



Tamav Irene

The life and the legacy of Tamav Irene

Birth

A little bit before the 1940s *Fawzia* was born to pious parents, *Yassa* and *Genevieve*, who were leading a deep spiritual life and were adorned with many virtues especially charity.

When *Genevieve* was in labour, she suffered greatly. *Matta*, her father, quickly headed to *St. George's* church in *Tahta* to pray and ask for the intercession of *St. George*. Meanwhile, *Genevieve* prayed tearfully asking for the intercession of the *Virgin Mary*. Suddenly, amid her pains, the room was filled with a bright heavenly light and the *Mother of God* appeared with *St. George*. *St. George* moved forward and lightly tapped three times on *Genevieve's* back. Immediately, *Genevieve* gave birth to the beautiful child *Fawzia*. Carrying the newly born on her arms, the *Virgin* made the sign of the cross and addressed her mother saying:

“She is not yours; she is ours; but take good care of her and bring her up properly”

Those words made her parents think that she will not live for long so they showered her with love and tenderness all the time and hardly ever refused anything she asked for.

Anba Shenouda (St. Shenoute)



Later, when *Fawzia* was being baptized by *Bishop Boutros of Akhmim and Sohag* at the monastery of *Abba Shenoute the Archimandrite*, *Bishop Boutros* saw the patron saint of the monastery, *St. Shenoute*, blessing the child as he was taking her out of the baptismal font. Again, the family saw the *Divine Grace* that surrounded their eldest daughter.

Eight to twelve months later, during a visit to *Genevieve's* parents and while they were spending some time on the roof, *Genevieve* carried her daughter who was persistently trying to free herself and crawl on the floor. *Genevieve* resisted; she was used to giving *Fawzia* a bath twice per day and if the little girl gets herself dirty this means an

extra bath. But grandmother said: “*Why don't you leave her to play on the floor? There is no harm in an extra bath!*”

All of a sudden, while *Fawzia* was playing on the ground, she screamed and her body turned as cold as ice and she lost consciousness. Her grandfather hurried to find a doctor; he thought that she might have been dead.

Meanwhile, *Genevieve* saw a scorpion on the floor and realized what had happened and cried out to *St. Shenoute* for help. Immediately, she saw the saint flying towards *Fawzia*, taking her on his arms; he blew on her face and made the sign of the cross on her forehead and addressed *Genevieve* saying:

“*Do not be afraid; she is ours!*”

Immediately the child regained consciousness and again life ran through her veins. That day was regarded as her new birthday.

“*She is ours.*” the words echoed in her parent's minds; she will not live for long, heaven will take her back! Since that day the family vowed to visit annually the monastery of *Abba Shenoute* carrying many gifts with them. *Abba Shenoute* accompanied *Fawzia* until she joined the convent and all throughout her monastic life.

Later *Genevieve* and *Yassa* gave birth to four girls and two boys. They all got married except one girl who joined the convent of *St. Philopater Mercurius* and became a nun too.

From the cradle, *Genevieve* nurtured her daughter with *the true orthodox faith* and *the practices of piety*. *Fawzia*, later *Tamav Irene*, recollects :

“My mother taught me how to pray and prostrate myself (*matania*). I used to sneak into her room and watch her saying her midnight prayers and all the hourly prayers from the *Agpeya* each in its due hour.

Matania : lying on the front with face looking down as an act of worship.

Agpeya : The book of daily prayers.. The sequence of prayers runs as follows :

Vespers (at sunset)
Compline (before going to sleep)
Midnight
Matins (at dawn)
First hour (around 7 p.m.)
Third hour (around 9 a.m.)
Sixth hour (at noon)
Ninth hour (3 p.m.)

The first time I saw her prostrating herself I cried and screamed at her as she stood up and kneeled down. She stopped praying and hugged me; patting my shoulder, she said: ‘I am kneeling down to *Jesus, our Father and Lord.*’ I asked her why are you doing so? She said: ‘*Do the same as what I am doing*’ I started to prostrate myself like her.

Later, I joined her at the times of prayer that were many a time accompanied with tears streaming over her cheeks. From my early childhood, I learned to pray with a contrite heart and pouring my soul in *matanias* is carved deep inside me.

On a cold night in *Kiahk* (fourth month in the Coptic calendar, roughly December 10th until January 7th), I saw my mother looking out through the window that faced the church of *St. George in Gerga*. I asked her : ‘*Why are you standing there?*’ She helped me stand on a chair next to her and said: “*Do you hear the prayers?*” I told her : ‘*Yes, I do.*’ We stood there and heard a *magnificent mass* from the very beginning and until the very end. Sometimes we could hear those consoling masses more than once per night.

One day, my mother asked the priest of the church, why he held masses late at night, but his answer was that he never did. When my mother confirmed that she heard prayers at night, he told her: ‘*You are lucky. Those are the Sowah who are holding masses. God has given you the privilege of hearing them.*’ ”

Sowah : Anchorites and ascetics who have exalted spiritually and who have been endowed with levitation and movement to distant places. They defy time and location. They usually meet together and hold masses in churches at night when they are empty.

The Virgin

Tamav Irene relates to us her childhood experiences and how intimate was her mother's relation with the *Virgin*. She says: "One day, when I was very young, boiling water was spilled over my legs and they were all covered with blisters. Despite using various ointments, they never healed. My mother prayed and asked for the intercession of the *Virgin Mary*. Suddenly I felt a light gentle breeze of air passing over my legs and all the burns and blisters disappeared; I was totally healed."

Tamav Irene recalls another miracle of healing:

"My mother suffered from frequent pain in her stomach. The physicians of the small town of *Gerga* were unable to help. She travelled to *Cairo* and again the physicians failed to cure her. She returned to *Gerga* still suffering from pain. At that time she had four children, each only one year older than the other.

Our house in *Gerga* was located next to the *Church of the Virgin Mary* and many passers by were either coming or going to the church. One Sunday morning, I was standing next to my mother in the balcony while she suffered from great pain. Watching the passers by on their way to and from the church, she felt sorry for herself; she was unable to attend mass or receive communion. I cried when I saw her face flooded with tears. She patted on my shoulder consolingly. I told her: '*Mother, please do not cry, Our Lady, the Virgin Mary, will heal you*' That night, she saw in a vision the *Virgin Mary* dressed in a heavenly blue gown that was adorned with bright stars.



She asked my mother: 'Why are you crying?' My mother replied: 'My children are still young and if I die I don't know who will look after them and bring them up in the true Christian faith. Please, My Lady, grant me life until my eldest daughter becomes old enough to look after her brothers and sisters?'

The Mother of the Light calmed her down saying: 'Come with me, I will take you to a good physician' My mother replied: 'I have to ask my husband for permission first.'

The *Virgin* replied: 'Would he object if you told him that you are going with me?' My mother replied: 'Of course not; may the peace of the Lord reside in you, Lady'

Mother of the Light: The Coptic orthodox church of Egypt calls the Virgin 'The Mother of the Light' i.e. Mother of Jesus who is the Light of the world.

My mother left with the *Virgin* in a carriage that was waiting for them. They passed through fields and beautiful green gardens until they reached a huge building. In its

hall, there was a room that had a bed and a doctor was present. The Virgin addressed the doctor saying: *'Come George, examine her.'*

He replied: *'But, my Lady, you know that her case is over.'* The *Virgin* replied: *'She has asked for my intercession and I have asked my Beloved Son for her sake and He has granted her to live for more. Will we leave her ill?'*

St George



As my mother lay on the bed, the *Virgin* asked *St. George* to put his hand on her abdomen. He replied: *'Your hand first, my Lady.'* The *Virgin* placed her hand on the spot of pain and the great martyr *St. George* put his hand after she did. They pressed bit by bit on the abdomen and the chest until what looked like a ball of rotten meat came out of her mouth. They put it in cotton wool and placed it in my mother's hands. *'This is the cause of your illness.'* they said and then took her back home.

As soon as she arrived, she woke us all up, and related to us what had happened with her. She also showed us the ball of meat in the cotton wool. Immediately, our father asked us to join him in a hymn of praise to the *Virgin* (Theotekia) and a hymn of praise to *St. George* the great martyr (Doxology).

Genevieve lived for many years and gave birth to other children. She lived as long as she has requested; until her eldest daughter, *Fawzia*, later *Tamav Irene*, grew up and joined the convent.

All of the children saw in their parents a living example of love and prayer and witnessed their strong relationship with saints.

Fawzia's parents and grandparents were very generous to the poor. Added to the money and goods that they gave them, when *Genevieve* cooked for her family she always made enough to keep a share for the poor. When her daughters returned back from *'The Catholic Nuns School of Gerga'*, she used to send them with the cooked food to the poor families' homes and give each according to his needs. This done, the family gathers around lunch in joy and gratitude to the Lord.

One day, one of her daughters asked: *"Mother, isn't the money we give them enough? Why do you exhaust yourself in cooking too?"* *Genevieve* answered: *"With money, they will buy their basic needs but they will never buy or cook this kind of food."*

Genevieve made sure that this be done in secrecy; either at two p.m. when it is very sunny or in the evening when the streets of *Gerga* have very few passers-by. If any of her children excused himself whether because it was very hot or very dark, *Genevieve* used to tell them that the *Lord Jesus* protects from any danger all those who do good .

Genevieve so loved the poor and the acts of mercy that good has never parted her home. Anybody who knocked at her door was given bread and food. One day, her husband noticed that she has been distributing bread and food from morning until the evening; assuming that there is no bread left, he told her: “*You’d better bring more yeast and bake*”. *Genevieve* answered in faith: “*We will bake only on the scheduled day every week.*”

St Michael

Tamav Irene tells us about how her family was strongly attached to *St. Michael the Archangel*. *Genevieve* hung his icon in the prayer room beneath which there was an oil lamp that was always lit. She feasted on his commemoration day, every *12th day of each Coptic month*, by making bread and pastry. In the evening she used to put the bread before the icon and next day she would find a cross made by *St. Michael* on one of the loaves. She took this loaf and put it in the flour to become a blessing for the store rooms all the year round. The bread covered all their needs and the needs of the families they helped.

Regarding *the acts of mercy*, a big merchant in *Cairo* who knew *Yassa, Tamav Irene’s* father, tells us about how he is greatly indebted to him for his now very successful career. *Yassa* taught him the tools of the trade and was very generous with him. He supported him until his business flourished and until he became a very well known merchant. He relates to us about *Yassa’s* Christian attitude towards all his employees and all those who came in contact with him. He says:

“*Yassa* was very well off and was the owner of a very successful business in trade. I was one of his employees. He was accustomed to choose the day on which he made most profit each month and on that day he would ask all his employees, who were many, to pass by his office one by one before leaving. He would put all of the income of the day in a drawer in his desk and whenever an employee came in, he would open the drawer a little bit and grab from it some money without counting and give it to him.

This sum was in addition to our monthly salaries. Each handful was different from the other but in it each of us found what fulfilled his needs. In other words, the employee who had many children the handful fulfills his needs and the employee who needs less finds enough for his needs. Everybody was happy and content with what *God* has sent him as a blessing.”

Genevieve raised her daughters in an atmosphere of love for helping others. As an example, their neighbour, a paralysed lady living with her brother and his wife, was often left alone when they travelled. *Genevieve* made sure that she is taken care of by her daughters. They helped her eat, clean her room and fulfilled all her needs.

Moreover, *Genevieve* also sent with her daughters a lot of food and sweets to the orphanages that were very poor and had no facilities at that time. She encouraged them to help the orphans cleanup their place and she asked them to take their measures to sew dresses for them. *Fawzia* spent her day praying with them and reading *the Bible*.

Practicing these virtues at an early age was the seed that the heavenly father provided for the young heart opening up to new spiritual depths.

Mrs. Faika Yassa, the sister of Tamav Irene

Mrs. Faika Yassa, the sister of *Fawzia*, tells us about the holiness and spirituality that she has witnessed.

She says: “From her early childhood, *Fawzia* was a faithful and obedient child. She loved *God* from the bottom of her heart and prayed, fasted, practiced confession, received Holy Communion and attended Sunday School regularly. She strictly followed the *Coptic Orthodox faith* that she cherished and was always anxious to keep pure.

I recall, once there was a lady, whose husband worked in the town hospital, who followed the protestant sect of the ‘*Salvation of Souls*’ though all her family were orthodox and her aunts from her father’s side were nuns in one of the orthodox convents in *Cairo*. This lady held religious meetings at her home attracting the simple-minded to her wrong beliefs. Not only this but she also managed to hold weekly meetings in the *Orthodox church of St. George* with the consent of its priest against the contribution of money. Unfortunately, this attracted many followers of the orthodox faith who were eager to hear the word of *God*.

One day, *Fawzia* was invited to attend one of those meetings that have become very popular. *Fawzia* attended the meeting until its end when she heard the lady asking the attendees to raise their hand if they have been redeemed. *Fawzia* was upset to hear those words and started befriending the girls who attended those meetings and invited them to her home to tell them about the ‘*true faith*’ and warn them from the teachings of that lady. She spoke to them about redemption, the importance of constant vigilance and repentance and the importance of confession. She related to them the story of *St. Macarius* whom the devil fought until the last moment in his life. As his spirit was leaving his body, the devil said: “*You have achieved salvation, Macarius*”. *St. Macarius* kept answering: “*Not yet*” until he reached heaven and then said: “*Only now I have achieved salvation*”.

With *God’s* grace and with *Fawzia’s* never wavering faith she attracted many and the number of attendees of this meeting dwindled. The lady found out that *Fawzia*, who wanted to become a nun, was behind it all. She wondered and underestimated

the faith of the young girl. In the next meeting, the lady, full of anger towards *Fawzia*, insulted the great martyr *St. George* by saying that he is just like anybody else and that there is no such thing as saints or martyrs. Moreover, she insulted nuns and mocked at them in an inappropriate manner. *Fawzia* stood up and criticized her, word by word, regarding what she said about *St. George*, *the prince of martyrs*, and about the angelic life of nuns.

The lady was struck with an epileptic fit and fell on the floor. *Fawzia* addressed the attendees saying: “*Look! She is possessed by an evil spirit. Is it right to follow the devil?*” The responsible for the *Sunday School* classes was one of the attendees, he admired her and later visited her family and encouraged her. But on the contrary, the priest blamed her. Defending the ‘*true faith*’, she boldly answered the priest: “*Father, the martyr will be angry if that lady comes into this church again.*” Later she visited *Father Hanna Salama*, a pious priest, and spoke with him. He comforted her and promised to do something about this matter.

On the same day, at two after midnight, the church was *wondrously lit* and the neighbours heard clatter inside. They rushed in to find *St. George* circling around saying: “*This lady must not be allowed to come into this church again*”. Since that day *Fawzia* become more special to *Father Hanna Salama*; he supplied her with spiritual books of which I remember ‘*The Homilies of St. Jacob of Serug*’ and whenever he held private masses, he asked her to attend.

The abundant grace of *God* has accompanied *Fawzia* since she was born and it was natural that *God* supports His chosen one. He surrounded her and her family with care and enveloped her spiritually. This spirituality lasted with her all life long.

In August, during the two week *fast of the Virgin*, our sister abstained from food until the evening and broke her fasting with some bread and salt. She refused to eat all kinds of fruits. Once our mother offered her a fruit but she refused and excused herself by saying that it has a bad smell. She strictly fasted during the regular periods of fasting of the church and lead a very ascetic life.

With her friends she spent most of the time at the *Virgin’s church in Gerga*. Not only on Sundays and Fridays when masses were held but also on most of the days of fasting; they spent their time in holy meditation and fervent prayers then cleaned the church and finally ate some plain food and returned home.

Fawzia has committed herself to clean the church regularly because on the first time she did so with her friends, they received a consolation from heaven. This was on the *twenty first day of the Coptic month* on which the church regularly commemorates the *Virgin Mary*. The idea of cleaning the church triggered when she saw that the priest was old and was unable to take proper care of the church. Dust covered all the benches and accumulated heavily everywhere; moreover, the church was full of spiders. After a hard day’s work with the help of her friends they managed to clean

the church thoroughly and as they were about to leave, the *Virgin Mary* appeared to them with a smile on her face and said: *“I am grateful to you for cleaning the church of my God and Son and which is dedicated to my name”* She then blessed them and disappeared.

Since then, *Fawzia* regularly and happily cleaned the church on Saturdays. As her younger sisters, we accompanied her and spent the whole day in cleaning and singing praises. We noticed how she efficiently distributed the responsibilities to each of us. Managing things was one of the gifts bestowed upon her by *God*.

Also, *God* has granted her when she was very young the gift of consoling those who are older than her. I remember a neighbour who had lost her son and whom nobody was able to console; *Fawzia* visited her regularly and read for her verses from *the Bible* until she was comforted.

Moreover, she was gifted too with *spiritual transparency* through which she saw forthcoming events. One day, she said: *“Let’s finish what is in our hands quickly because our neighbour will send her granddaughter to ask us to help her”*. After half an hour exactly our neighbour’s granddaughter was knocking at our door and said: *“Please come, my grandmother needs you.”* We were astonished and asked how she has known this beforehand; she humbly answered: *“It was the devil who gave me this idea to fill me with pride and thus fall spiritually”*.

And now back to memories that were recorded by *Tamav Irene* herself about her mother’s strong faith in *St. George*:

St George



‘My mother had a heavy gold necklace which she used to wear on occasions only and after the occasion, she used to take it off and put it back in its box. Once, being busy with one of my brothers, she temporarily put the necklace in a pillow case until she finds the time to put it back in its box. Later, the maid came and as usual put the pillows in the balcony to expose them to the sun for some time. The necklace fell unnoticed to the street. At that time there were construction works in a neighbouring building. Finding that the necklace is not in its place, my mother realized that one of the workers in the neighbouring building has taken it. So, my mother called

on *St. George* to bring it back.

When my father returned from work, he noticed that she was disturbed though she tried to hide it. And when he knew that the necklace was lost, he asked her not to be concerned about this incident. She told him that she has faith in *St. George* whom

she has asked to bring it back. My father's response was: "Does St. George have time for such things ... the necklace is lost and the one who has taken it might have been in need of money." As soon as those words were uttered, they smelt a strong scent of incense and *St. George* appeared and placed the necklace in the room before them.

Anba Ebraam



Tamav Irene tells us about another miracle that has been performed through the intercession of *St. Ebraam* (Anba Ebraam (1829-1914), a saint who was the *Bishop of El Fayoum* in the late nineteenth century and who is known as the friend of the poor) :

In our house we had a big picture of *Anba Ebraam* who is held in high esteem by our family. It was placed on a table and has not yet been hung on the wall. My mother often received some of her friends from church and a few neighbours too. Our town was small and all the families knew each other and my mother was always careful to avoid gossip.

One day, on a visit to my mother, some of the ladies started gossiping about one of the families. My mother was careful not to hurt anybody's feelings so she indirectly tried to change the subject but she failed. Finally, she looked at the picture of *Anba Ebraam* and inside her asked for his intervention. Immediately, *three knocks* on the table were heard but when the ladies looked around there was no one. The gossiping started again but this time the saint was seen emerging of his picture and with his hand banged on the table. Unable to interpret the meaning of this event, my mother told the ladies that the message is 'instead of gossip, we should pray for those people'.

Tamav Irene proceeds to tell us about her grandfather *Matta El Faizy* and how much he loved the church:

'My grandfather used to gather all the members of the family every evening to say the prayers of *Vespers* (sunset) and *Compline* (before going to sleep) followed by reflections on some verses and a story or two after which we went to sleep.

Being an *archdeacon*, my grandfather spent a lot of time at church during *the holy fast of Lent*. And even at the age of seventy, leaning on a staff, he spent most of his time standing up in prayer. Every now and then he would rest on a bench in the churchyard and many-a-time he was visited by a small child who had a small ring in one of his ears. The child would pull him from his garments and say : "*Stand up Grandpa to pray ... stand up Grandpa to pray*" This child regularly visited Grandpa for



two years. One day, Grandpa was very tired and this small child came to wake him up. Grandpa said : “*I must catch this child and find out whose son he is!*” Grandpa ran after the child who had already ran into the church then into the alter. Grandpa waited for him to come out but he never showed up. So Grandpa asked the priest about the child and was told that it must have been the martyr saint *Kyriakos* who is known as *Abou Halka* (the one with a ring).

Archdeacon : Title given to a person who is in charge of vergers.

Vergers : Those who are responsible for doing some simple duties during church services.

When Grandpa heard this, he sat down and cried saying : “*Forgive me God’s martyr.*” He prayed and fasted for three days and on the fourth day the child showed up and told him : “*Stand up to pray, Grandpa.*” To which he replied : “*Forgive me God’s martyr! I ran after you!*” The child said : “*I forgive you, Grandpa.*” The child appeared to him daily until the day of his decease and a strong relationship developed between Grandpa and the child martyr. Grandpa used to ask him to pray for the sick before **God**. The next day he would give him an answer whether this person will be cured or he will depart and that after all this is **God’s** will.

Saint and martyr Kyriacos :

St. Eulita was born in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) at the end of the third century. As the daughter of nobility, she grew up to be a rich woman. She was also a good Christian, who spent her time in prayer and helping the poor. Eulita was married at a young age, and she bore her husband a son whom they called Kyriacos. However, shortly after his birth, tragedy struck the family when Eulita’s husband suddenly died.

When Kyriacos was about three years old, Emperor Diocletian began his persecutions against the Christians. Worried about her son, Eulita took Kyriacos, along with two of her maids, and fled to Seleucia in Syria. However, the situation there was no better than where they had come from, so they left and travelled to Tarsus. The governor of Tarsus, Alexandros, was also very cruel and blood-thirsty, and was known for killing Christians with his bare hands.

Eulita and her companions lived as strangers among the people of Tarsus, and were soon arrested and brought before Alexandros. Eulita realized that it was an invitation from God to martyrdom, since she could not escape persecution. She decided in her heart to remain faithful, and to endure all kinds of pain until the end. Her only concern was the well-being of her son, Kyriacos.

When Eulita was presented to Governor Alexandros, he asked her, "What is your name, beautiful woman?" Eulita answered, "I am a Christian." Showing irritation, he said, "So you follow Jesus whom the Jews crucified!" Her reply was, "I call upon His holy name, though I am not worthy." The Governor then asked, "Do you know that our emperor ordered the extermination of all Christians?" Eulita answered, "Yes, I know." Finally, Alexandros shouted at her saying, "Aren't you scared of death? Don't you want to save your beauty?," To which Eulita replied, "Governor, you must know by now that all Christians are willing to die for their Lord the Christ. Your cruel tactics and severe abuse will only strengthen their faith."

Alexandros became even more angry, telling his men, "Bring me that child from the Christian woman and throw her on the ground, and whip her with lashes made of cow's nerves. She must learn how to answer me properly." The soldiers grabbed Kyriacos from the arms of his mother and gave him to Alexandros. Eulita was then thrown to the ground, and they started whipping her.

The governor looked at Eulita, who was now covered with blood, and asked, "Why don't you come back to your senses and save your life, and your son's too? For if you agree to sacrifice to the idols, I promise to release both of you." Eulita replied, "You surprise me with such an offer, which even a child like my son would not accept." Alexandros then said, "In this case, let us ask the child." He looked at Kyriacos and said, "Son, would you agree to worship the idols?" However, to everyone's surprise, Kyriacos answered, "Your idols are made of stone and wood. My real God is Jesus Christ." When Eulita heard her son's words, she was filled with courage, and shouted, "I am a Christian; I worship the real God Jesus Christ who created heaven and earth." Kyriacos then started yelling, "I am a Christian, I am a Christian."

The soldiers started beating Eulita again, but she endured the pain with joy, giving her son a practical example on how to remain faithful until the end. In the meantime, Alexandros was trying to attract the child's attention by playing with him. Kyriacos kept shouting, "I am a Christian! I am a Christian!" The governor became even more angry and threw Kyriacos with all his power to the ground. Kyriacos hit his head against one of the concrete steps, and died instantly, to receive the crown of martyrdom. He was only three years old then.

When Eulita saw her son fall dead in front of her, she sighed with relief, since she was sure that he went to Jesus in Paradise, and that she did not have to worry about his future. She lifted up her eyes to heaven and prayed, “Thank you my Lord because you considered Kyriacos worthy of receiving this glorious crown. I ask you now my Saviour to take me also, for this is my ultimate desire to be with my son in the Heavenly Kingdom, where we can enjoy Your presence with us for eternity.”

Eulita’s words angered the Roman governor, and he ordered that she be beheaded. He also ordered that the two bodies be thrown in a garbage dump.

Eulita was executed on July 22, 305 while repeating the words, “I am a Christian. I am a Christian.” At night, her two maids took the bodies and hid them in a cave near Tarsus. When Emperor Constantine ascended the throne, he built a church in the same place where the mother and her child were martyred. Today, parts of the relics of those two saints are preserved in St. Mary’s Monastery in the valley of Nitron. There is also a historical church bearing their names in Tahta.

Tamav Irene tells us about the virtue of charity which she has witnessed in the life of her grandfather *Matta El Faizy* :

‘I used to accompany my grandfather wherever he goes. I remember my childhood days very well; they are carved in my memory ... My grandfather was a timber merchant and he also owned a hatchery. When I was very young, I used to go with my brothers and sisters to his office and at the end of the day he would call *Moussa*, the driver, to drop us back home but I always insisted to stay with him. Thus, I accompanied him wherever he went until we returned home on condition that I do not tell anyone about what he was doing and I used to promise that I will do so. Then he would ask me :

“What will you tell your grandmother if she asks you where you have been.”



And when I replied : *“I will tell her that I do not know.”*

He would say : *“No ... this means that you are lying.”*

I used to reply : *“Then what should I say, Grandpa?”*

He used to reply : *“Tell her to ask Grandpa.”*

We used to ride on a horse carriage that was loaded with vegetables and fruits. Grandpa also carried envelopes that had different sums of money inside them. When we reach a needy

house, he would get off the carriage and knock on the door and as soon as he hears the sound of the latch being lifted, he would put down what he was carrying in front of the house and leave quickly before being seen. This is how he reached out to relief the needy by himself. When we finally returned home and my grandma asked where we have been, he would tell her that he had work that had to be done.'

Tamav Irene proceeds to tell us more about the early days of her childhood which reveal that her desire to become a nun has occupied her mind ever since:

I had a *small chapel* in which there were *three* pictures: one of *Our Lord Jesus Christ*, the second of the *Virgin* and the last of *St. George*. All the three were *anointed with holy oil*. Before them was *an oil lamp that was always lit* and also *fresh flowers* that I brought daily. I longed very much to join *an orthodox convent* but I knew none so I asked the catholic nuns of my school if I could join them on condition that I take my communion and make my confessions in my orthodox church but they refused.

"We can build a cell for you on the roof,", my father suggested and jokingly added that he will be the head of the convent but I longed to lead a monastic life in a convent.

My mother's sister, *Aunt Mofida*, nicknamed *Dida*, shared with me the same longing for monastic life. She was a little bit older than me and we played together the role of nuns on the roof and we fasted for long hours and practiced asceticism in quest for the angelic life of nuns. We were eager to grow up quickly to become nuns and measured our heights daily with a piece of rope to see how much we have grown. In between us we agreed that the older joins the convent first followed by the younger.

Dida was very beautiful and the family kept pushing her to get married. Finally, they succeeded to get her engaged. Before the marriage ceremony took place, *Dida* prayed tearfully before the *Virgin's* icon saying :

"They are forcing me to get married and I want to be a nun"

Emerging from her icon, the *Virgin Mary* said :

"Tell your mother that if they do not allow you to become a nun, the Virgin will take you as a bride to the Lord Jesus Christ."

When *Dida* told her mother about the vision, she thought that it was just an excuse to escape from marriage and while *Dida* was making cookies and biscuits for the wedding ceremony, she was struck with a severe headache and immediately fell dead.

Dida was living in another town and since I received the news of her death, I have not stopped crying. I loved *Dida* and I shared with her all my aspirations. At that time I

was very young. At once, we travelled to offer our condolences to *Dida's* family and attend the funeral. After spending the night there, I woke up and saw a vision. I saw many luminous virgins in white apparel wearing diamond-like crosses and crowns on their heads. One of them was *Dida*. My heart was filled with happiness. I said :

“Dida! How come! Who are all these?”

Dida answered : *“All those are virgins. Some of them were nuns and the others wished to be nuns but were unable to become nuns so they lived a life of chastity and God equaled them to nuns. Today, we are going to visit to martyr *Saint Demiana and the forty virgins* to celebrate with them their feast. I asked for the permission of *Our Lord Jesus Christ* to visit you to console you and to tell you how happy I am and to ask you to stop crying.”*

I told *Dida* : *“Take me with you. You look so beautiful. Take me with you .”*

Dida said : *“Ask for the permission of your mother first and I am waiting for you.”*

Being always obedient to my parents, I ran quickly to my mother and said :

“Dida! Dida is downstairs with many virgins, may I go with them?”

My mother said : *“How come!? Tell her that we need you with us.”*

Back to *Dida*, I said : *“It's a pity. My mother doesn't agree. She said that they need me.”*

Dida answered : *“Do not be sad you will become a nun and you will be a mother superior and you will have many spiritual daughters, then finally you will join us.”*

I asked *Dida* : *“Tell me about you!”*

Dida said : *“We are in paradise and we are very happy. It is very beautiful and what makes it so beautiful is the presence of Our Lord Jesus Christ in it.”*

Later, I related what happened to the rest of my family. We were very happy when we found out that this day was the day of the commemoration of *Saint Demiana and the forty virgins*.

St Demiana. Near the end of the third century, there lived a Christian man named Mark. He was the governor of El-Borollos, El-Zaafaran, and Wadi al-Saysaban districts in the Northern delta of the Nile River in Egypt. Mark had an only child named Demiana; her beauty and virtuous character were legendary, and her father loved her dearly. Demiana's mother reposed in the Lord when she was a young child, and her father did his utmost to raise her a virtuous Christian.



Demiana loved to pray and read the holy books in the seclusion of her room. When she was fifteen, her father wanted her to marry one of his noble friends, however, she refused. She said she had devoted herself as a bride of Christ and intended to live in celibacy and serve the Lord. Demiana requested her father to build her an isolated house on the outskirts of the city where she could live with her friends, away from the world and its temptations.

Her father granted her wish and built her a large palace in the wilderness. Demiana transformed the palace into a Coptic orthodox convent for nuns, living the monastic, ascetic life with forty virgins. Demiana was their abbess; they spent their time fasting, doing handiwork, reading the

holy books and praying fervently to God.

At that time, Diocletian, the pagan emperor, began to torture and kill Christians who refused to worship his idols, Apollo and Artemis. When Mark was ordered to kneel before the idols and offer incense, he refused initially; however, after some persuasion, he consented to worship the idols.

When news reached Demiana that her father offered incense before the idols, she reproached him severely. “How could you deny your Saviour who shed His blood to save you? ... What you did, my father, is cowardly and shameful”, she said. Her father was moved by her words and bitterly repented.

Mark travelled immediately to Antioch to see Diocletian. He made the sign of the cross in front of the emperor, soldiers, princes and all people, and declared himself a Christian. Diocletian was furious and said, “I have tried to keep our friendship but you insult me in front of all”. He ordered Mark to reconsider but Mark refused. The emperor ordered Mark to be beheaded by the sword. The feast day of his martyrdom is commemorated on July 12th (Abib 5th in the Coptic calendar).

When Emperor Diocletian learned that it was Mark’s daughter, Demiana, who had persuaded her father to return to worshiping Jesus Christ, he ordered one of his commanders, who was a prince, to attack her palace with one hundred soldiers. Diocletian ordered him: “First, try to convince her to worship our idols by offering her riches and glory, but if she refuses then threaten her, torture her, and even behead her and her virgins to make her an example for the other Christians.”

Demiana saw the soldiers approaching, and prayed to God to strengthen their faith. She told her forty friends: “If you are willing to die for Jesus’ sake then you may stay, but if you cannot withstand the torments of the soldiers then hurry and escape now.” The forty virgins replied, “We will die with you.”

The prince relayed Diocletian's message to Demiana by saying: "I am an envoy sent by Emperor Diocletian. I command you by his orders to worship his gods so that he may grant you whatsoever you wish."

"Cursed be to the messenger and him who sent him. Are you not ashamed to call stones and wood, gods? ...There is no other God in heaven or on earth besides the one and only true God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost – the Creator, who has no beginning and no end; the omnipresent and omniscient God who will throw you in hell for eternal condemnation. As for me, I worship my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and His Good Father and the Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity – I profess Him, ... and in His name I will die and by Him I will live forever."

The prince was enraged with Demiana and ordered her to be placed in the Hinbazeen (squeezing press) until her blood poured on the ground. When they put her in prison, an angel of the Lord appeared to her, touched her body with his illumined wings, and she was healed of all her wounds. She was subjected to additional tortures, but through it all her faith sustained her. The prince issued an order for Demiana and the forty virgins to be beheaded. Their martyrdom is commemorated on January 21st (Toba 13th in the Coptic calendar). St. Demiana received three heavenly crowns: one for her virginity, the other for her endurance of torture and the third for her martyrdom. The patron saint of Demiana was Abu Seifein (St Philopater Mercurius).

I prayed and asked for the intercession of *St. Demiana*. I told her that I do not want to be a burden to my father, pray that *God* sends me a treasure with which I can build a convent that encloses between its walls those who want to lead a monastic life.

St. Philopater Mercurius



I asked *God* in all my prayers to send me that treasure and to arrange for all matters. One night, while praying tearfully I saw a luminous beautiful young man who said :

"Why are you crying? What belongs to you in all this house except those two pictures! Go to my convent."

I asked him : *"Who are you?"*

He answered : *"I am a martyr and my name is Abu Seifein"* (literally holder of two swords) and

then he placed the two icons between my arms and disappeared.

To say the truth, I have never heard of or read about a martyr called *Abu Seifein*. Next day, I paid a visit to *Father Boutros (Peter)* the pastor of the church of the *Virgin* and

told him about what I have seen and asked him about the martyr. He opened the *Synaxarium* (a book that has a compilation of hagiographies of Saints and Martyrs, along with some Church-related events, arranged in the order of their anniversaries) and let me read the story of the life and martyrdom of *Abu Seifein* on the *25th day of Hatour* (December 4th). It was the first time I read this.

Next day, while I was saying my prayers asking for *God's* assistance, I asked the martyr to show me how to join his convent. Again, I saw him before me and he repeated exactly the same words of yesterday.

I informed *Father Boutros* again about this vision. I also told him that I am afraid of conceit due to the many visions I have seen. He answered : *"Be patient, he will do something."*

In spiritual life they call this a right strike in the sense that many consecutive heavenly visions might lead to self-conceit and thus pave the way for the devil to arrange for a quick fall in the spiritual life and stray away from God. A left strike is the opposite. It is a series of consecutive falls in spiritual life that might lead to desperation in the relationship with God and thus cause us to stray away too. Both lead to the same thing but in different ways. The devil uses anything, whether good or bad, to achieve his means.

What *Father Boutros* expected happened on the third night. I saw the martyr in an officer's uniform and he said :

"I want you in my convent in Cairo."

Astonished, I said : *"A convent in Cairo!"*

He answered : *"I will take you with me to see the convent. A few of the nuns will be receiving some of their relatives and one or two will see you and ask you whose relative you are, do not give an answer, just smile."*

I asked the martyr to make *the sign of the cross*. He made the sign of the cross and said : *"Let's go. Do not be afraid!"*

When we see visions, we always ask whom we see to make the sign of the cross first to be sure that the vision is from God's side and not a false apparition of the devil pretending to be a saint or angel. We also make the sign of the cross ourselves as the devil cannot stand the sign of the cross.

Then, I found myself on horseback and in a few seconds we were on the second floor of the convent. There I met two nuns who asked me: *"Beauty, whose relative are you?"* and as directed by the martyr, I remained silent and smiled. The martyr was present but the nuns could not see him.

Then he said : *“Have you seen my convent?”*

I answered : *“Yes, but how do I come here?”*

He said : *“My God will arrange for it”*

After this I saw the railroad and the nearby Hermel Hospital and he quickly dropped me home at *Gerga*.

By *God’s* providence, *Omena Maria*, a nun from the convent of *Abu Seifein* in *Cairo*, came for a visit to *Gerga* to see her sister who lived in a small village called *El Sheikh Allam* on the east bank of the *Nile*. *Gerga*, where we used to live, lied on the west bank.

Omena (literally mother in Arabic) or Tamav (literally mother in Coptic) precede the names of nuns. Tradition has it that only the mother superior’s name is preceded by Tamav and all the rest of the nuns by Omena just for the sake of distinction.

Omena Maria’s visit was during *the fast of Jonah* and she used to attend mass in *Gerga* in the nearby *Archangel’s church*. A friend of mine got to know her and told me that she has met a nun from the convent of *Abu Seifein in Cairo* and I asked her to put me in contact with her. So we met and I invited her to spend the three days of *the fast of Jonah* at our place. We spent a lot of time together in my room and I told her that I would like to become a nun and I asked her to pray for me.

On the last day of *the feast of Jonah*, my father met *Omena Maria* and he spoke with her for a while. She told him about how things run in the convent. What he heard from her made him more worried and very sad too. Now he was more determined than ever not to allow me to join the convent.

Later, *Omena Maria* had to go to hospital to undergo an operation and I visited her several times. She promised me to ask *Tamav Kiria Wassef*, the mother superior, to correspond with me and I gave her the address of one of my friends.

Tamav Kiria Wassef was born in Tahta, a town in the province of Suhag. She joined the convent in 1903 and was consecrated as a nun in the same year by Father Boulos El Baramossy and later was ordained as mother superior in 1928. She departed on September 24th 1962. Tamav Irene succeeded her as mother superior.

Back to the convent, *Omena Maria* spoke with the mother superior and I received letters from her at the address agreed upon but one day, by mistake, the letter arrived at our address and my father received it. It said: *“Take the train and get off at Giza station (a railway station in Cairo) and you will find me waiting for you”*.

When my father read this, he smiled and looked at me and said : *“Is it right to do this? Is it right to break the heart of your parents? What will people say about us? Let us be patient and let us pray and fast to find out God’s will. I will allow you to join the convent and I will drop you there by myself. You must go in a decent way and not by running away.”*



When my parents saw that I was determined to become a nun, they resorted to fasting and prayer and dedicated a period of fifteen days preceding the fast of the nativity for this intention. Daily masses were held in the afternoon. They usually ended at 3:00 p.m. My mother was unable to attend the last mass so on that day she prayed in her room asking for **God’s** guidance to reveal what is best for my future.

While praying she saw the following vision:

A bright light lit the whole room and she saw angels laying something like a foundation. She asked them: *“What are you doing?”* They answered : *“We are building a foundation for the Queen, the Mother of the King, who will be here soon.”*

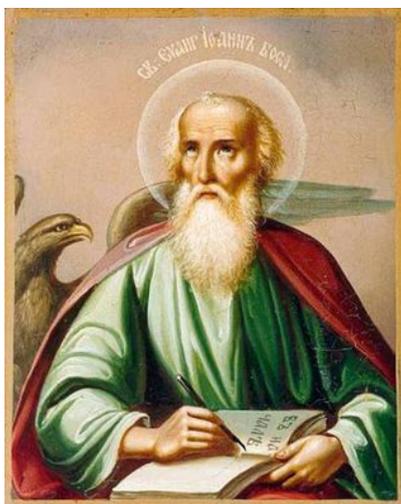
Finally, they placed a fascinating chair adorned with gold and jewels on the foundation and amid a host of angels, **the Virgin** arrived and sat on it. With profound reverence my mother kneeled before her and said: *“Peace be upon you, O Mother of the Light.”* Then the Virgin said: *“Have you forgotten what I told you about your eldest daughter when you were in labour? She is ours and I have engaged her to my Son. Do not be afraid, let her join the convent and she will be under God’s protection or else we will take her back right now.”* My mother replied: *“Let it be as you say. I will convince her father.”*

As soon as my father returned home after church, my mother informed him about the vision she had seen, but my father said: *“Let’s build for her a cell on the roof, she must not go to the convent”*. The prevailing idea at that time was that those who joined the convent are either handicapped or blind or ... etc.

My confessor, who was a saint, visited us at that time and was able to convince my father that becoming a nun at home was a futile idea. With his wisdom he told my father: *“Let her join the convent. In a week’s time she will come back with her own free will. Your daughter is spoilt and when she starts to suffer from the hardships of the life in the convent, she will call you and ask you to bring her back”*. My father agreed as he knew that at that time life in a convent was very rough.

Fawzia's fervent prayers never ceased. She asked for the help of the saints and devoured the books of their lives and words. She sought their assistance and with their help she was able to join the convent.

St. John Chrysostom



For example, she told us what had happened between her and *St. John Chrysostom (the Golden-mouthed)*:

One night while I was reading a book about the life of *St. John Chrysostom* on the day of his commemoration, I saw that there were some unclear matters. I saw him in a vision; he was holding a cross in one hand and a golden bible in the other. He introduced himself to me and I asked for his intercession to facilitate my way to monastic life. In another vision he said: *"It is all over now, I have been with your father and mother and matters have calmed down"*

I went immediately to my parent's room who met me with a smile and said: *"It is finished, we have agreed to let you join the convent"*.

I said: *"I know who persuaded you"* and they confirmed that they have seen *St. John Chrysostom*.

Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, was born at Antioch in about the year 347 into the family of a military commander. His father, Secundus, died soon after the birth of his son. His mother, Anthusa, widowed at twenty years of age, did not seek to remarry but rather devoted all her efforts to the raising of her son in Christian piety. The youth studied under the finest philosophers and rhetoricians. But, scorning the vain disciplines of pagan knowledge, the future hierarch turned himself to the profound study of Holy Scripture and prayerful contemplation. St Meletius, Bishop of Antioch, loved John like a son, guided him in the faith, and in the year 367 baptized him.

When St Meletius had been sent into exile by the emperor Valens in the year 372, John and Theodore (afterwards Bishop of Mopsuestia) studied under the experienced instructors of ascetic life, the presbyters Flavian and Diodorus of Tarsus. When John's mother died, he embraced monasticism, which he called the "true philosophy." Soon John and his friend Basil were being considered as candidates for the episcopal office, and they decided to withdraw into the wilderness to avoid this. While St John avoided the episcopal rank out of humility, he secretly assisted in Basil's consecration.

The saint spent four years struggling in the wilderness, living the ascetic life under the guidance of an experienced spiritual guide. For two years, the saint lived in a cave in complete silence, but was obliged to return to Antioch to recover his health. St Meletius, the Bishop of Antioch, ordained him deacon in the year 381.

In the year 386 St John was ordained presbyter by Bishop Flavian of Antioch. St John was a splendid preacher, and his inspired words earned him the name “Golden-Mouthed” (“Chrysostom”). For twelve years the saint preached in church, usually twice a week, but sometimes daily, deeply stirring the hearts of his listeners.

The fame of the holy preacher grew, and in the year 397 with the death of Archbishop Nectarius of Constantinople, successor to St Gregory the Theologian, St John Chrysostom was summoned from Antioch, and elected to the See of Constantinople. At the capital, the holy archpastor was not able to preach as often as he had at Antioch.

Many matters awaited the saint’s attention, and he began with the most important — the spiritual perfection of the priesthood. He himself was the best example of this. The financial means apportioned for the archbishop were channelled by the saint into the upkeep of several hospices for the sick and two hostels for pilgrims. He fasted strictly and ate very little food, and usually refused invitations to dine because of his delicate stomach.

The saint’s zeal in spreading the Christian faith extended not only to the inhabitants of Constantinople, but also to Thrace to include Slavs and Goths, and to Asia Minor and the Pontine region. He established a bishop for the Bosphorus Church in the Crimea. St John sent off zealous missionaries to Phoenicia, to Persia, and to the Scythians, to convert pagans to Christ. He also wrote letters to Syria to bring back the Marcionites into the Church, and he accomplished this. Preserving the unity of the Church, the saint would not permit a powerful Gothic military commander, who wanted the emperor to reward his bravery in battle, to open an Arian church at Constantinople.

The saintly hierarch denounced the dissolute morals of people in the capital, especially at the imperial court, irrespective of person. When the empress Eudoxia connived to confiscate the last properties of the widow and children of a disgraced dignitary, the saint rose to their defence. The arrogant empress would not relent, and nursed a grudge against the archpastor. Eudoxia’s hatred of the saint blazed forth anew when malefactors told her that the saint apparently had her in mind during his sermon on vain women. A court was convened composed of hierarchs who had been justly condemned by Chrysostom: Theophilus of Alexandria, Bishop Severian of Gabala, who had been banished from the capital because of improprieties, and others.

This court of judgment declared St John deposed, and that he be executed for his insult to the empress. The emperor decided on exile instead of execution. An angry crowd gathered at the church, resolved to defend their pastor. In order to avoid a riot, St John submitted to the authorities. That very night there was an earthquake at Constantinople. The terrified Eudoxia urgently requested the emperor to bring the saint back, and promptly sent a letter to the banished pastor, beseeching him to return. Once more, in the capital church, the saint praised the Lord in a short talk, "For All His Ways." The slanderers fled to Alexandria. But after only two months a new denunciation provoked the wrath of Eudoxia. In March 404, an unjust council was convened, decreeing the exile of St John. Upon his removal from the capital, a fire reduced the church of Hagia Sophia and also the Senate building to ashes. Devastating barbarian incursions soon followed, and Eudoxia died in October 404. Even pagans regarded these events as God's punishment for the unjust judgment against the saint.

In Armenia, the saint strove all the more to encourage his spiritual children. In numerous letters (245 are preserved) to bishops in Asia, Africa, Europe and particularly to his friends in Constantinople, St John consoled the suffering, guiding and giving support to his followers. In the winter of 406 St John was confined to his bed with sickness, but his enemies were not to be appeased. From the capital came orders to transfer St John to desolate Pityus in Abkhazia on the Black Sea. Worn out by sickness, the saint began his final journey under military escort, travelling for three months in the rain and frost. He never arrived at his place of exile, for his strength failed him at Comana.

At the crypt of St Basiliscus, St John was comforted by a vision of the martyr, who said, "Despair not, brother John! Tomorrow we shall be together." After receiving the Holy Mysteries, the hierarch fell asleep in the Lord on September 14, 407. His last words were, "Glory to God for all things!"

The holy relics of St John Chrysostom were solemnly transferred to Constantinople in the year 438. The disciple of St John, the venerable Isidore of Pelusium, wrote: "The house of David is grown strong, and the house of Saul enfeebled. He is victor over the storms of life, and has entered into heavenly repose."

By *God's* providence, *Omena Maria* came to *Gerga* and visited us at that time. We agreed that I go with her to the convent but on the night before we travelled, my paternal uncle *Tawfik* heard about it and was so furious. He hastily came to our house and addressed my father saying :

"How can you leave your daughter to do this? No! She must not go to the convent. I will not let her go! I will sit by the door and prevent her from leaving." and he actually

did as he said but when we were leaving he was wondrously asleep and we left peacefully. My father joined us later at the railway station and bought for us the tickets. When my uncle woke up, he headed quickly to the station but our train had already left.

Thus *the bride of Christ* began her first steps towards angelic life on *April 16th, 1953*. (*8 Bermuda 1669 according to the Coptic calendar of martyrs*) She thanked and praised *God* who helped her achieve her heart's desire and as soon as she took the first step to climb up the heavenly ladder, her fervent love for *God* was so clear and through good strife and vigilance she progressed in virtues and managed to soar up to high levels of perfection but will the devil stand still before this ardent heart that is full of true love in its flight towards heaven?

How will a girl at such a tender age be able to pursue her monastic life among the nuns and fulfil her desire for serving others?

How she prayed, praised and worshiped *God* in her private life? How was she closely related to saints especially *St. Philopater Mercurius* in whose convent she was a nun?

What about her ardent desire to win a martyr's crown in heaven? How she pursued every kind of ascetic practice and mastered self-discipline?

How she kept the vigilant eye of her soul alert? How she bore the burdens of others? How countless miracles were performed proving her sanctity?

What about the innumerable visions she saw? How she has become a living example of holy saints? How she strived for progress and constantly intensified her course of monastic life?

How people flocked in crowds to hear her recount endless miracles that has been performed? How she stirred the hearts of thousands in *Egypt* and abroad?

How humble she was despite the halo of renown which hung around her?

What about the countless miracles that are performed nowadays through her intercession from her heavenly abode?

This is what is coming next.

Finally, *Fawzia*, accompanied by *Omena Maria*, arrived in *Cairo* on the 16th of April, *1953*. They headed first to the *Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of St Mark* where *Fawzia* expressed her wishes to join the convent of *St. Philopater Mercurius in Old Cairo*. They wondered why she has chosen to join that poor and unorganized convent. Why not join the convent of the *Virgin at Zeiweila* (a very old suburb of *Cairo*)? But *Fawzia* was resolved to join the convent of *St. Philopater* in answer to the call of heaven and to fulfil the martyr's request.

She loved the life of purity and chastity and her contemplation was on *the Most High*. She followed the example of the *Blessed Virgin Mary*, the spiritual *Mother of all Virgins*, who was her intercessor and heavenly mother too and who always assisted, consoled and comforted her whenever she suffered from any troubles or pain.

Heaven has become her beloved abode in which she dwelt while she was still struggling on earth.

At home, before she joined the convent, *Fawzia* soared up high in her spiritual life through her close relationship with the *Saviour* and through fervent prayers and ascetic fasts.

Deeply rooted in the fountain of the water of life, that tender budding plant sprouted quickly at the convent and pursued a deep spiritual life that very few could pursue after long struggles. She managed by *God's* help to earnestly take her first steps towards *the Royal Path*. *God* strengthened and supported her to face the snares of the devil who waged a war against her from the first moment she set foot in the convent. Yet in everything she managed to conquer overwhelmingly through Him who loved her.

The enemy of all what is good

Tamav Irene tells us about her spiritual experiences with the various wars waged by the devil to demonstrate the power of prayer and how weak the devil is and how he vanishes just by making the sign of *the life-giving cross*. She also shows us how to conquer him and to watch out for his snares by asking for *God's* help because our *Saviour* never abandons us.

When I joined the convent, I had no cell for some time and on the first three days I had no food or water. I did not care to ask for anything as we were in the *Holy Week* and I told myself let me fast harder but *Omena Tawaklia*, one of the older nuns who loved to perform acts of mercy, had pity on me. She took me to her cell and offered me food and a hot drink as I felt very cold. Later, *Omena Martha* received me in her cell.

At that time, my father kept sending me messages asking me to go back promising to arrange for a cell at home but I always refused.

After some time, I was given an abandoned cell in the second floor. It was not suitable for living. I cleaned it and I was supplied with a couch to use as a bed. In the evening, it was very dark and I had no candles or kerosene lamps to light the cell. I spent a lot of time praying and thanked *God* that I have a cell. When I finished my prayers, I slept on the couch and as I had no cover I used the coat I travelled with. To say the truth, I was very happy.

Hardly had the first hours of the night pass, when I suddenly found before me a black tall creature. His feet were on the ground and his head reached up to the ceiling. He had horns and his eyes were as red as blood. He was holding a knife in his hand and threatened me saying:

“So, you have come and moreover you have a cell!! I will not leave you, I have all the time!!” and he struck the floor with the knife.

From the horror of the sight, I leapt on the couch and screamed:

“O power of God, save me! O power of God, protect me!” and I fell on the floor frightened to death.

Omena Tawaklia, who occupied the next-door cell, heard my screams and the thud when my body hit the floor. She knocked on my door but as I was unable to move, she used a knife to open it to find me lying on the floor with an ice-cold body. She took me between her arms until I felt warm again and took me to the mother superior, *Tamav Kyria Wassef*, who prayed for me and rubbed my forehead with *Holy Oil*. Deeply scared, I asked her to permit me to stay with her in her cell.

She answered: *“No. Do not be afraid! The devil is like straw, just make the sign of the cross and he will vanish! He is trying to scare you. Go back to your cell. Do not be afraid.”* I returned to my cell but could not sleep. I stayed awake all night holding the cross in my hand.

Also, sometimes when I prayed and prostrated myself, I saw snakes and scorpions on the ground. The first time, I told myself: *“My cell is clean, where did they come from?”* I was scared and left the cell at once. *“Help me! I have a snake in my cell!”* I told a nun passing by. At once, she understood what this meant and said: *“If you see snakes and scorpions, do not be afraid. This is the devil.... Just make the sign of the cross and all will vanish!”*

Next day, I saw a big snake and when I prostrated myself, my forehead touched it. This happened many times and the confessor of the convent, *Father Makar El Makary*, comforted and encouraged me saying: *“Touch them with your head!”* and I kept assuring him that they were real. He reassured me again: *“Do not be afraid! Put your head on them!”*

In order not to break my monastic spiritual rules, I obeyed him.

Each nun has a spiritual rule to follow. These rules are given by a spiritual elder. The rules organize the spiritual books to read, life in the cell, individual prayers especially at night, the number of Psalms to read, the number of prostrations per day, work, the quantity of food to be eaten, etc...

My forehead really touched their bodies and when I prostrated myself carrying a cross in my hand, they disappeared because prayer is *the powerful weapon* that scares the devil and with patience and perseverance we defeat him.

On another occasion, on a pitch-dark night, while carrying a kerosene lamp (lantern), as there was no electricity in the convent at that time, I suddenly found someone blowing off the flame. Then I found myself surrounded by many colours: red, green, yellow, black... and heard screams all around me and finally felt something hit my body.

I kept repeating: *“Save me, O power of God. Protect, O power of God.”*

Immediately I felt a power carrying me and putting me in my cell.

So I told the devil:

“Now, I know your tricks and how the power of my God defeats you.”

Another time, *Tamav* continues:

One day, early in the morning, I went to work in the kitchen. I filled the stove with kerosene and lit it up. The kerosene tank was next to it. When I tried to make the fire stronger, the flame rose higher and in a moment the tank caught fire. I was in a corner and to get out of the kitchen I had to cross over the fire. The flames grew higher and higher and were about to reach the wooden ceiling. With faith, I cried:

“Help me, O God of Abu Seifein... Help me, God’s martyr and watch over your convent”

Immediately, I saw the *martyr* before me making *the sign of the cross* towards the fire and at once it was extinguished. I was very happy that the convent was saved and thanked *God* and His martyr.

When I told the mother superior about it, she said:

“The sad one (meaning the devil) is constantly trying to fight you.”

All these wars were visible but later the devil used other methods. He put in my head the thought that my duties require that I spend the whole day out of my cell and thus I do not have enough time to pray and follow my spiritual rules like I used to do back home. It is better that I return to my father’s place. The thought echoed in my head: I am coming here to pray, not only to work (serve).... I will go back home and live there as a nun.

I resorted to prayer and asked for *God's* guidance. One night I saw the martyr *Abu Seifein* who said:

“What will you do at home after your parents die? A nun who leaves her convent is exactly like a fish taken out of water. Stay and you will be happy amid all this work. Just repeat the psalms all the time and if any verse from the Bible consoles you, learn it by heart.”

I thanked *God* for His love and care and since then, and whenever I had a free second, I prayed using the psalms as much as time permitted. Moreover, I carried the *Book of the Hours (Psalms-Agpeya)* with me all the time. Since that day I felt that I am living in paradise despite all the hard work.

The *daughter of Christ* pursued her way along *the Royal Path* which she sincerely loved and now she no longer feared the wars of the devil, instead she faced them with courage and alertness carrying the sword of the spirit (*God's word*) and arming herself with *the breastplate of faith, love and hope*. She lived humbly and showed love towards all the nuns and novices. She served all putting before her eyes the biblical commandment of love for all and became a living example of humbleness and self-denial.

Tamav Irene recalls those early days and says :

I will share with you some of my experiences when I first joined the convent... One day, I was in my cell and one of the older nuns knocked on my door and said: *“New girl! Come and sweep the corridor.”* I answered: *“Yes, mother.”* And as soon as I picked up the broom and started sweeping for a few seconds, she said: *“You new girl! Stop sweeping!”* I obeyed and said: *“Yes, mother”* and at once left to my cell. A few minutes later, the nun returned and knocked hard on my door saying: *“New girl! Come and sweep the corridor.”* I answered: *“Yes, mother.”* And as soon as I started to sweep again, she asked me to stop. This happened several times and each time I replied: *“Yes, mother.”* Finally she told me: *“You were well brought up at home. The convent will not do you any favour.”*

The aroma of *Tamav's* virtues of humbleness and obedience spread among the nuns and the mother superior recommended her to be consecrated as a nun.

On Monday the *26th of October 1953* (16th of Babah 1670 according to the Coptic calendar of martyrs), *Fawzia* was consecrated as a nun by *Father Makar El Makary* and was given the name of *Irene* (she was named after *Irene the martyr of the fourth century*). As there was no church at that time in the convent, the consecration took place in *the church of Abu Seifein* that is located next to the convent.

To read about the martyr Irene, go to the books section where you will find a detailed PDF about her.

Tamav Irene recalls :

We spent the whole day before the consecration cleaning the convent and during the night at church our time was divided between our individual prayers and midnight praises. Our confessor spent that night with us to take our confessions. The older nuns and our confessor told each of us :

“Today you are reborn. Note that after penitence and confession, all your sins are forgiven thus you are reborn.”

During the rite of consecration, we knelt down, our heads touching the ground, and we were covered with a big carpet, under which I was surrounded by a pool of tears shed during the funerary rites.

I prayed to *God* and said:

God, I do not deserve to be your bride. You have purchased me with Your blood and I have done nothing for You! Support me and aid me. Give me the strength and help me die towards all the vanities of the world. Make me yours only.

I was full of joy but at the same time I prayed tearfully asking *God* to strengthen me to follow the path that pleases Him. *It was a beautiful day that I will never forget.*

Every nun is given a saint's or martyr's name at the time of consecration. In church history, there could be different saints who carry the same name; in this case the saint should be specified. Moreover, in one convent, each nun has a unique name. Two nuns cannot carry the same name. When a nun dies, a newly consecrated nun may carry her name again.

The mother superior chose for me the name of '*Irene*' out of her great love for a pious nun who carried this name before me and who died before I join the convent.

She told me that this nun worked all day long and prayed fervently all night. Her time was precious. In her last days, *God* has bestowed upon her the gift of healing the sick, yet she avoided meeting people and only did so when she was instructed by the mother superior, just for the sake of obedience.

She has never been out of the gate of the convent since she became a nun, not even for medical attention. By night, she used to pass by the cells of the nuns; the old and the young, the ordained and the novices, the sick and the sound, and distributed water she had brought from the well fulfilling the commandment:

“I was thirsty and you gave me drink” Mat. 25:35

She asked *God*, that if He wished to give her the cross of suffering from illness, that

she does not fall bedridden and that she could serve herself until the last day in her life and not be a burden to anyone. **God** granted her wish and revealed to her the day of her departure three days before it occurred. On that day, she went to church and received communion and returned to her cell where she rested in peace.

After consecration, **Irene** resumed her struggle and served the nuns, especially the elderly and the sick. She did this with love and humility. Then she was assigned the task of serving the mother superior beside her other duties.

Tamav Irene relates how she spent the early days when she joined the convent and how her **guardian angel** accompanied her all the time.

“I worked daily from four in the early morning until ten or eleven in the evening. I spent all that time between serving the sick and the mother superior and when I returned to my cell I used to be extremely exhausted. Before I went to sleep, thoughts crossed my mind:

“Will I be able to pray? Will I have sufficient time?”

I used to say:

“Lord Jesus Christ, please bless each hour of sleep, make it as if it is hours. Make the four or five hours of sleep as if they are eight. I am afraid that I might not be able to wake up in time for midnight praise.”

At that time there were no alarm clocks or prayer bells in the convent and each nun woke up on her own.

At prayer time, I used to hear a voice calling me three times by my name: *“Irene.... Irene.... Irene.... Wake up it is time to pray.”*

When I open my eyes, I used to see an angel over my head who then moves towards the end of the bed and then turns facing me and as soon as I sit up, he disappears. Thus, I used to pray joyfully and tirelessly.

The angel woke me up daily at the same time and in the same way and each time I thanked him.

One day, I asked him: *“Who are you?”*

He answered: *“I am your **guardian angel** who accompanies you all the time.”*

I really experienced the blessings of hard work in **God's** house and also the blessings of always lifting up my heart in thankfulness to **God**.

Let me tell you a story that shows how **God** greatly consoles us and gives us more than we ask for when we work joyfully, thankfully and without complain.

Being the youngest of the nuns, all the work of the convent was on my shoulders. At that time, it was usual for nuns to do a lot of work even on Sundays. One day, a nun asked me to do some work in the kitchen on a Sunday. I requested to attend mass first but the nun answered :

“The early fathers say that work is equal to prayer.”

*“I must adapt to this principle in obedience to the nuns”, I told myself, and I worked joyfully from all my heart. One day, I was promised to attend the first mass next day provided that I return quickly to perform my duties. I was very happy as it had been three months since I last attended mass and received communion. I really longed for it. Late this evening, I was informed that I will not be able to do so as there are some tasks I have to do. I obeyed without any complaints and said to myself: “I will receive the same blessings of attending mass.” and thanked **God**.*

Orbana (Sacramental Bread)

That night, while praying, I found someone telling me:

“Come and attend mass with the Sowah and I will bring you back just in time for your work.”

Sowah : Anchorites and ascetics who have exalted spiritually and who have been endowed with levitation and movement to distant places. They defy time and location. They usually meet together and hold masses in churches at night when they are empty.

I asked him: *“How will I go?”*

He said: *“Hold on to my gown.”* And as soon as I did, I found myself rising in the air and in no time I was in a church in the desert with a cross over it. It’s entrance was like that of a crypt and we had to bend down to enter. The church was simple yet very wide and beautiful with an air of high spirituality. I attended mass and received communion after which I was given an **Orbana** (Arabic for sacramental bread).



Sacramental bread (Latin: hostia), sometimes called altar bread, Communion bread, the Lamb or simply the host, is the leavened bread which is used in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist in all the Eastern Orthodox churches.

The hostia or sacramental bread, known as prosphorá or prósphoron (“offering”) may be made out of only four ingredients: fine (white) wheat flour, water, yeast, and salt.

Sometimes holy water will be either sprinkled into the dough or on the kneading trough at the beginning of the process.

Before baking, each loaf is stamped it with a special liturgical seal. The prosphora should be fresh and not stale or mouldy when presented at the altar for use in the Divine Liturgy.

After baking, several prosphora are offered to the priest and he chooses the best one for the Lamb (Host) that will be consecrated.

The remaining loaves are blessed and offered back to the congregation after the end of the Divine Liturgy (Eucharist); this bread is called the antidoron i.e. a “gift returned”, or “in place of the gifts”. The tradition is that the antidoron is eaten right away without anything beside it.

The rest of the baked loaves are distributed to the congregation.

I asked them: “*Where are we?*”

They answered that we are in the church of the *Sowah* located on *the mountain of St. Anthony* (near the Red Sea coast). Finally, I found myself back in my cell with the *Orbana* in my hands. My heart was full of *indescribable consolation* and *spiritual joy* that lasted for a long time.

Before I began work, I went to the mother superior with the *Orbana* and told her about all what had happened.

She said: “*You have received the blessings of communion! I take the Orbana!*” I gave it to her and she divided it and distributed it as a blessing to the nuns.

Thus, the nun *Irene* pursued the life of blind obedience to her mother superior. She tells us of another experience that emphasizes the value of this virtue in *God’s* sight. She says:

“One day, the mother superior gave permission to all the nuns to attend *the Vespers* of *the feast of St. Mercurius* (the service of evening prayers preceding the day of the feast) in his ancient church but she asked me and another nun to attend *Vespers* at *the Virgin’s church* which is next to it.

On my way to the *Virgin’s church*, I thought of quickly lighting a candle in *St. Mercurius’ church* then go to the *Virgin’s church*. I heard an inner voice saying: “*St. Mercurius will be cross about it.*” I wanted to obey my mother superior so I asked *St. Mercurius* to guide me to take the right decision. I found that whenever I headed towards *the ancient church of St. Mercurius*, I was unable to move my legs and whenever I headed towards *the Virgin’s church* I was able to move them. Thus, *God’s* will was clear. I

said: “*Forgive me Lord, I will obey blindly.*” When I returned to the convent, I told the mother superior about it. She said: “*God and St. Mercurius wanted to show you that obedience is better than offering sacrifices; it is good to be obedient.*” I was very happy and I learned the lesson that obedience is *the gem of monastic life* and that *God* will listen to those who obey.

From that day onwards, I carried out literally all the orders given to me by my mother superior; *East means East West means West* and when I obeyed I had a clear conscience and my heart was filled with peace.

The enemy of all good (the devil) never ceased to take a chance to cause hardships for the nun *Irene* and waged against her campaign after campaign. She tells us about another form of his warfare:

“One day, after I was a consecrated nun, the mother superior asked for me and she was informed that I was resting for a while in my cell. The enemy seized this chance to stir up the anger of the deputy nun and the mother superior as well. The mother superior sent for me and said:

“*Leave the convent now, at once! Go back to your father’s house!*” I begged her to spend the night at the convent and leave the next day after mass but in vain. She insisted despite that it was late in the evening and said: “*You are not obedient! Your obedience is fake!*” She scolded me and after shedding many tears, she agreed that I stay for the night.

I spent the whole night crying and prayed saying: “*God*, if I had not been consecrated, I could have returned home. How can I go back now?” and I found *St. Mercurius (Abu Seifein)* before me and he said: “*Do not be unhappy and do not leave. This is a war waged against you. I spoke with the mother superior.*”

Next day, I attended mass and went to the mother superior and said: “*Forgive me mother, I am leaving. I wish that you are always well. Pray for me.*” She hugged me and kissed me saying: “*You are my dear and beloved daughter. St Mercurius visited me last night and threatened me because of you.*” Since then I had a special place in her heart and I was the one who served her all the time and read for her from the books of the lives of saints and of the sayings of the early fathers.

Later, when my father came to visit me, she heartily welcomed him and refused that I go back with him. She kept always encouraging me to endure any troubles caused by the enemy of all what is good. She used to say:

“*Don’t you want to be a martyr? Isn’t this what you are longing for? If you endure hardships and insults and be despised, this is exactly like martyrdom.*”

The sin of condemnation

Seeking to divest herself of earthly affections, the newly consecrated nun, *Irene*, exercised virtues that she incessantly nourished by fervent prayer.

Every evening, upon returning to her cell, she practiced careful self-examination and through prayer sought consolation. She knew that prayer is *the channel of all graces* and the means of attaining all virtues.

To urge us attain the virtues of endurance, humility and love towards one another, she shared with us the following experience that shows the importance of spiritual vigilance and sincere self-examination.

“One day, while attending mass, I noticed that some nuns were chatting together all the time about manual work. I was surprised. On the way back to my cell, I witnessed another incident between two nuns and I wondered about their conduct but did not utter a word. I did not think that these thoughts could be a kind of condemnation so I forgot all about it.

In the evening, while praying as usual before the icons at the eastern corner of my cell, I said to myself : *“You have many great hidden weaknesses. Others might have obvious weaknesses but fewer.”* Suddenly, I found myself before an iron gate of a huge building. Someone standing next to it opened and let me in. The place was dark and extremely depressing. Its walls were made of stone and its smell was offensive. It had trenches and in each trench there was a nun. They were all crying.

I asked them: *“What brought you to such a place? I cannot stand its smell.”*

They answered: *“Because we used to condemn the mother superior and our sisters too. We also interfered in the policies of the convent.”*

Then they asked me: *“ What brought you here?”*

I answered: *“Today, I have fallen into the sin of condemnation.”*

I tried to leave this place as quick as possible. I found a staircase leading to the gate through which I have entered. There, I found someone who was clad in white. Inside me, I thought of giving him anything to let me out, but he said:

“I am the keeper of this place and I do not take any money. You see how horrifying it is.”

I said: *“ I want to leave this place; I cannot tolerate it!”*

He answered: *“All those who are here have fallen into the sin of condemnation and are going to stay here but you have the permission to come to this place and leave. So watch out...”*

I said: *“I have repented and will never condemn again. I want to leave.”*

He let me out and showed me *two paths*. One, *narrow* with stone walls and through which I must move sideways and bruise either my face or my back. The other was *very wide*, full of cars, people and dazzling lights.

He said: *“At the end of the narrow path you will find your convent but if you take the wide one, you will get lost.”*

I said: *“I will take the narrow path. And to avoid bruising my face, I will give my back to the stone walls.”* I moved along; it was a long way and the friction between the walls and my back hurt a lot. Finally, I reached the eastern gate of the convent.

As soon as I was in my cell, I knelt to pray. I said: *“Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned. I thank you for not leaving me at this horrible place. Please, help me repent and not condemn or criticize others.”* Conscious again, I found myself kneeling at the prayer corner of my cell bathed in tears. The offensive smell was still clinging to my nostrils.

I spent the night praying and shedding tears of sincere repentance. I asked **God** to help me make a new beginning and avoid condemning others completely.

Next day, whenever I tried to bend down, I suffered from great pain in my back and shoulders. When I showed my back to the mother superior, she told me that it was all bruised and that my clothes were covered with blood. She applied an antiseptic and I suffered for three days from high fever and the severity of the wounds. I was exhausted after all I have gone through.

The nuns at the convent noticed that I was excessively fatigued and when they inquired about the reason, I used to answer: *“This is because of my sins.”*

I remained like this until I met with our confessor on his weekly visit. When I told him about what had happened to me, he said:

“Thank God that He has given you the lesson early so that you do not condemn anybody or interfere in matters of the convent or the nuns or anybody.”

I followed his advice and plugged my ears with small cotton balls so that I do not hear anything that is going on between the mother superior and any nun.

I lived in complete estrangement. ***From my cell to my work and vice versa.*** I have firmly decided that whatever takes place, I will act as if I am not in the convent at all.

And although I loved the mother superior and she loved me too but whenever she started to tell me : “ *Irene, haven't you heard*”

I used to answer right away: “*I have not heard and I do not want to know.*” She used to comprehend my reasons for saying so and she was never angry with me.

Whenever I was asked to convey a message to the mother superior, I put it simply. If anybody entered her cell to place a complaint or report something, I looked for any pretext to excuse myself: taking the water jug to fill it or doing some washing. I did not want to hear anything to avoid condemnation.

On the train to Upper Egypt

In *June 1956*, three years after I have joined the convent, I received the news that my mother had passed away. She has not visited me all this time. Only my father visited me whenever he came to *Cairo* for business.

When I received the news, I recalled my mother's words before I joined the convent: “*Stay with me. It will be only three years from now and I will depart to heaven.*”

At that time, I answered her: “*May God extend your life for the sake of your children. It is better that I join the convent while you are still living.*”

In obedience to the orders of *Pope Kyrillos the Sixth* and the mother superior, I travelled with *Omena Kirya Eskandar* to offer condolences to the family.

We took the train of four p.m. from *Cairo* station heading to *Gerga*. Before reaching *Assuit* station which is midway between *Cairo* and *Gerga*, we were informed that there was a derailed train there. We had to get off our train and take another which was waiting a little bit far from where we were. Everybody rushed to find a seat in the other train.

It was pitch dark, and, of course, we had no matches or flashlights. We prayed asking for *God's* help. We waited until the rush was over and as our train was far from the station and there was no platform, we will have to jump from the high carriage to the ground.

Suddenly, *an officer whose face radiated peace, tranquillity and great spirituality* appeared in front of us. He kindly addressed us saying: “*Do not be afraid, mothers. God is with you.*”

We answered: “*May God be with us and with you.*”

He addressed me saying: “*Give me your hand to help you get off the train.*” I refused, thanked him and jumped.

Then he addressed *Omena Kirya* and said:

“Give me your hand.”

She answered: *“No, thanks.”* and she took my hand and jumped.

We noticed that a ray of light radiated from this officer. It looked like a torchlight whose beam lit the distant rails.

As we hurried up to reach the other train, he said: *“The train will not leave before you reach it. I am travelling on the same train.”*

When we reached the train, we found that all of its carriages were crowded. In one of them, a few soldiers were sitting. As soon as they saw the officer, they stood up to give him the salute. He then told them:

“Isn’t it shameful that you sit and leave those nuns standing.”

They answered: *“As you order!”* and we got seated and thanked them.

The officer sat beside us and asked us about our destination. We said that *Irene’s* mother has passed away and this is why we are travelling to *Gerga*.

He said: *“I am travelling to Gerga too”*



He chatted with us all the way and just before we arrive, we asked him for his name and where he lives. He answered: *“Is it essential that you know my name?”*

We said: *“We and our families would like to thank you.”*

He smiled and said: *“I am living in the convent of St. Mercurius. I am Philopater Mercurius”* and he disappeared. All those who were present and the soldiers too were astonished.

Then *Omena Kirya* said: *“May God forgive you, Irene, why did you not let him hold my hand? I would have taken his blessing.”*

All the passengers started asking about the officer who disappeared and when they knew that it was *St. Philopater Mercurius*, they asked about the story of his life.

This shows how *God* answers our prayers whenever we are in need by sending *His martyrs and saints* to aid us. He does not abandon us but instead gives us peace, strength, endurance and a great reward in heaven too and because *He is the Lover of mankind, merciful and kind*, he attracts sinners for the sake of the salvation of their souls. He sympathies with us; we have nobody else but him. Nothing gives us happiness and comfort except *the love of God*.

When we reached my parent's house, those who were present there told me: *"You are the reason for your mother's death."* I used to say: *"God, am I the cause of my brothers and sisters being orphans."*

While *Irene* prayed and wept bitterly, someone with a luminous body who looked like a saint appeared to her and repeated the verse: *"Do not grieve like others*" yet she was neither filled with comfort nor peace. When she asked him who he was, he said that he is *Anthony the Great*. To test if this vision is heavenly or not, she said: *"Where is the cross of your Christ?"* and made the sign of the cross. *At once, he disappeared which showed that this vision is not heavenly. The devil cannot support the sign of the cross and his false visions do not bring any comfort or peace.*

Irene spent one year at her parent's house during which she has seen her mother in visions innumerable times. Once her mother told her: *"Do not think at all that you are the reason for my passing away..."* Her mother also helped her overcome all the difficulties that she has encountered. And again, what has happened during this year showed that heaven is so near and confirmed our faith about paradise which *God* has prepared for those who love him and as a reward to the saints who lived in perfection leading a life that pleased *the Almighty*.

Irene tells us about one of her sisters who was not consoled and who cried bitterly after their mother's departure. Her mother brought her holy water and after she drank it, she woke up happy and stopped crying. And whenever one of her sisters fell sick, she saw her mother sitting by her side all night taking care of her and praying for her. Another time when cold was severe and the cover fell off her small brothers and sisters, her mother put it back in its place. One of them woke up and said: *"I dreamt that mother put a cover on me"*.

Moreover, *God* has permitted *Irene* to see the high rank of her mother in heaven.

"One day I was taken to heaven by an angel and I saw what eye has not seen. I cannot describe what I have seen because it far beyond words.

I saw my mother with another woman like her. She addressed the other woman saying; *"This is my daughter, the nun, whom I have told you about."*

I accompanied my mother in the greenery of *Paradise*. I saw rivers of crystal water and very beautiful flowers and a light that fills the heart with heavenly peace. I asked my mother if they see *God* in *Paradise*. She answered: *"Yes, he fills all paradise."*

After matters became stable, *Irene* returned to her convent again.

From the very first days, after she had joined the convent, heaven manifested many signs of support for this trustworthy soul that was chosen to lead the lives of many others in the path to angelic life.

Irene led a sincere and honest spiritual life. She revealed all her inner thoughts to her confessor and the mother superior and was obedient to them and was committed to their spiritual advice and was distinguished in the practice of ascetic life.

She nurtured herself with holy books and the writings of the lives of saints. This was the well of heavenly treasures from which she obtained her strength and God granted her a special grace to comprehend what she read and to keep it in her heart preparing her for carrying the torch of leadership.

Irene tells us more about those first days:

Omena Euphrosena, an old nun at that time, was a slave of *Ethiopian* origin in the household of a physician's family who treated her equally. Since she joined the convent, she took on the hardest jobs without pitying herself.

She used to say: *"I worked hard outside the convent, shouldn't I work harder in the house of God? I must serve you all"* and although she has become older, she still remained a hard worker and always asked for *God's* assistance. She worked all day and prayed all night and abstained from meat, vegetables and fruits and only ate Halva (a sweet) and molasses all year round.

Her cell was next to mine and the devil, enraged to behold so much good, waged a fierce war against her. The devil assailed her with pottery that flew into her face without any human intervention. She screamed and said :

"O power of God assist me... my beloved Abu Seifein help me"

She cried and struggled and after a while, I used to see a bright strong light in her cell and I hear her saying :

"You have run away you cursed ones! It is the power of God that made you run away!"

Then she used to start chanting :

"Praise Him, glorify Him, exalt Him above all because His mercy endures forever"
(from midnight praise.

I used to enjoy hearing those praises and next day we used to see many bruises in her face.

When I joined the convent and was still a novice, *Omena Kyria Iskandar*, the nun who visited us at my home town *Gerga*, took me to take the blessing of that devout nun. She knocked at her door and when she opened, she went in but I remained outside unseen by *Omena Euphrosena*. Then I heard *Omena Euphrosena* calling me asking me to enter, she said :

“Come in new girl and sit down. You will be the superior of this convent”.

She then addressed *Omena Kyria Iskandar* saying :

“Look! Omena Kyria, this girl will become the superior of this convent”

Omena Kyria replied :

“The rats of the convent have not yet felt her presence” She meant that nobody has felt her presence yet.

Omena Euphrosena replied :

“Rats or no rats, she is going to be. I will not be here. I will be in heaven. You will see, then.”

I took no heed of those words. I said to myself : *“This is an old nun who does not know me and this is the first time that she sees me but I am sure of her sanctity”*

A second incident:

A few months later, *Irene* suffered from a severe headache and pain in her eyes so together with *Omena Kyria Iskander* they visited several ophthalmologists but in vain.

By permission of the mother superior, *Omena Kyria Iskander* took her to *Father Mena El Baramousy*, who was leading a solitary life at that time in *Old Cairo* and who became later *Pope Kyrillos the Sixth*, to pray for her.

Irene tells us:

Father Mena put the cross he held in his hand on my head and prayed for a long time, then he addressed *Omena Kyria* and said :

“This girl reads a lot and passes her nights in prayer and this enrages the devil. The headache she suffers from is a war waged against her by the devil. Look, Omena Kyria this girl will become the superior of the convent and in her days a lot of events will take place and in her days too, several alters will be built and many will join the convent.”

She replied : *“What are saying, Father?”*

He replied: *“Look, Omena Kyria, I will remind you if I was still living and if I go to heaven, remember what I told you.”*

She replied : *“May God preserve your life.”* and we left.

A third incident:

Irene relates:

One night, I had a dream, I saw three luminous persons wearing crosses who were also holding crosses in their hands; they brought a chair and started taking its measures. I asked them about what they were doing.

They replied: *“We are building this chair to fit your measures exactly.”*

I asked them : *“Who are you?”* They replied : *“We are the three Macarii.”*

I could not comprehend what they said so I spoke with my confessor about this dream.

He replied : *“Do not pay heed to it.”*

Three Macarii Macarius the Elder and known as Macarius the Great and The Lamp of the Desert (A.D. 390.)

St. Macarius the Elder, was born in Upper Egypt, about the year 300, and brought up in the country in tending cattle. In his childhood, in company with some others, he once stole a few figs, and ate one of them: but since his conversion to his death, he never ceased to weep bitterly for this sin.

By a powerful call of divine grace, he retired from the world in his youth, and dwelling in a little cell in a village, made mats, in continual prayer and great austerities. A wicked woman falsely accused him of having deflowered her; for this supposed crime he was dragged through the streets, beaten, and insulted, as a base hypocrite, under the garb of a monk. He suffered all with patience, and sent the woman what he earned by his work, saying to himself: *“Well, Macarius! having now another to provide for, thou must work harder.”* But God revealed his innocence; for the woman falling in labour, lay in extreme anguish, and could not be delivered till she had named the true father of her child. The people converted their rage into the greatest admiration of the humility and patience of the saint.

To shun the esteem of men, he fled into the vast hideous desert of Scété, being then about thirty years of age. In this solitude he lived sixty years, and became the spiritual parent of innumerable holy persons, who put themselves under his direction, and were governed by the rules he prescribed them; but each of them dwelt in separate hermitages. St. Macarius admitted only one disciple with him in his cell, to entertain strangers.

He was compelled by an Egyptian bishop to receive the order of priesthood, about the year 340, the fortieth of his age, that he might celebrate the divine mysteries for the convenience of this holy colony. When the desert became densely populated with monks, four churches were built. The austerities of

St. Macarius were excessive; he usually ate but once a week. He delivered his instructions in a few words, and principally inculcated silence, humility, mortification, retirement, and continual prayer, especially the last, to all sorts of people. He used to say, "In prayer, you need not use many or lofty words. You can often repeat with a sincere heart, Lord, show me mercy as thou knowest best. Or, assist me, O God." He was much delighted with this ejaculation of perfect resignation and love: "O Lord, have mercy on me, as thou pleasest, and knowest best in thy goodness!" His mildness and patience were invincible

The devil told him one day, "I can surpass thee in watching, fasting, and many other things; but humility conquers and disarms me." A young man asking St. Macarius for spiritual advice, he directed him to go to a burying-place, and upbraid the dead; and then go and flatter them. When he came back, the saint asked him, what answer the dead gave you: "None at all," said the other, "either to reproaches or praises." "Then," replied Macarius, "go, and learn neither to be moved with injuries nor flatteries. If you die to the world and to yourself, you will begin to live to Christ."

He said to another: "Receive, from the hand of God, poverty as cheerfully as riches, hunger and want as plenty, and you will conquer the devil, and subdue all your passions." A certain monk complained to him, that in solitude, he was always tempted to break his fast, whereas in the monastery, he could fast the whole week cheerfully. "Vain-glory is the reason," replied the saint, "fasting pleases, when men see you; but seems intolerable when that passion is not gratified."

One came to consult him who was molested with temptations to impurity: the saint examining into the source, found it to be sloth, and advised him never to eat before sunset, to meditate fervently at his work, and to labour vigorously, without sloth, the whole day. The other faithfully complied, and was freed from his enemy.

God revealed to St. Macarius, that he had not attained the degree of perfection of two married women, who lived in a certain town: he made him visit them, and learned the means by which they sanctified themselves. They were extremely careful never to speak any idle or rash words; they lived in the constant practice of humility, patience, meekness, charity, resignation, mortification of their own will, and conformity to the humours of their husbands and others, where the divine law did not interpose: in a spirit of recollection they sanctified all their actions by ardent ejaculations, by which they strove to praise God, and most fervently to consecrate to the divine glory all the powers of their soul and body.

A subtle heretic of the sect of the Hieracites, called so from Hierax, who

in the reign of Dioclesian denied the resurrection of the dead, had, by his sophisms, caused some to stagger in their faith. St. Macarius, to confirm them in the truth, raised a dead man to life, as Socrates, Sozomen, Palladius, and Rufinus relate..

Lucius, the Arian usurper of the see of Alexandria, who had expelled Peter, the successor of Saint Athanasius, in 376 sent troops into the desert to disperse the zealous monks several of whom sealed their faith with their blood: the chiefs, namely, the two Macariuses, Isidore, Pambo, and some others, by the authority of the Emperor Valens, were banished into a little isle of Egypt, surrounded with great marshes. The inhabitants, who were Pagans, were all converted to the faith by the confessors.

The public indignation of the whole empire, obliged Lucius to return to their cells. Our saint, knowing that his end drew near made a visit to the monks of Nitria, and exhorted them to compunction and tears so pathetically, that they all fell weeping at his feet. “Let us weep, brethren,” said he, “and let our eyes pour forth floods of tears before we go hence, lest we fall into that place where tears will only increase the flames in which we shall burn.”

He went to receive the reward of his labours in the year 390, and of his age the ninetieth, having spent sixty years in the desert of Scété.

The two other fathers, the two Macarii, like twin lights illuminating the heavens, of whom one was an Egyptian by birth and had been a disciple of blessed Anthony, the other an Alexandrian. As their names suggest, the virtues of their souls and the grace of heaven were in them marvellously combined. The one Macarius was equal to the other in feats of abstinence and in virtue of soul, and only excelled the other in that he possessed, as if inherited, the graces and powers of blessed Anthony. There were both there when someone in the district committed the crime of murder and someone else who was innocent was charged with the crime. He who suffered this calumny fled to their cell and those who pursued him came too, alleging that they were in danger unless they handed over the man accused of murder to the law. On the other hand he protested that he was innocent of this crime, and affirmed by an oath that he was not guilty of blood. At last since both sides were unshakable, Saint Macarius asked them where the man who had been killed was buried. They pointed out the place and he went to the tomb with the man and all those who accused him. There he knelt down and called upon the name of Christ, and said to those who stood nearby, «Now the Lord will show if indeed the man is guilty whom you accuse.» Raising his voice he called the dead man by name and who was called replied from the grave. Macarius said to him, «By the grace of Christ, I ask you to say if this man who is accused here is the one who killed you». Then he replied in a clear voice from the grave, saying that this was not the man by whom

he was killed. Stupefied they all fell to the ground and they begged him, grovelling at his feet, to ask the dead man who had killed him. «This,» he said, «I will not ask; it is enough for me to have set the innocent free; it is not up to me to discover the guilty.

Another incident :

As usual, I had no time to reflect on those dreams so I completely forgot about them but one night, I had a dream which was more like a vision and I wondered about what I have seen.

Immediately I headed to the cell of the mother superior whom I frequented as she was sick and I had to look after her and it was usual that I pass by her whether by night or by day. I related to her simply what I have seen :

Mother, I saw something like a vision. I was in a state in between being awake and asleep. I saw myself in your cell and three luminous persons wearing monks apparel. They were wearing crosses and also carried crosses in their hands. I saw you standing holding an oil lamp in your right hand. They took it from your hand and put it in mine.

She smiled and said : *“Just before you come in I was praying and I asked God to reveal to me who will carry the responsibility after me and I saw the same vision you have seen.”*

And I asked her : *“What does this mean?”*

She laughed and said : *“The three luminous persons are St. Anthony, St. Shenoute the Archimandrite and St. Pachomious. The vision reveals that you are the one who will carry the responsibility after me. I hope you do this while I am still living so that I may rejoice.”*

I said : *“Does this mean that you love me?”*

She replied : *“I love you very much.”*

I said : *“This does not mean that you love me.”*

She asked : *“Why?”*

I replied : *“You are living in great agony.”*

She said : *“Yes, I am.”*

So I told her : *“Why then do you want me to live in agony?”*

She replied : *“It is for the sake of the convent”*

She wanted to retire from the responsibility of the convent and kept persuading me to carry it while she is still living on the pretext that this will give her happiness.

But I always replied : *“This will not give you happiness, on the contrary it will cause sadness.”* and I wept bitterly and at length.

Finally, she allowed me to leave and said : *“Do not cry, but this is the interpretation of the dream. You are going to carry the responsibility after me.”*

St George's Convent in Old Cairo

Days passed by and *Pope Kyrillos the Sixth* wanted to choose a superior for the nearby convent of *St. George in Old Cairo*. His choice fell on *Irene* but she refused so he asked her to carry the responsibility temporarily until he finds the suitable nun. Daily, in the morning, she went to the convent of the great martyr *St. George* and in the evening she returned to her convent. *Omena Kyria Iskander* accompanied her all the time.

About those days, *Irene* recalls:

I used to receive all the visitors of the convent and accompany them to the shrine of the martyr and I also had to record daily the income and the expenses. I was quite distracted; many things had to be done.

One day, I said without uttering the words: *“St. George you are unpleasant. I neither want you nor your convent.”* That said, I found *the whole bunch of keys of the convent withdrawn from my hands*. The bunch included the keys of the gate, the shrine, the library and the stores. I ran to *Omena Kyria* and told her about what had happened to the keys.

She said : *“What do you mean withdrawn? Let's look for them and find them.”*

“I looked for them everywhere and could not find them. Please ask a carpenter to come and fix new ones”, I replied.

But, it was already too late to find a carpenter so she gently addressed me saying:

“Irene, confess what has happened between you and the martyr St. George.”

I said: *“I will tell you the truth. I told St. George that he is unpleasant and that I neither want him nor his convent.”*

She said : *“What have you done! go and apologize to the martyr.”*

I replied: *“Why should he be unhappy? I only said the truth. These are my true feelings and I do not feel that I have done something wrong.”* While speaking, I realized my mistake and felt humbled and started crying and blamed myself and said how have I done this and how have I spoken to the great martyr like this. I started prostrating myself saying : *“I have sinned, forgive me God's martyr.”* and wept heavily.

Seeing this, *Omena Kyria* made me sit next to her on a sofa and after a few moments, we smelt a *strong odour of incense* and we heard *the rattle of keys in the air and the bunch of keys falling between us*. We wondered at *God's* work and at *His tenderness* and the *martyr's love*. At this moment, I remembered the similar incident when *St. George* brought back the lost gold necklace of my mother.

Later, under divine guidance, *Pope Kyrillos VI's* choice fell on *Omena Kyria Eskandar*, the nun from our convent, to become the mother superior of the convent of *the great martyr St. George in Old Cairo*. She was the first mother superior to be consecrated during his papacy. By his orders, the ceremony, led by the late *Anba Theophilis*, bishop of El Souryan monastery (1948 - 1989) together with the late *Anba Kyrillos*, the bishop of Ballyana (1948 - 1970), took place on the *26th of September 1961*.

I was relieved that this has taken place, because I was sure that there was no chance for me to carry such a responsibility at my convent. I was the youngest nun and there were many older devout nuns who were more qualified.

However, after a few months, I saw the martyr *Abu Seifein* in a vision. He said:

"Look, I want nobody else to carry the responsibility of this convent. Nobody except you. Whatever you say, whether you want or do not want, I have come to tell you that My God wants this and me too."

He then collected all the keys from the responsible nuns and tied them with a string and tried to give them to me. I refused and tried to run away but he put the string around my neck.

I kept saying: *"What's this?, What's this?"*

He replied : *"These are the keys of my convent. I want nobody else to carry its responsibility. You are going to do so!"*

I said : *"It's none of my business."* and I removed the string of keys from around my neck and threw them back saying : *"I do not want them!"*. He put them again around my neck and said: *"Only you and no one but you."*

I spoke with no one about this vision, neither to my confessor nor to my mother superior who wanted to put me in charge while she was still living.

On the *25th of September 1962*, one year after the consecration of *Omena Kyria Eskandar at the convent of St. George*, my mother superior departed to heaven. Next day, after the prayer ceremony for the departed soul, *Anba Kyrillos*, bishop of Balliana, handed me a *letter* from the *Pope* informing me that I was *the one chosen to be in charge of the convent*. I refused to take the letter and started crying.

The content of the letter was a complete surprise to *Anba Kyrillos*, bishop of Balliana, who said:

“You are quiet right! You are just a child! Are they going to put a child in charge of the convent? It is illogical! The Pope is well known for his kindness, sanctity and wisdom, yet he has chosen a child to carry the responsibilities of the convent.”

Then he said: *“Daughter, do not refuse to take the letter. These are the orders of the Pope and we cannot refuse to carry them out. Later, pay him a visit and discuss the matter with him.”*

I kept saying: *“How come?”*

He replied: *“You are quiet right! You are just a child! That will not work.”*

Omena Ellaria, who was present, humbly kissed my head and gave me a pat on the shoulder saying:

“Stop crying! Accept the orders of the Pope and do not say no. Let the heavy burden lay on our shoulders and the light on yours”

I told her: *“How come, Omena Ellaria? This is not acceptable!”*

She replied : *“Do not worry!”*

My father, who came to hear of this, sent me a letter, contrary to his usual habit, he wrote :

“You are not my daughter if you accept this position. Run away and come quickly. I will hide you until they put another nun in charge and after matters settle down, go back.”

I was unable to repress my tears until I visited *Pope Kyrillos VI*.

I told him : *“your excellency, I am not suitable, . You do not know me. You have not even taken my confessions. You have met me only once and prayed for me when I was suffering from a headache.”*

He asked me : *“Then who is suitable?”*

I replied: *“Omena Ellaria. She is a devout nun. She is old and wise. Moreover, she is the second in charge after the mother superior and at the moment she is carrying some of the responsibilities. All the nuns recommend her. There are many others too, like Omena Feeby for example.”*

He replied: *“That’s true! How has this passed me? I have completely forgotten about Omena Ellaria. Alright, keep this as a secret between us. Do not tell anyone. Omena Ellaria is the right choice. She’s the one all the nuns recommend. Do not upset yourself. Do not tell any of the nuns about this. One day, I will drop by the convent without notice and I will consecrate her mother superiour.”*

I wholeheartedly thanked him and left.

I believed with my whole heart what the Pope had told me and it never passed through my mind that he is just calming me down. I did not know that Omena Kyria Eskandar, the mother superiour of St. George’s had told him that I had the intention of running away and this is why he had to resort to such a plan.

Upon my return to the convent, the nuns were surprised to find me calm and happy and wondered how this has happened.

I told them that the *Pope* has prayed for me but did not tell anyone what he told me.

Early on Monday, *Oct 15th 1962* (5th of Babah 1679 according to the calendar of martyrs), after midnight praises have ended in the old church of *Abu Seifein* that lies now outside the convent, and before the nuns return to their cells, suddenly *Fr. Boulos El Baramossy*, later *Anba Macarius* bishop of Qena (1965-1991), the confessor of the convent, showed up. He informed us that the *Pope* is coming to celebrate mass now.

Anba Macarius asked me :”Did you drink anything?”

I replied : *“We have not finished our prayers yet!”*. Our monastic rule requires that we do not eat or drink anything before we finish the prayers of the ninth hour.

He then said : *“That’s good so that you could receive communion during mass.”*

I asked him to excuse me to go to my cell and wash my face and wear the appropriate garments for mass.”

He replied : *“Let the nuns bring them for you,”*

That reply aroused my suspicions.

I said : *“I hope that there is nothing else behind this.”*

He replied : *“What could there be? There is nothing else.”*

I replied : *“How could you do this to me?”* in a strange manner.

Surprised, he said : *"You have not uttered such words when you speak with the nuns and now you speak with your confessor in this manner."*

I replied : *"I am helpless. I have been deceived."*

At this moment I started to realize what was going on and started to cry.

He then ordered the nuns to bring me my garments and holding me by the hand, he lead me back towards the church.

The nuns pushed me as if they were leading a lamb to slaughter.

The more they pushed, the more I cried. The nuns were all around me. *It looked like a funeral and I was the deceased.*

When *Anba Youanas*, bishop of Khartoum, Sudan (1947-1968), who was attending the prayers upon a special invitation from the *Pope*, saw the scene, he cried too.

Anba Kyrillos, bishop of Ballyana gave me no chance to utter a word, he started celebrating mass.

That day, the *Pope* sent the *wine* and *Eucharistic bread from the Patriarchate*. Moreover, he also sent *his personal schema* for me to wear.

It was an awesome mass.

The bible verses of the day were the ones read during the consecration of *Popes*. It was about *the good shepherd*.

It read :

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. ... etc. (John 10:1-16).

I cried bitterly and asked *God* for *His assistance, His mercy and His guidance*.

Later, when I visited the *Pope*, I kindly reproached him and said :

"What am I to do now? I have worn the schema and according to its rules I must recite the psalms twice daily and the praises too and also perform up to 700 prostrations daily. How can I organize myself between the rules of wearing the schema and my work and duties."

He said : “*While you are moving around recite the psalms and say your prayers.*”

I said : “*You see what you have done to me.*”

He replied : “*I have fervently prayed and found that this is God’s will and I could do anything except comply with it.*”

To be continued

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The countless multitudes who witnessed the life of *Tamav Irene* and who resorted to her for help.

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