all other humans? So how could God allow His word to dwell in her?" I also explained it to him from the Quran and the Gospel.



After this tense discussion, he was silent, then he greeted me and left without any comment. The siege around me was intense, eyes were watching me, and my image was that of a suspect under surveillance.

The Dawn Appears

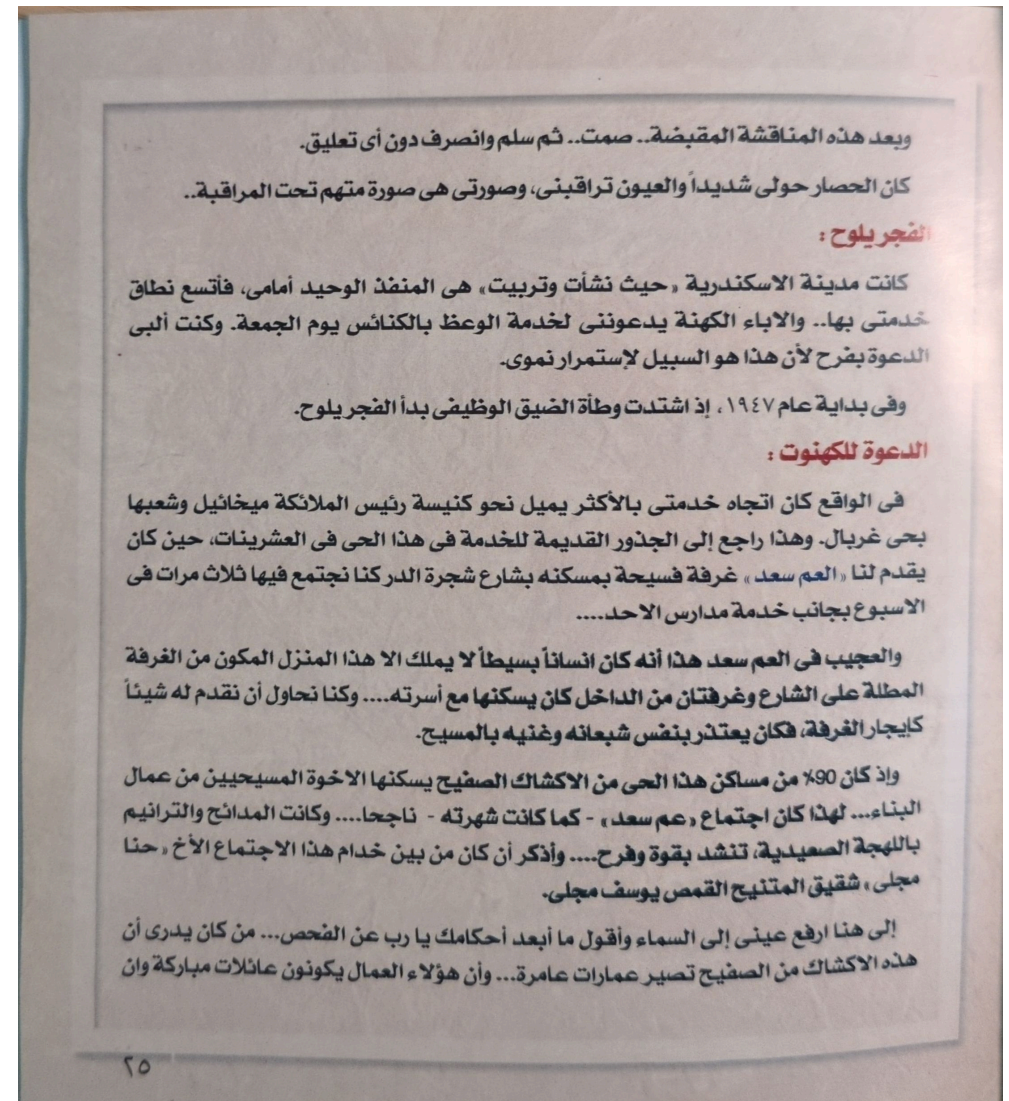
The city of Alexandria, where I was raised and grew up, was the only escape for me, and the scope of my service there expanded. The priest fathers would invite me to serve by preaching in the churches on Friday. I would accept the invitation with joy because this was the way for my spiritual growth to continue. At the beginning of 1947, as the pressure at work intensified, the dawn began to appear.

The Call to the Priesthood

In reality, the direction of my service was more inclined toward the Church of St. Michael the Archangel and its people in the Ghirbal neighborhood. This goes back to the old roots of the service in this neighborhood in the twenties, when "Uncle Saad" would offer us a spacious room in his house on Shagaret al-Durr street, where we would meet three times a week, in addition to the Sunday school service. What was strange about "Uncle Saad" was that he was a simple man who only owned this house, which consisted of the room overlooking the street and two inner rooms where he lived with his family.

We would try to give him something as rent for the room, but he would decline, his soul satisfied and rich in Christ. Since 90% of the houses in this neighborhood were tin shacks inhabited by Christian construction workers, the "Uncle Saad" meeting was successful. Praises and hymns in the Upper Egyptian dialect were sung with power and joy. I remember that among the servants of this meeting was the brother, Hanna Magly, the brother of the late Hegumen Youssef Magly.

Here I raise my eyes to heaven and say, "How unsearchable are your judgments, Lord!" Who would have known that these tin shacks would become prosperous buildings, that these workers would become blessed families,



and that the "Uncle Saad" meeting would become a church, and that this young servant would become the priest of this church?

Note

The tradition at that time was that the Coptic Community Council and the society representing the church's neighborhood would nominate and recommend the person called to the priesthood to the Patriarchal Father. This recommendation would be done after a precise examination over many long months. Some members of the Coptic Community Council specializing in church affairs would come to the church to examine the candidate's sermons, as well as his family and his behavior in society and at work. No one dared to reach the Patriarchal Father except through this path.

Copy of the Recommendation Letter to the Patriarchal Father

April 21, 1947

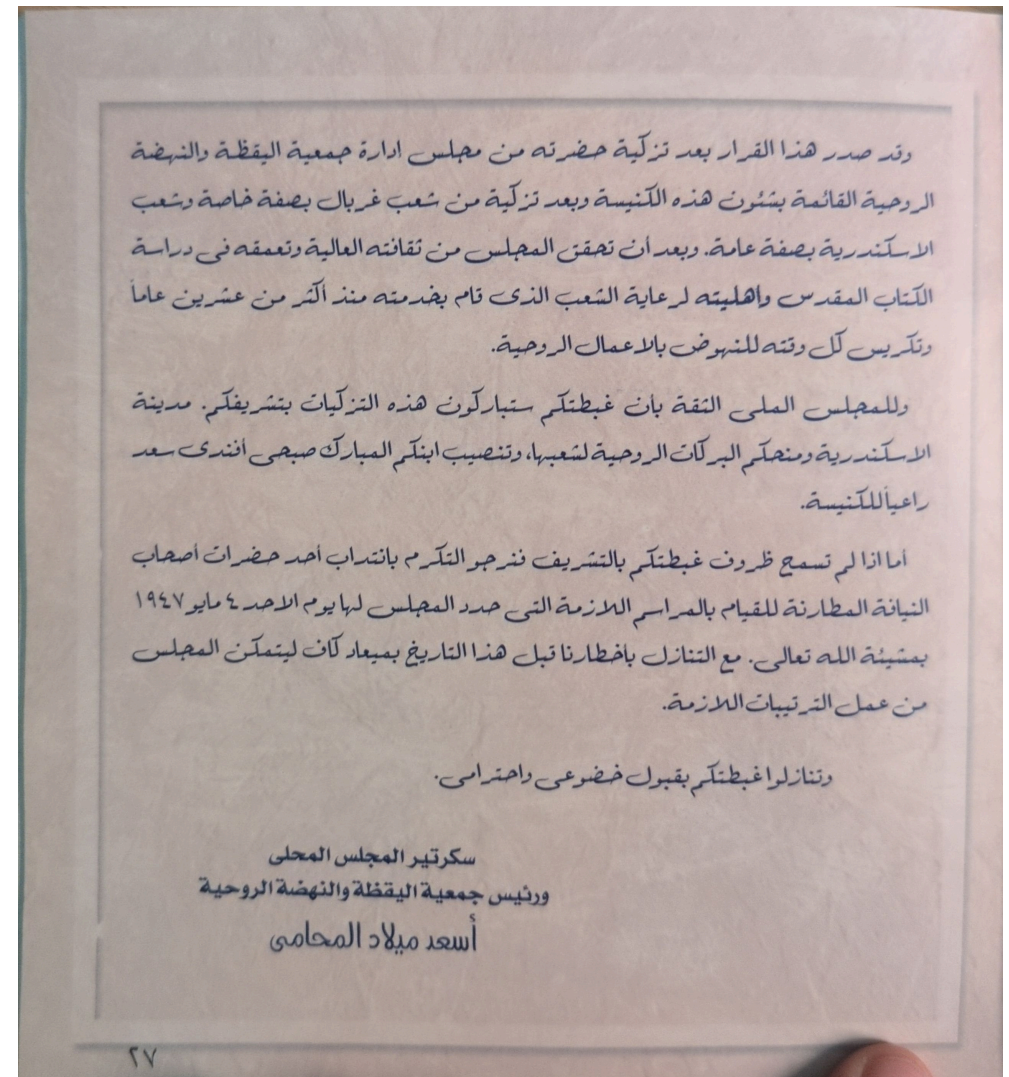
To His Holiness, the Great Pope Anba Yusab II, Pope and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, I kiss your hands and bow at the feet of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory who dwells in you, and I ask your holiness for your good prayers. May God prolong your life and bless us with your kindness and satisfaction, and keep you as a treasure for the church and its people. I am honored to present to your Holiness the decision of the Coptic Community Council issued on April 18, 1947, which includes the approval of the ordination of Subhi Effendi Saad, the deacon, as the pastor of the Church of St. Michael the Archangel in the Ghirbal neighborhood in Alexandria.



This decision was issued after his recommendation by the board of directors of the "Spiritual Awakening and Revival Society," which is in charge of this church's affairs, and after a recommendation from the people of Ghirbal in particular and the people of Alexandria in general. The council has verified his high culture, his deep study of the Holy Bible, and his eligibility to shepherd the people he has served for more than twenty years and to dedicate all his time to the advancement of spiritual works.

The Coptic Community Council has confidence that your Holiness will bless these recommendations by honoring the city of Alexandria with your presence and granting your spiritual blessings to its people, and by installing your blessed son, Subhi Effendi Saad, as the pastor of the church. If your Holiness's circumstances do not permit your presence, we request that you kindly delegate one of the honorable Metropolitans to perform the necessary ceremonies, which the council has set for Sunday, May 4, 1947, God willing. Kindly inform us before this date so that the council can make the necessary arrangements. Please accept, your Holiness, my submission and respect.

Secretary of the Local Council and President of the Spiritual Awakening and Revival Society Asaad Milad, Lawyer



The Ordination Took Place on the Feast of the Martyrdom of St. Mark the Apostle

This letter reached His Holiness Pope Yusab II. He requested my presence, along with a group of people interested in church affairs. We traveled to Cairo and met with His Holiness. The conversation began with questions about his children, the people of Alexandria, the conditions of the churches, and the priests. He then criticized Mr. Asaad Milad, the secretary of the Coptic Community Council, for not coming to the Patriarchal residence when he or his brothers, the members of the Coptic Community Council, came to Cairo. He then asked questions about my person and whether there was any opposition from some of the people.

After he was assured of what he wanted, he promised to attend the celebration of the Feast of St. Mark the Apostle and also to perform the ordination. Since this was his first visit after being installed as patriarch, the reception was honorable.



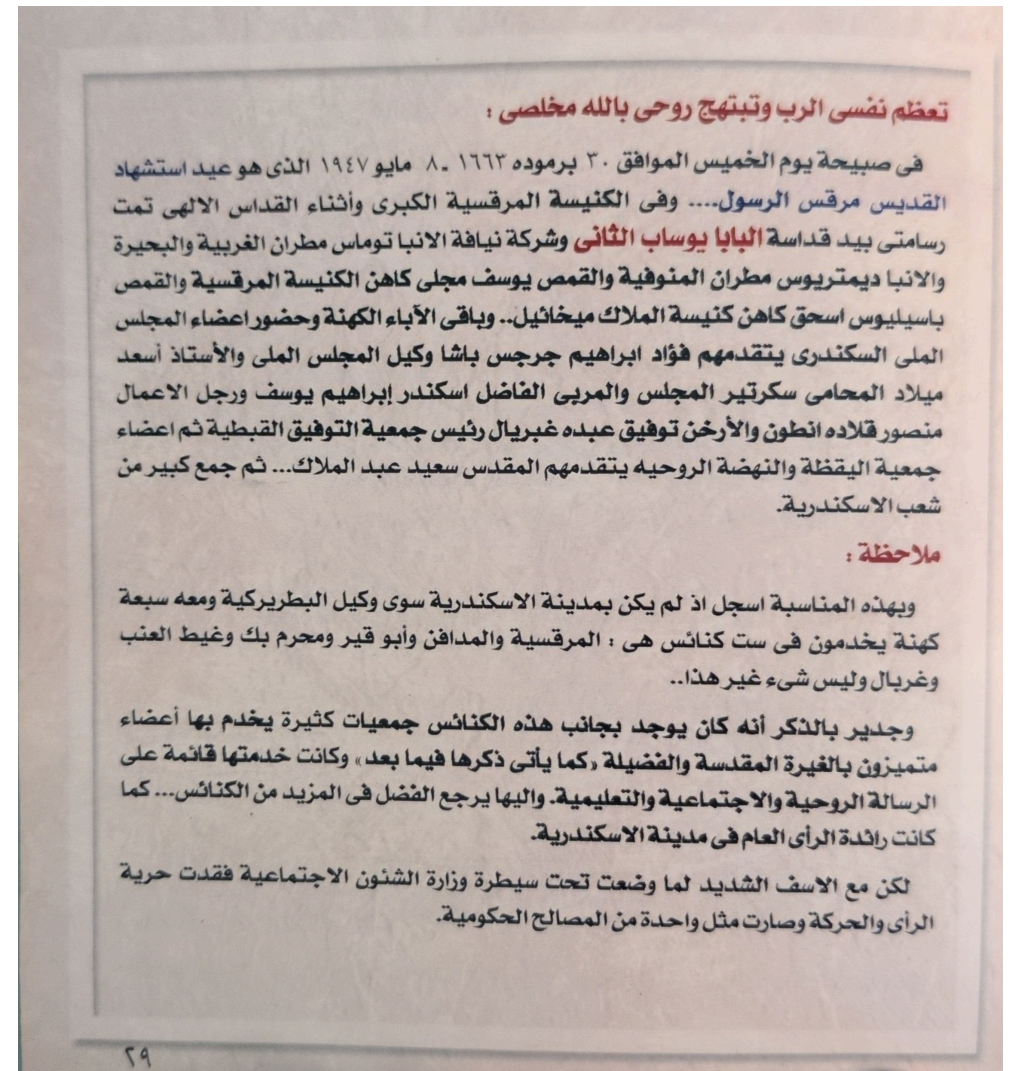
My Soul Magnifies the Lord, and My Spirit Rejoices in God My Savior

On the morning of Thursday, 30 Barmuda 1663 A.M., corresponding to May 8, 1947, which is the Feast of the Martyrdom of St. Mark the Apostle, and in the Great St. Mark's Cathedral during the divine liturgy, my ordination was performed by the hand of His Holiness Pope Yusab II, and with the participation of His Grace Anba Thomas, the Metropolitan of Gharbia and Beheira, Anba Dimitrios, the Metropolitan of Menoufia, Hegumen Youssef Magly, the priest of the St. Mark's Cathedral, Hegumen Basilios Ishak, the priest of the Church of St. Michael the Archangel, and the rest of the priest fathers.

The ordination was also attended by members of the Alexandrian Coptic Community Council, led by Fouad Ibrahim Gerges Pasha, the vice president of the Coptic Community Council, Mr. Asaad Milad, the lawyer and secretary of the council, the honorable educator Iskandar Ibrahim Youssef, the businessman Mansour Qaladah Anton, and the archon Tawfik Abdo Gabriel, the head of the Coptic Taufiq Society. The members of the Spiritual Awakening and Revival Society, led by al-Muqaddas Saeed Abd al-Malak, were also present, along with a large crowd of the people of Alexandria.

Note

On this occasion, I note that at that time in the city of Alexandria, there was only the patriarchal vicar and seven priests who served in six churches: St. Mark's, the Cemeteries, Abu Qir, Moharram Bey, Ghayt al-Enab, and Ghirbal, and nothing else. It is worth mentioning that in addition to these churches, there were many societies served by members who were distinguished by holy zeal and virtue. Their service, as will be mentioned later, was based on spiritual, social, and educational missions, and they are credited with the increase in the number of churches. They were also pioneers of public opinion in the city of Alexandria. But unfortunately, when they were placed under the control of the Ministry of Social Affairs, they lost their freedom of opinion and movement and became like one of the government departments.



Spiritual Service

All praise and thanks be to You, Lord. I have been freed from the troubles of the job and have been given absolute freedom to serve as I wish. What could prevent me from working? The people were very kind and responsive to every call, and from the first moment, friendship and trust were formed between us. The first call or the first lesson was, "With quietness and order, we receive the blessing of God." Gradually, the people were trained to worship with quietness and reverence. Every Sunday evening was dedicated to a sermon meeting, and it was a continuous spiritual revival that brought joy to all the people. I then lived with the people in daily visitation, morning and evening, and this also increased the people's joy. The people's turnout for the church was strong and accompanied by abundant consolation.

Looking Ahead

The church buildings were simple and temporary, and they had to be renewed. But how could they be renewed while the prayers continued? I thought about buying the empty land opposite the church, which was a large area of more than 8,000 square meters. This would have been enough to build a large church that could accommodate the people, whose number exceeded twenty thousand, and also to establish social projects that complemented the church's mission. Since the church was connected to the society, it was possible to make bold and quick decisions. Thus, there was a great hope for the realization of useful projects. But unfortunately, while we were in this fantasy and these cherished hopes, cruel hands were extended to separate the church from the society and annex it to the Patriarchate.

There would have been no objection to this action if things had been handled by the Patriarchate without



slow bureaucracy. The best evidence for this is that all the churches and charitable projects in Alexandria were established by the people under the leadership of the societies. The annexation of the Church of the Angel to the Patriarchate caused great distress and sensitivity among the people and the society on one hand, and the Patriarchate and the Coptic Community Council on the other. This was because the people and the society loved the church and wanted to advance it and create useful projects, following the example of Hegumen Gerages Boutros and the Faith Society and the Church of St. George in Jazirat Badran.

In the face of this feeling, the church and its projects froze, because every project required council decisions and the Patriarchate's approval. This, unfortunately, was not available. As for me, I sank into my sorrows because my heart was with the people.



The Project of the Church of the Virgin and St. Joseph in Smouha

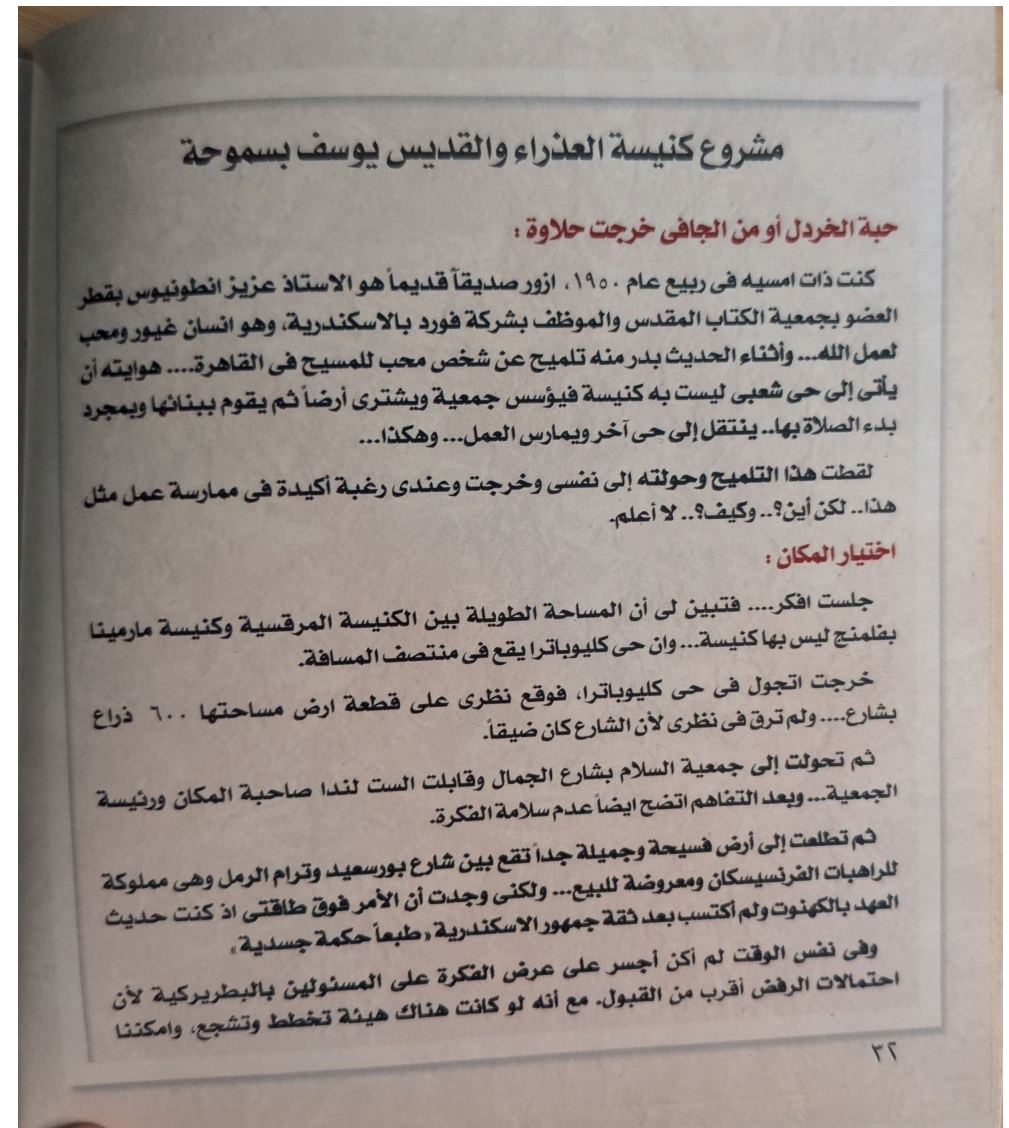
A Mustard Seed, or Sweetness out of Harshness

One evening in the spring of 1950, I was visiting an old friend, Mr. Aziz Antonius Bactor, a member of the Bible Society and an employee at the Ford company in Alexandria. He was a zealous person who loved God's work. During our conversation, he hinted about a person who loved Christ in Cairo. His practice was to come to a popular neighborhood without a church, establish a society, buy land, and then build on it. As soon as prayers began in it, he would move to another neighborhood and continue his work. I caught this hint and it resonated with me, and I left with a strong desire to do something similar. But where? And how? I did not know.

Choosing the Location

I sat and thought, and it became clear to me that the long distance between St. Mark's Cathedral and the Church of St. Mina in Fleming did not have a church, and that the Cleopatra neighborhood was in the middle of this distance. I went for a walk in the Cleopatra neighborhood, and my eyes fell on a piece of land of 600 square cubits on a street. It did not appeal to me because the street was narrow. I then moved to the "Al-Salam" society on Al-Jamal Street and met Mrs. Linda, the owner of the place and president of the society. After a discussion, it also became clear that the idea was not good.

I then looked at a very spacious and beautiful piece of land located between Port Said Street and the Raml tram. It was owned by the Franciscan sisters and was for sale. But I found that the matter was beyond my capacity, as I was a new priest and had not yet gained the trust of the people of Alexandria. This was, of course, a worldly wisdom. At the same time, I did not dare to present the idea to the officials at the Patriarchate because rejection was more likely than acceptance. Even though if there had been a body to plan and encourage, and we had been able to



get this land, it would have been a great blessing.

Buying the Land

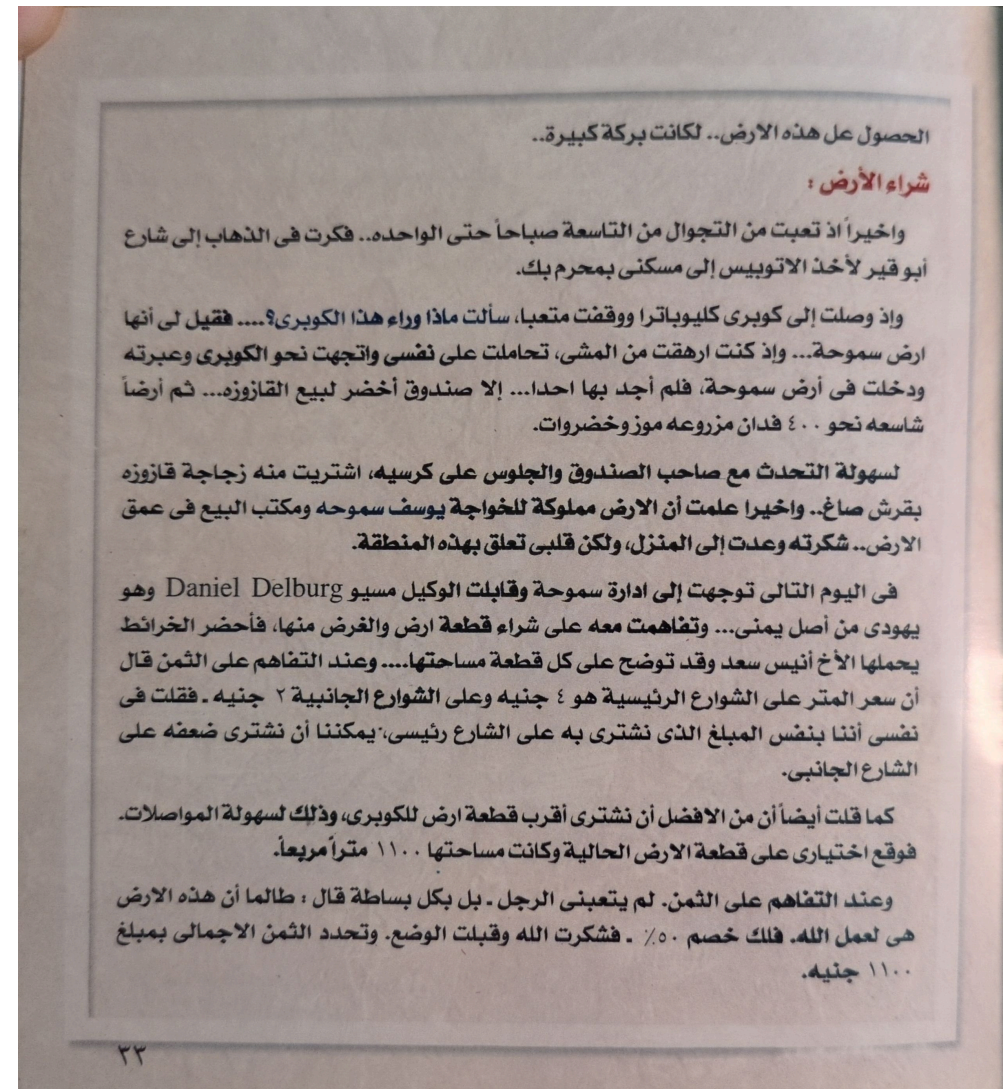
Finally, when I got tired of walking from nine in the morning until one, I thought about going to Abu Qir Street to take the bus to my home in Moharram Bey. When I reached the Cleopatra Bridge and stood there tired, I asked, "What is beyond this bridge?" I was told that it was Smouha's land. Since I was exhausted from walking, I pushed myself and headed toward the bridge and crossed it, entering Smouha's land. I did not find anyone there except for a green kiosk selling soft drinks. There was also a vast land of about 400 feddans planted with bananas and vegetables.

To make it easier to talk with the kiosk owner and sit in his chair, I bought a bottle of soft drink for one piastre. Finally, I learned that the land was owned by Mr. Youssef Smouha and that the sales office was deep in the land. I thanked him and returned home, but my heart became attached to this area.

The next day, I went to the Smouha administration and met the agent, Mr. Daniel Delburg, a Jew of Yemeni origin. I discussed with him the purchase of a piece of land and the purpose of it. He brought the maps, which were carried by brother Anis Saad, and the area of each piece was marked on them. When we discussed the price, he said that the price per square meter on the main streets was 4 pounds and on the side streets was 2 pounds.

I said to myself that with the same amount of money we would use to buy on a main street, we could buy double the amount on a side street. I also said that it would be better to buy the closest piece of land to the bridge for easy transportation. So my choice fell on the current piece of land, and its area was 1,100 square meters. When we discussed the price, the man did not make it difficult for me. He simply said, "As long as this land is for the work of God, you get a 50% discount." I thanked God and accepted the offer.

The total price was set at 1,100 pounds.



At that time, we did not own anything. But with God's help, in a short time, five hundred pounds were collected, and the down payment was paid, and the rest was to be paid in three annual installments. This was in July 1950. We then started collecting donations, and by December of the same year, we had 1,000 pounds, a piece of land of 1,100 square meters, and the architectural drawings.

Starting the Construction

We submitted this to the Patriarchate and the Coptic Community Council. Since these two bodies recur in the account, I shall refer to them together as "BM." We sought their approval of the drawings and permission to put the building out to tender. Here I stop, stunned and not knowing what to write, and to avoid a long explanation of the tragedy, I will just note that we went around and around in attempts, discussions, and correspondence for which God had given no warrant. The "BM" would not approve, and we would not stop our efforts. It was a bitter tribulation and dark nights that we lived through in worry, sadness, and tears from December 1950 until March 1955. In April 1955, we began construction secretly without the knowledge of the "BM," and the ground floor was completed in March 1956.

Consecration of the Church and Beginning of Prayer

On the blessed Saturday evening of March 31, 1956, which was the eve of the third Sunday of Great Lent, the church and its courtyard were filled with crowds of people whom I did not know where they came from or how they knew, because we did not announce it in newspapers or in churches. At around seven in the evening, His Grace the Metropolitan Anba Michael of Assiut arrived with a bright face and a joyful smile. He entered the church, and the prayer began, and the altar, the vessels, and some of the icons were consecrated. At that moment, I was lost to myself and even to my existence.



It was as if the whole world had gathered in this place and my whole life had been confined to this moment. I did not know how to speak or how to act.

The church project was known until that time as the "Church of St. Joseph," but during the consecration, our Metropolitan Father said, "The Orthodox Church of God, consecrated in the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Righteous St. Joseph." The Metropolitan Father, the priests, the deacons, and the people then sat down. I gave a speech that was the essence of my soul, heart, and blood, and its theme was the psalmist's words in Psalm 125, "Those who sow in tears will reap with shouts of joy." On Sunday morning, the divine liturgy was held in a solemn spiritual ceremony that combined joy and awe. Our Metropolitan Father, Anba Michael, presided over the prayer, and some of the priest fathers participated.



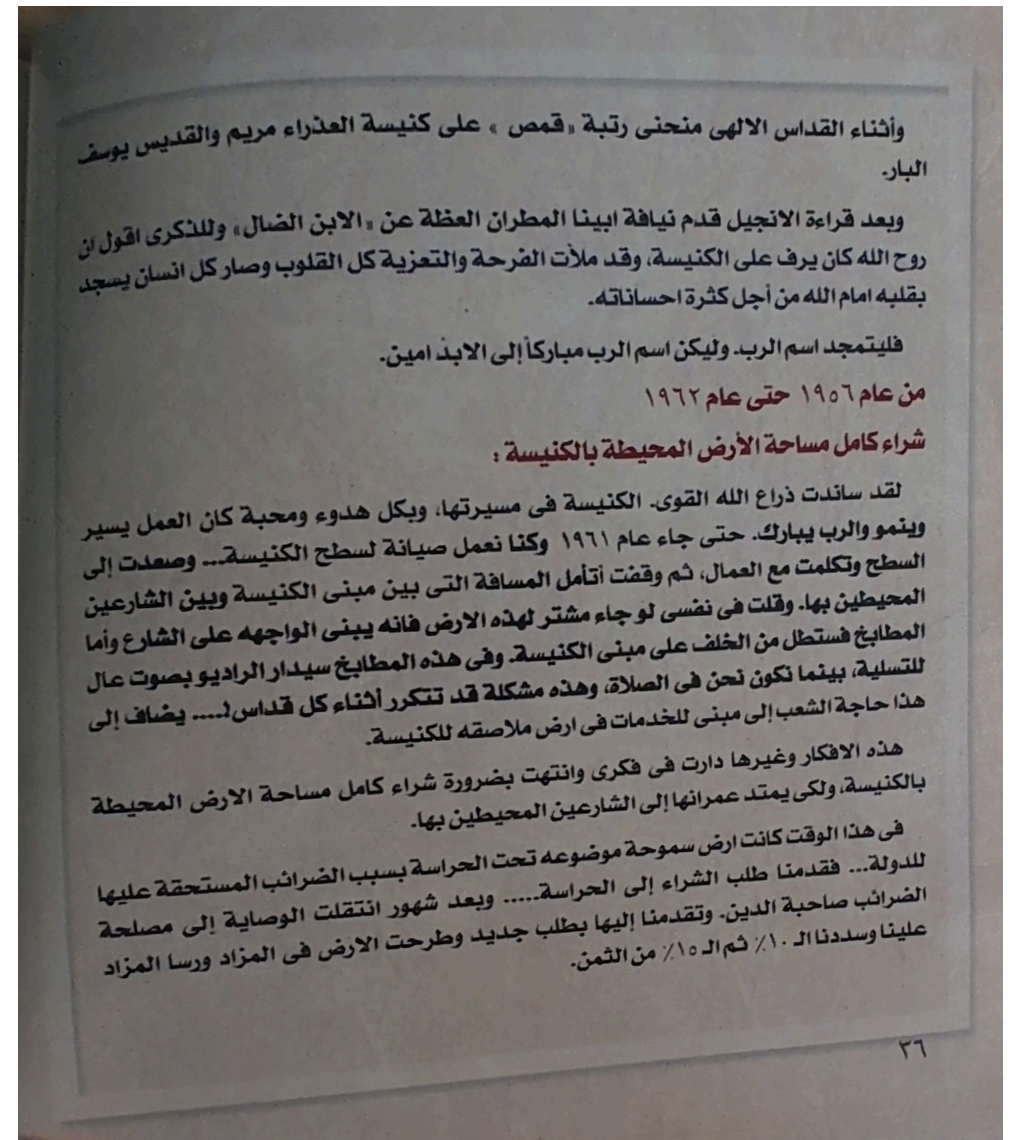
During the divine liturgy, he granted me the rank of "hegumen" for the Church of the Virgin Mary and the Righteous St. Joseph. After the Gospel was read, our Metropolitan Father delivered a sermon about the prodigal son. I mention for the record that the Spirit of God was hovering over the church, and joy and consolation filled every heart. Everyone was prostrating with their hearts before God for His abundant goodness. May the name of the Lord be glorified, and may the name of the Lord be blessed forever, Amen.

From 1956 to 1962: Buying the Entire Area of Land Surrounding the Church

The strong arm of God supported the church in its journey. With all quietness and love, the work was progressing and growing, and the Lord was blessing it. Then came the year 1961, and we were doing maintenance on the church roof. I went up to the roof and spoke with the workers. I then stood and contemplated the distance between the church building and the two surrounding streets.

I said to myself, "If a buyer comes for this land, he will build the facade on the street, and the kitchens will overlook the church building from the back." "In these kitchens, the radio will be playing loudly for entertainment, while we are in prayer, and this is a problem that might be repeated during every liturgy." "In addition to this, the people need a building for services on a piece of land adjacent to the church." These and other thoughts ran through my mind, and I concluded that it was necessary to buy the entire area of land surrounding the church and for its expansion to extend to the two surrounding streets.

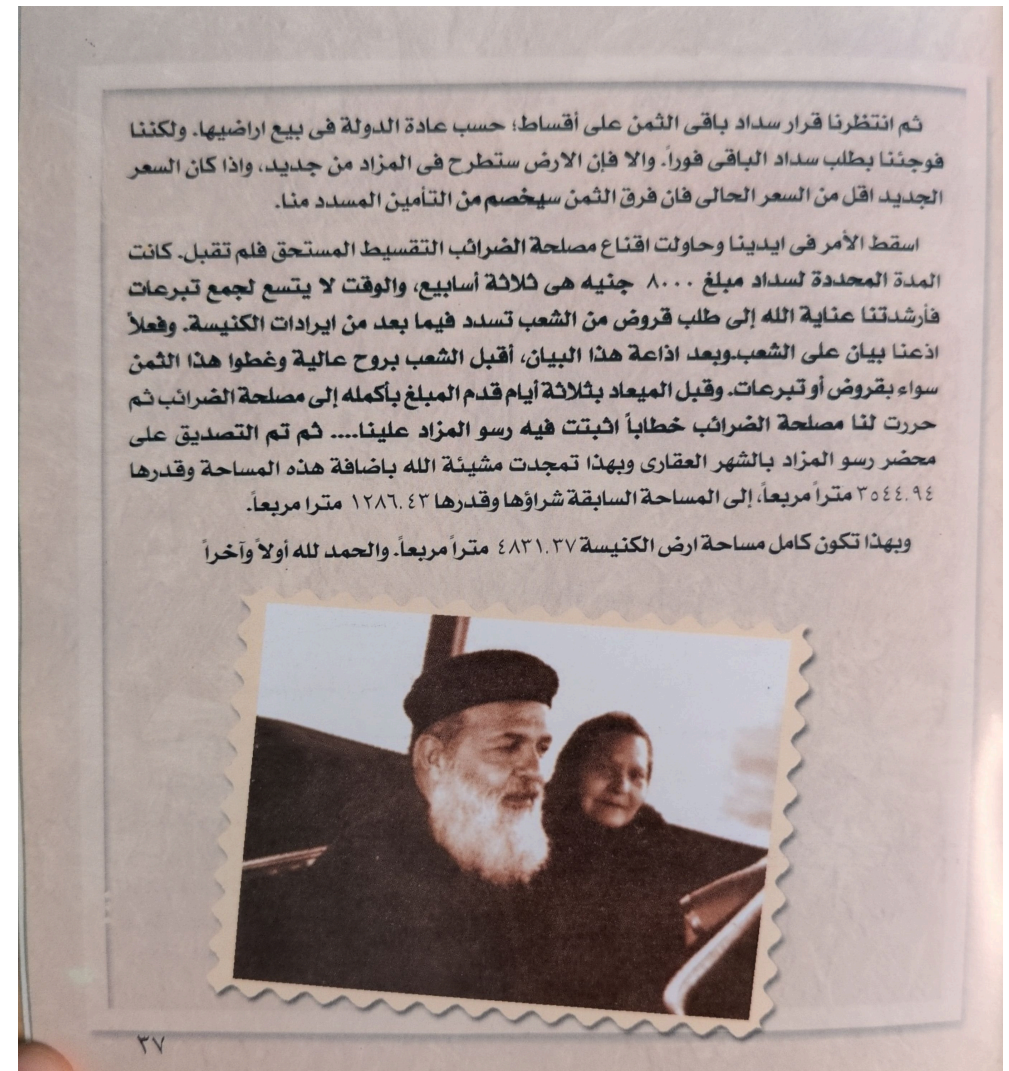
At that time, the Smouha land was under receivership because of taxes owed to the state. We submitted a purchase request to the receiver. After months, the administration of the estate was transferred to the Tax Authority, the creditor. We submitted a new request to it, and the land was put up for auction. Our bid won the auction, and we paid 10%, then 15% of the price.



We then waited for a decision to pay the rest of the price in installments, according to the state's custom in selling its lands. But we were surprised by a request to pay the rest immediately. Otherwise, the land would be put up for auction again, and if the new price was less than the current price, the difference would be deducted from the deposit we had paid. We were at a loss, and I tried to convince the Tax Authority to allow us to pay in installments, but they refused. The deadline for paying the 8,000 pounds was three weeks, and there was not enough time to collect donations.

God's providence guided us to request loans from the people, to be paid back later from the church's revenues. We actually announced a statement to the people. After this announcement, the people came with a high spirit and covered this price with either loans or donations. Three days before the deadline, the entire amount was submitted to the Tax Authority. The Tax Authority then issued us a letter stating that the auction had been settled on us.

The minutes of the auction settlement were then approved by the Real Estate Registration Office, and thus God's will was glorified by the addition of this area, which was 3,544.94 square meters, to the previously purchased area of 1,286.43 square meters. Thus, the total area of the church's land became 4,831.37 square meters. Praise be to God first and last.



My Service at St. Mark's Cathedral (1962-1968)

As soon as we rejoiced in our victory in the deal for the new land and while we were proceeding with the responsibility of paying back the loans provided by the faithful people, I was delegated to serve at St. Mark's Cathedral based on a decision by the late Pope Cyril VI. I spent six years serving at St. Mark's Cathedral. Finally, I returned to my church during the Apostles' Fast in 1968.

Return to the Church and Building the Upper Floor of the Church

Upon my return to the church, I found that the ground floor building was still as it was, with nothing above it. We began building the upper floor after confirming all the structural guarantees that would ensure the safety of the work. This was confirmed by the document signed by the great engineers: George Wanees Saad al-A'sar, Sami Tawfik Gabriel, and William Riad. All three of them are great engineers known in Alexandria. For further confirmation, a detailed report from Professor Dr. Milad Hanna, the head of the Structural Engineering Department at Ain Shams University, was added to this document. These papers are kept in the special file in the church's archive.



Engineer George Wanees al-A'sar

Here, we mention with all loyalty and appreciation the great effort made by the distinguished engineer George Wanees Saad al-A'sar, my nephew, in both the design and implementation, until this church appeared as beautiful and wonderful as it is.

Completion of the Work

Then, one of the contracting engineers was entrusted with the expansion, and the work proceeded with quiet determination and skilled craftsmanship. We finished this upper floor at the end of 1977. This strenuous journey could have ended sixteen years earlier if the internal opposition had stopped troubling us with invented difficulties.



Beginning of Prayer

On the night of January 1, 1978, based on a delegation from His Holiness Pope Shenouda, the bishops His Grace Anba Hadra, the Bishop of Aswan, His Grace Anba Wissa, the Bishop of Al-Balyana, and His Grace Anba Barsoum, the General Bishop, attended. In a solemn spiritual procession filled with dignity and joy, the bishops carried the holy altar board and the holy vessels from the ground floor to the upper floor, accompanied by the priests and deacons singing the hymn "Evlogimenos." The people on both sides expressed their joy in their own special way. We prayed the vespers, and then appropriate speeches were delivered. On the morning of Sunday, January 1, 1978, we prayed the divine liturgy. Praise be to God.



Selections on the Back Cover

The cover reproduces excerpts from the memoir. Parts of the first excerpt are covered by the portrait; the full passage appears on scan pages 9–10.

I remember this beautiful period of my life, from the ages of eighteen to thirty-eight, with bitterness. How could the flower of my youth be wasted in a lifeless job? ... I remember stopping on the stairs once as I was going up to work: “What is the value of this job, Lord, when my heart is absent from it?”

...

Our father the metropolitan asked me: “Is your father living?” I said yes. “Is your mother living?” I said, “May God have mercy on her.” “Did your father marry after your mother’s death?” I said, “My father is an old man and did not get married.” Then he said firmly: “Go, get your father’s blessing. It is better than monasticism.”

On the blessed Saturday evening of March 31, 1956, he approached with a radiant face and a joyful smile. He entered the church, prayer began, and the altar, vessels, and some icons were consecrated. At that moment I lost awareness of myself, even of my own existence. It was as though the whole world had gathered in that place and my entire life had been contained in that moment. I did not know how to speak or act.

On the night of January 1, 1978 ... in a solemn spiritual procession filled with dignity and joy, the bishops carried the holy altar board and the sacred vessels from the ground floor to the upper floor ... and the people on either side expressed their joy, each in their own way.

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