

The Transfigured Cross

A Study of Father Bishoi Kamel
(6 December 1931- 21 March 1979)

by

John H Watson

Editor's Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Christian might ask the question, why has a Western priest and theologian expressed such an enthusiastic interest in a Coptic priest who spent most of his relatively short life of 47 years working in a parish church in Alexandria?

Readers of the Coptic Church Review in the last two decades will have seen and understood many varied contributions from the Revd. Dr. John Watson and will be aware of his other supplements to Coptic Studies. But he has said that his study of Abouna Bishoi Kamel was written to provide a comprehensive appreciation of what he sees as the most significant gift of modern Coptic life and thought to universal Christian spirituality. Fr. Watson has made three visits to the church of Mar Girgis in Sporting, in December 1989, April 1994 and May 2001, exclusively to study the life of Fr. Bishoi on the ground. In preparation for the CCR text he has recorded several taped interviews with Fr. Bishoi's widow Tasouni Angel Bassili; numerous direct quotations from these recordings are an essential part of the published text.

In nine short chapters, the author has explored the significance of Abouna Bishoi Kamel's continuing presence in Coptic Egypt. The longest sections of this study explore the Alexandrian priest's authentic *theologia crucis* or Theology of the Cross, which the author sees as the key to Fr. Bishoi's life. These sections also discuss Fr. Bishoi's confrontation with cancer and record his historical analysis of a church election. Some Western Theology has focused upon an interpretation in which our knowledge of the Being of God is derived from the study of Christ in his humiliation and suffering. Fr. Watson finds an Orthodox resonance in the teaching of Father Bishoi. Four chapters offer shorter but careful surveys of the Coptic Orthodox priest's biography, parochial ministry, marriage, theological study and publications. One condensed but perceptive section examines his relations with Islam and Muslims.

The conclusion of Fr. John Watson's study is that the perfect mutual movement between confession of faith and life, which he finds in Abouna Bishoi Kamel, is evidence of such holiness as to define a saint.

Rodolph Yanney

Sources & Acknowledgements

On 29 December 1989 I visited the Library of the Monastery of St. Macarius in the Wadi Natroun. Father Jeremiah gave me a copy of a small book, in Arabic and English, entitled “Magnetic Radiation” by the eminent Coptic historian Iris Habib El Masri. The English language text included some ballpoint editing by Professor Iris herself. This work aroused my interest in Father Bishoi Kamel Ishak and led to the present essay. The books of Fr. Luka Sidaros, Fr. Tadros Malaty and Girgis Qoraisa were also valuable sources in Arabic: there are no satisfactory English translations. Tasouni (Coptic. *Sister*) Angel Bassili was my principal source in the preparation of this essay. She is a lady of great dignity, good humour, vitality and compassion. The days she gave to me were a delight. Her recorded memories are highly valued.

The reader should note that Sister Angel’s contributions appear in direct quotation and are recorded in this format throughout the text.

I am indebted to: Victoria North, the Hospital Archivist of the Archives Centre of the Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust in London, for information about the hospital and its staff at the time of Bishoi Kamel’s stay there; Dr. Gleb Y. Ivanov, for advice on medical vocabulary; Gordon Taylor, the archivist of the Salvation Army’s International Heritage Centre, for the background to one key sentence in this study; Fr. Tadros Yacoub Malaty, who enjoyed a close friendship with Fr. Bishoi from 1953 until his death, for answering innumerable questions; Fr. Antonious Henein, for his running commentary on my notes; and to Dr. Kees Hulsman and the Religious News Service from the Arab World for essential chronological data.

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All documentation and translations produced for this essay are preserved in the records of CSCIL (Centre for the Study of Christianity in Islamic Lands), Walmer, Kent, UK, which closed in 1995 after twelve years of active research and is now only an archive. CSCIL applies a fifty-year embargo on confidential documents. It is hoped that this archive will be moved to the Religious News Service from the Arab World in the Arab Republic of Egypt. The archive is presently in transit.

Thanks to Faber & Faber Ltd. for permission to quote from the English translation of *The Philokalia*, the poetry of T.S. Eliot and the poem by Philip Larkin; to Sister Isabel Mary SLG, The Editor of the *Fairacres Chronicle*, for permission to quote from the essay of Alexandru Popescu; and to the Salvation Army for permission to quote the song by T.D. Ferguson.

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As to mistakes, the customary formula applies: that is, that all those which remain, and all the opinions expressed, are entirely my own.

John H Watson
At Highcliffe, Christchurch, Dorset
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“Spiritual reality can never be derivative, it is the primordial mystery of Christ within us, continually nurturing the divine likeness. That is why, when you look with the eye of the spirit at a human person, an animal, a tree, a house, or any object in the created universe, there you will see, or at least remember, the transfigured Cross”.

Alexandru Popescu¹

One: Introduction

The visitor to Alexandria, arriving at Sidi Gaber railway station,² is thrown into a maelstrom: the traffic screeches and screams, vagrants cry out for cash, shady salesmen on the footpath offer bargains, taxi drivers appeal for passengers, and a dozen amplified muezzins affirm the majesty and superlative greatness of God. In the background there remains the hullabaloo of the station itself. When transport is secured, the driver mimics every other motorist in the city; the constant bleeping of the car’s horn asserts unequivocally, ‘Look out! I am here!’

Driving away from Sidi Gaber the commotion and confusion does not lessen, but travelling through the clamour of Omar Lutfy Street the visitor is suddenly conscious of an imposing church on the right hand side of the road and tram track. Externally imposing, the house of worship commands a block of several hundred metres. Perhaps this sanctuary offers silence to the stranger buffeted by the chaos of the station and the city streets?

The expectation is undermined as soon as one steps from the pavement into the courtyard on the south side of the building. It is a hive of activity. Guarded by armed police, as churches, mosques and synagogues must be in modern Egypt, the enclosure is filled with people moving in every direction. This enclave is not only a place of worship for the Coptic Orthodox Church, the ancient traditional church of Egypt, but is also a social centre for the Copts. It is a place of education and study. For children and young people it is also a place for games, fun and friendship. The adult conversations are personal, family, ecclesiastical, and spiritual: the discussion is also, of course, political, because this is Coptic ground where their dreams and aspirations may be given expression. The courtyard is buzzing.

A wide, palatial stairway to the left ascends high above the courtyard and leads to the narthex at the Western end of the main nave of the church. The central worshipping area is elevated some metres overhead, rising above the entrance yard; below are offices, a bookshop and an air-conditioned library. Worshippers mount the stairs and find themselves in a well-lit, spacious nave. The roof is high. There is a mixture of religious art; some of it is very clearly Coptic, emanating from the recent school of Coptic art, led by the great Master iconographer Professor Isaac Fanous. His *atelier* is in Cairo but his work is known throughout Egypt and the Coptic Diaspora. Other work is of a kind that might be seen in any church in the West, a mirroring of the style of Italian masters. An iconostasis separates the nave from the *Haikal*; in Coptic Orthodoxy this is the entire Sanctuary area and the Altar where the Divine Liturgy is faithfully completed every day. The

¹ Fairacres Chronicle Vol. 34 No.1. Oxford, 2001. p.22

² The second largest railway station in the city, it is the first place to detrain from the Cairo-Alexandria express.

liturgy is ritualistically presented in a church shrouded in the smoke of the incense. Coptic chant is unaccompanied, apart from the controlled pointing of the text by the metallic ring of the solitary *naqus* (a pair of small hand-cymbals) or the *trianto* (triangle). The affect upon the worshipper, whether a native Copt who has known the rite from childhood or a foreigner amazed by the mystery, is wholly awe-inspiring.

Returning to the courtyard below, and moving towards the East End of the church, there is a tunnel running right under the Sanctuary into another enclosure on the northside of the building. This area contains various conveniences, including a small kiosk, which sells confectionery and snacks, and a playground where boys play football. The main feature of the space, in its southeastern corner, is a shrine. This holy place has its own vestibule that leads to the central tomb.³

This sacred space is a haven of calm and inner healing. Outwardly no distance from the pandemonium of the railway station, the bustle of Omar Lutfy Street or the eager exchanges of the congregation, it is inwardly on an entirely different plane. Here rests the body of *Abouna*⁴ Bishoi Kamel who was the inspiration, the living soul and the intellectual force of the Coptic Orthodox parish and Church of *Mar Girgis* (Saint George) in Sporting, Alexandria from Wednesday 2 December 1959⁵ until the day of his death on Wednesday 21 March 1979.⁶ Even when he was far away from Egypt, the people of his church felt his presence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century his shrine is frequently filled with students and adolescents who are far too young to have known him during his lifetime but who are eager to invite his prayers on their behalf because of his reputation as ascetic, sage and confessor.

Everyone entering the modest mausoleum removes their shoes as they would in many Coptic Orthodox sanctuaries. It is certain that this practice is very primitive and that it has its origin in “the general Semitic sense that a condition of shoelessness is a sacrament of reverence”.⁷ It is natural to reflect upon the record in the Book of the Exodus; “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground”.⁸ The casting off of footwear might be understood as a ‘placing-to-the-side’ of the more tangible pre-occupations of the pilgrim. The intention, when barefoot, is to abide and remain with the Holy.⁹ Certainly, the young people here in Alexandria are conscious of a special place, where the divine penetrates the temporal and holds out the promise of help and comfort through a living encounter with the holy person.¹⁰ A visiting Western scholar on 14 May 2001 interviewed a substantial number of teenage students at this Alexandrian shrine. Each one said that they had come to be close to the holiest of men, in his tomb, and to ask for his help with their problems and needs. Some older visitors to the tomb said that they came every day to ask for the priest’s help. One elderly lady, who had been a member of the congregation since the inception of the parish in 1959, explained that it was natural to continue to speak with someone from whom she had sought advice for decades of her life.

³ ‘Shrine’ is *ROFAT* in Arabic and in Coptic *PISOMA*. In her dated but classic study, Winifred S. Blackman has an interesting discussion of the tombs of Muslim sheiks and Coptic saints. *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, London, 1927, pp. 240-251.

⁴ ‘Father’, the title used to address a Coptic priest or monk. A possessive form: ‘our father’.

⁵ In the Coptic Calendar 22 Hathor, 1675 *Anno Martyrii* (Latin, in the year of the martyrs) The Coptic Calendar dates from August 29, AD 284, the date of the accession of the Emperor Diocletian who relentlessly persecuted the Church.

⁶ 12 Paramhat 1695 AM.

⁷ Kenneth Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque*. London 1959. p.25.

⁸ Exodus 3.5.

⁹ Muslim practice at the mosque is based upon the Qur’an’s gloss on Exodus 3 in Surah 20.12: “Take off thy sandals! Behold, thou art in the twice-hallowed valley.” Al-Tabari dates the custom from the time of Umar, but other authorities suggest the second year of the Hijrah.

¹⁰ See Jennifer Westwood, *Sacred Journeys*, London 1997.

The shrine of Abouna Bishoi Kamel is significant for modern Coptic self-understanding. It expresses physically the reality of quickening sanctity and the power of holy persons to assist in the life of the contemporary church. The sense of sanctification is so pervasive as to be almost tangible. The attachment to intercession and supplication – addressed to and effected by the saint – is similarly palpable. The memorial has a universal reference at the beginning of the twenty-first century. There are few, if any, similar modern shrines in Western churches. Coptic commitment to the saints, to miracles and other supernatural events, frequently leads them to tell the foreign guest: “For you heaven is closed, but for we Copts it is still open”. It is true that confidence in these beliefs is almost absent in the West. Poetic sensibility is more receptive to such things and a modern English agnostic might have been writing about the Coptic shrine:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.¹¹

The dialogue between the visitor and the saint in the Alexandrian shrine would have been equally clear to a great Anglican poet:

You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid...
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.¹²

In his death this extraordinary Coptic priest has provided the Alexandrian church with a holy space for serious devotional encounter. In his life as a pastor he touched the church with healing and initiated a series of important social-service projects. As a theologian and teacher he provided an authentic *theologia crucis*,¹³ and a workable ascetic theology, most notably in his confrontation with cancer. In an hour of crisis for the Copts he pierced the complacency of mere ecclesiasticism with theological truth. Abouna Bishoi Kamel’s continuing presence in Coptic Egypt is such that no student of Oriental Orthodoxy can neglect him, and that is the justification for the present essay.

¹¹ *Church Going* (1955) by Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

¹² *Little Gidding* (1943) the last of the Four Quartets. T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

¹³ *theologia crucis* (Latin: Theology of the Cross): Martin Luther taught a theology in which our knowledge of the Being of God should be derived from the study of Christ in his humiliation and suffering. There is more than an echo in the teaching of Father Bishoi.

Two

What can we know of any man? And, when all is said and done, how little do we understand those of whom we boast that we can read them like an open book. Man of himself can create nothing. The impetus for creation is not of this world, this world that 'is too much with us', and it is just because there are so few who have spiritual insight into things not of this world that our sense of values is so easily warped.

Eric Fenby¹⁴

Sami Kamel was born on 6 December 1931 in the town of Damanhur, which has stood in the middle of the western Delta for at least four thousand years. His parents were devout Coptic Christians. They had recently arrived from Manoufia. Damanhur is an historic centre, known in pharaonic times as *Temaïen en-Heru* and dedicated to the god Horus. In the Greco-Roman period it became *Hermopolis Parva*. Damanhur at the beginning of the twenty-first century has a substantial population and is an important railway junction. It is located 80-km southeast of Alexandria & 160-km northwest of Cairo.¹⁵

Sami was raised as a devout Copt. He assisted in the sanctuary as a child and learnt to read Coptic, the liturgical language of his people. Just before the Second World War, and immediately after his seventh birthday, Sami joined his primary school. He was an excellent pupil and is remembered by retired members of the staff and by fellow pupils as an unusually hardworking boy. His four-year primary course was followed by five years in secondary education. Sami chose the Science course as his central option. At the age of sixteen, he joined the Faculty of Science at the University of Alexandria. His widow, Sister Angel Bassili, remembers this period in his biography:¹⁶

In his Christian life Sami looked for good examples in the Church. A great influence on him was a man called Yussef Habib. He was a gentle and quiet man, living a celibate life as part of his commitment. He had a very good job but he devoted himself to the service of God in the church. When he was not at work then he was in constant attendance at services like the Raising of Incense. He knew all the Coptic hymns by heart. He was a model of piety. Sami Kamel recognised virtue in the life of Yussef Habib and took him as a model of Christian living.

During his time as an undergraduate Sami took responsibility as a teacher with the Sunday School movement¹⁷ in the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Moharram Bey in Alexandria.

¹⁴ Eric Fenby, *Delius as I knew him*, London 1936.

¹⁵ In Damanhur, the birthplace of the holy man who is the subject of this paper, there are *mulids* (birthday festivals) in November for a Muslim Sheik, Abu Rish, and in January for a 19th century Jewish mystic called Abu Khatzeira. In the present political climate, the authorities keep all non-Jewish Egyptians out of the January festival. Most pilgrims are Europeans and Israelis who bring their sick relatives to the shrine, or collect bottled water that is blessed during the festival.

¹⁶ NB. Sister Angel's contributions appear in direct quotation and are recorded in this format throughout the text.

¹⁷ See esp. Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche*, Hamburg. Lit Verlag. 1998.

When he was a student, Sami used to go to church regularly but when the service had ended he would always quickly run away. A devout Copt called Dr. Raheb Abdel Nour noticed how Sami always ran off and so one day he stood at the door and stopped him. Dr. Abdel Nour explained that they needed help in the church, especially from young educated Copts. Sami agreed to help Raheb and they became friends. Sami looked up to the doctor as an example. He always remembered that it was Dr. Raheb Abdel Nour who first placed him in the service of the Church.

He graduated *summa cum laude* in the summer of 1951 and was appointed as science teacher at Ramleh Secondary School, also in the great Mediterranean metropolis. The city of Alexandria was to be the centre of his life's work as a teacher and later as a priest.

Although he was now a graduate-teacher, Sami Kamel continued to be a determined student. Within two years of his graduation he was the recipient of two diplomas in Psychology and Education at ordinary and higher levels, coming top of the class on both occasions. In 1956 he graduated from the Alexandrian Theological College with first class honours and was elected Secretary General in the Association of Servants of the Church. After part-time studies in the Faculty of Humanities at his university he successfully completed a degree in Philosophy.

In 1957, Sami was appointed an associate professor in the Higher Institute of Education at Alexandria University, under the direction of the Ministry of Education. He continued to teach and labour in the Church, being now established as a man of considerable intellectual gifts with a character of acknowledged charm and humility. The completeness of his mind and the empathy of his nature were evident from his ability to excel in art, education, philosophy, psychology, science and theology. For Sami all scholarship was related to the quest for and knowledge of God, so that even the simple tasks of study had larger meaning. His unusual range of academic interests and his genuine erudition in all these fields were always harnessed to the service of the Church. His counsel, even though it was sometimes ignored, endures as a major contribution to Coptic Orthodox History, especially when related to the process of patriarchal election and the infiltration of *episcopi vigantes* into the Coptic Orthodox Church. As a theologian he faithfully tried to recall the Copts to essential aspects of their Orthodox patristic heritage. In his attempts to define the Coptic experience and to interpret his own personal devotional life Bishoi had invariably focused upon Soteriology, the area of Christian thinking concerning salvation that is usually firmly related to biblical exegesis of all passages connected with the death and resurrection of Christ.

The use of the Coptic language in the church was important for Bishoi and is a major issue for the Copts today.¹⁸ The young associate professor in Alexandria in the late fifties would certainly have understood the earlier English professor who said, "Rescue a word. Discover a universe. Can we bury ourselves in a lexicon, and arise in the presence of God?"¹⁹ Sami Kamel's answer would unquestionably have been in the affirmative because of his intense devotional and cultural relationship with the Coptic language. The Arab conquest of Egypt in AD 641 and the resulting suppression of the native Christian population resulted in the gradual extinction of the Egyptian-Christian language in favour of Arabic:

¹⁸ See *Le Monde Copte* No.24, *Dossier: Language*. Limoges, France, 1994

¹⁹ Edwin Hoskyns, *Cambridge Sermons*, quoted by Michael A. Ramsey in *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, London, 1949. p.6

“Copts were compelled to abandon their Egyptian language in daily usage. But they kept it in their churches. They kept it in prayers. They kept it in their holy books. If they had not done so, the Coptic-Egyptian language would have been lost. The Coptic language *is* the Egyptian language in its last practical phase, because it is the only development of Egyptian which uses vowels. When any Copt writes or speaks about his identity, he expresses himself as an Egyptian. He feels that he is an Egyptian”.²⁰

It is true that Coptic had to yield to Arabic and accept its reduced status as a liturgical language. The effect upon the Liturgy, and especially the Scriptures, was devastating. The Coptic Orthodox Church had to adapt to the new vernacular. The Coptic language survived in Upper Egypt for centuries, and there are rare Coptic speakers today, but Arabic crept into the church and by the time of *Abouna*'s ordination it was dominant. Although Father Bishoi was happy to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Arabic, for a congregation essentially dependent upon that language, he preferred to use Coptic. He was a tireless teacher of the Coptic language and loved to pray first in that language.²¹

Not only in the advanced study of the Coptic language, in which he was most skilled, but also in the most mundane areas of academic work, Bishoi applied himself to the task in hand. He understood that the human pursuit of scientific knowledge and the urge for scholarly research in the humanities were consecrated tasks focused upon the wisdom of God. It was an unprecedented notion in Coptic circles at this time, though it reaches back to the perceptions of Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) in the heyday of the city's great catechetical school. Bishoi approved the declaration of Albert Einstein:

“...Science can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration towards truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion...The situation may be expressed by an image: science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind”.²²

Sami Kamel at twenty-six years of age appeared to be prepared for an active and fulfilled life in the Egyptian academic world, but a series of extraordinary events only eighteen months later were to completely change the direction of his life.

On the afternoon of Wednesday 18 November 1959 Sami Kamel took the young people in his Sunday School class to meet the new Coptic Patriarch. His Holiness Pope Kyrillos the Sixth had been consecrated only months before, on 10 May 1959, as the 116th successor to St. Mark the Evangelist. This patriarch, born Azer Yussef Atta on 2 August 1902, had been a monk since 23 February 1928. He was known as *Abouna Mina al-Muttawahad* (the Solitary) *al-Baramousi* (from the Monastery of the Romans) in the Wadi Natroun.²³ Pope Kyrillos was generally admired as an ascetic and liturgical mystic, who celebrated the Divine Liturgy every day from his ordination as a priest until the day of his death. His presence was commanding. Just before the

²⁰ Kamal Farid Isaac, *The Distress of the Egyptian Identity*. ISBN 977 17 0305 6. Arabic and English, Paris 2001. (This translation from the Arabic by A.J. Ormandy) The original has uncertain English. This is a rather militant tract.

²¹ Significant discussions concerning Coptic language and culture will be found in the various writings of L.S.B. MacCoull, including *Akten d. XVI Internationale Byzantinistenkongress*, Vienna, 1982. *The Fact of Coptic*, Bulletin of SAC, Cairo, 1985, International Congress of Classical Studies, August 1984, *Coptic Orthodoxy Today*, Coptic Church Review 4, 1983, *The Strange Death of Coptic Culture*, Coptic Church Review 10, 1989.

²² A.Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*, London 1950. p.29.

²³ See John Watson, *Abba Kyrillos: Patriarch and Solitary*. Coptic Church Review Vol.17, Nos. 1&2, Spring and Summer 1996.

arrival of Sami Kamel's youth group, the patriarch was involved in a discussion with Fr. Mina Iskander about the proposed *Mar Girgis* Church in Sporting. In 1957 the previous patriarch (Joseph the Second, reigned 1946-56) had purchased a plot near the tramway station at Sporting in Alexandria with a view to building a new parish church, but the scheme had not matured. Kyrillos said that they could not begin to build a church in Sporting until they had ordained a priest for it. When the Sunday School class entered the room Fr. Iskander pointed at Sami and in apparent spontaneity exclaimed, "Here is the man who can be the spiritual father to the people in Sporting!" After a brief exchange between Sami Kamel and Pope Kyrillos the Sixth, His Holiness the patriarch marked a cross on the young teacher's head and said, "God has given us the sign that you are to be a priest. I shall ordain you next Sunday". Sami explained that he was not married, but the Pope replied that if God had inspired him to make his decision then God would also inspire Sami to find a bride.

In common with all Orthodox churches, a Copt who is directed towards the priesthood, and who is not already a monk, must be married before his ordination. Monks cannot marry. Sami had no choice, according to the patriarch's command, but to find a suitable wife, and to find her very quickly indeed. The Pope, who was himself, of course, ordained into monastic celibacy, spoke of God 'electing' a wife for Sami Kamel. His future wife recalls this 'election'.

In my mind and in his mind we never thought about marriage. He was thinking about a monastery and he wanted to become a monk. In fact he had prepared everything to go to a monastery in 1958. But his father was sick and he postponed the visit. He knew that he was responsible for his father. When Pope Kyrillos asked him to be ordained in 1959, he told His Holiness that he was not thinking about a bride now, but about service in the church. Fr. Mina Iskander wanted to find a wife for him but Sami Kamel refused the offer. He told Fr. Mina that he wanted to discover the will of God in his life. Fr. Mina replied that if Pope Kyrillos wanted Sami to marry then he must be married.

Sami went to see his spiritual mentor, Yussef Habib, and told him that he was going away to pray at the Monastery of St. Samuel at al-Qalamun. So, he left on Thursday 19 November returning to Alexandria on Monday 23. He went immediately to Yussef Habib who asked him if he was satisfied. Sami said that he did not have a clear word from the Lord. "In that case you must obey the Pope", Yussef said. Sami spoke very calmly and asked how he could find a bride. Yussef told him, "I do think that there is one sister who will do for you".

Yussef Habib knew that two of Sami's closest friends in the Sunday School movement were George and Fayez Bassili. Angel Bassili, their sister, was active in the church. Following his conversation with Yussef Habib, the young ordinand went straight to the Bassili home and asked for Angel's hand in marriage.

The Pope was happy: "Tell her that she must accept!" It was about ten o'clock at night when Sami arrived. The marriage must be on the next day because of the Advent Fast. When there are fasts in the Coptic Church there are no marriages. So we had to arrange everything that night and prepared for the marriage at eight o'clock in the evening on the next day. It is, I suppose, a surprising story for you?

The Wedding Service took place on Tuesday 24 November 1959. Sami Kamel was ordained as Father Bishoi Kamel on Wednesday 2 December 1959 (22 Hathor 1675 in the year of the Martyrs²⁴). The newly ordained priest then retired to the Monastery of the Syrians in the Wadi Natroun for the standard forty-day retreat, traditionally identified with the period that Jesus spent in the Wilderness after his baptism (Matt. 4.1-11; Mark 1.12-13; Luke 4.1-13).

Baba Kyrillos was the very great teacher for my husband. He guided him in the priesthood. His Holiness used to come to Alexandria all the time and they often met. Sami Kamel had seen the patriarch many years before when he was a monk and was living as a solitary at a windmill in Cairo. At that time Sami said that when he was near to the monk he felt that he was in the presence of holiness. This feeling never really left Sami Kamel when much later the monk had become patriarch and he had become Father Bishoi Kamel. Pope Kyrillos was the great teacher of his life. Many years later when we were in Los Angeles, Abouna Bishoi distributed pictures of Pope Kyrillos to anyone he visited or met in church. He was asked why he did not usually do this in Egypt. Abouna said that the pope lives in Egypt and is known by all Copts. In the USA the second generation of Coptic migrants had often not even heard of the Pope. Abouna wished to emphasise the fatherhood of the patriarch as an important part of our tradition. He loved Pope Kyrillos.

Father Bishoi Kamel returned from his retreat to Alexandria and became the first parish priest of the Church of St. George, Sporting. His ministry in Mar Girgis was a sacrifice for him and Angel but one which they particularly understood and gladly embraced. *Abouna* once defined a priest as one who is “a martyr for Love and Church”. The labour and suffering involved in the establishment of this parish were taken for granted by the newly married couple. They viewed the people and problems of their parish with the insight of the spiritually purified and they saw beyond the banality of parochial life into the transformed world of Christ. A powerful and discriminating influence on them at this time was Father Mikhail Ibrahim of St. Mark’s Church in the Cairene suburb of Shoubra. Until his death on 26 March 1975 Mikhail Ibrahim was father confessor to Bishoi Kamel. He was the authentic but hidden priestly inspiration for Bishoi’s dedicated parochial life. Bishoi was himself renowned as a confessor and spiritual director but this too was a hidden aspect of his own successful pastoral activity.

In 1960 the primary task was the construction of a church building on the initially unpromising rectangular plot. Bishoi worked from the beginning with an architect, Farag Ekladios (d. 1992) and his brother Sheroubim. Both were devoted Copts, men of culture and Alexandrians. Their wide range of interests included traditional Egyptian architecture, the Coptic language and Orthodox hymnody. “Their devotion to Coptic heritage earned them a special status in the hearts of many Copts. They built more than ten churches in Alexandria, including St. George’s Church, Sporting. They devoted most of their talents to establishing the buildings of St. Mina’s Monastery in the Mariout Desert. They were very close friends of H.H. Pope Kyrillos the Sixth”.²⁵

At first the crypt was used for worship but slowly the building grew and eventually towered over the area. In a moment of spiritual intuition, Pope Kyrillos delegated Amba Maximus of Kaliubeya

²⁴ See *The Calendar of the Coptic Church* in Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt Ancient and Modern*, Cairo 1977. pp.72-131

²⁵ CSCIL. File ABKI. Tadros Yacoub Malaty. 10.01.

to consecrate the church. This bishop was recognised for his holy life and was exceptional because he wore the great schema of a monastic 'hermit' even when a bishop. The understanding that a bishop must be a man of personal holiness was certainly more important for Father Bishoi than any other imaginable qualification.

The consecration took place on 17 November 1968 (7 Hathor AM 1692). The date was chosen by the patriarch because the first church to be dedicated to Mar Girgis was consecrated on this same day over fifteen centuries earlier at Lydda in Syria, the traditional birthplace of the 'Great Martyr'.²⁶ St. George's, Sporting became, in a relatively short period, one of the best known parishes in Egypt with a liturgical life, social services policy, evangelistic outreach and teaching programme that has been held up as an example not only to the Egyptian church but throughout the region.

During the period of his ministry at Sporting, Bishoi Kamel was directly responsible for the construction a number of daughter churches in suburban Alexandria including those at Cleopatrales-Bains, Labban, Sidi Bishr, Hadara, Ibrahimiya and Mostafa. He instituted a nursery school at Sporting on 11 September 1972 (Coptic New Years Day, AM 1688). A parish nursery was not just a novel idea in the early 70s – it was really very exceptional - but was soon adopted by churches in Alexandria and then throughout Egypt.

Following his ordination, with a vocation to the priesthood proclaimed by a patriarch of acknowledged godliness and wisdom, Father Bishoi's reputation was in the ascendant and he was required to travel extensively. He represented the Coptic Orthodox Church at the World Council of Churches in 1960 and 1965. Ecumenical meetings were held in Geneva and the Lebanon and on one occasion the patriarch gave him exceptional permission to stopover in Jerusalem when *en route* to a WCC conference.

Pope Kyrillos sent Father Bishoi to the United States of America in 1969, where he celebrated the Divine Liturgy in Los Angeles for the first time on 9 November 1969 (30 Babah in the Coptic Calendar). It was the feast day of St. Mark, the first Coptic patriarch of Alexandria. Bishoi was conscious of the historical significance of this event. At a deeper level, he was exalted by the unmistakable spiritual presence which he sensed that day. St. Mark, patron of the Copts, was with them. During his ministry in the USA, he made pastoral visits to the Egyptian Christian Diaspora in San Francisco, California: Denver, Colorado: Houston, Texas: Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington State. Later, he visited Jersey City on 15 May 1974, where he bought a church for the local Copts.²⁷

Although he was required to represent the Egyptian church abroad, and to work with the Copts of the Diaspora in America, Austria, England and France, his home for the two decades of his priestly ministry was always Alexandria. He died in the flat he shared with Tasouni Angel Bassili in Naucratis Street, close to one of the faculties of his old university, and, as we have noted, he is buried in the parish church where he started his work.

²⁶ In Orthodox tradition Mar Girgis is the principal martyr of the Diocletian persecution. Before his conversion to Christianity he was a *chiliarchos* (commander of a thousand) under the Emperor Diocletian. His feast day is April 23, the day when St. George was beheaded in AD 303. See *The Purple Mantle*, A. Kafetzopoulou. California, USA 2001.

²⁷ cf. Iris Habib El Masri *Magnetic Radiation: the story of Father Pishoy (sic) Kamel*. St. George Church Bookshop, Sporting, Alexandria. 1989. pp.12-14, 16; Tadros Yacoub Malaty, *Pastoral Work in the life of Fr. Pishoy (sic) Kamel*, California, 1979. pp. 6-8,34-35.

Three

Nothing, whether it be good or bad, happens to a person by blind chance. There is a provident God who steers the affairs of this world, and with each one of us there is a Guardian who does not miss anything, and whose watchfulness never relaxes or grows weak.

Saint Isaac of Nineveh

Father Bishoi was always a pastor. He approached ecumenism, social services, his clerical colleagues, his spiritual children and all the laity as the precious objects of God's love and consequently as the cause for his deepest pastoral concerns. He wished to view the ministry from the perspective of eternity, through the eyes of the Scriptures, with the daily assistance of the Eucharist and with a consciousness of the constant presence of the Church Triumphant. He certainly enjoyed considerable management skills, but he left the financial and administrative affairs of the parish to the council. He did not even know the budget at St. George's, Sporting. He believed that the priest's time was too valuable to expend on economic and business matters. He was not a passive person but he certainly believed that inspiration was more significant than organisation.

A favourite story about the priest illustrates the point. During a period of duty in the USA he found a church for sale. The Copts had no church in Los Angeles at that time. The down payment for the church, about 25% of the total purchasing price, was approximately \$25,000. The elders of the congregation opposed the idea and feared falling into debt. Bishoi said, "We have two weeks to get the money. If anyone finds a better offer let me have it. I will have the down payment in my pocket". The only 'pocket' he had was his faith, for he owned nothing. Within the allotted period, the priest collected the money, mostly with the help of younger members of the Coptic community in Los Angeles. He placed the cheques and money in his wallet and went to bank it. When he arrived at the cashier's desk he found that he had lost his wallet. He searched himself, the parking lot and roads close to the bank. He found nothing. Evening came and all hope was lost. Father Bishoi could not ask for a penny from anyone. He felt that he had failed. In the middle of the night, while the priest and his friends prayed in anguish, a man came asking for Father Bishoi Kamel. When they met, the stranger asked if the priest had lost his wallet. Father Bishoi spelt out what had happened and the man explained that he was a taxi driver who had carried the priest in his cab. The wallet with all the money was returned. Then Tasouni Angel, the wife of Bishoi, spoke in Arabic, thinking that the taxi driver would not understand her, "Ask him if he would like to have a reward". The man replied in Arabic, explaining that he was a Muslim: No. He wanted no reward but he would like to make a contribution to the building of the church.²⁸ Father Bishoi's comment was that God had taught him a lesson: "God is the One who takes care of church finances".

Fr. Bishoi Kamel was sent to Geneva from 10 July to 10 August 1960 to represent the Copts at a World Council of Churches conference on a *Christian Theology of Money*. When questioned about the event on his return home, he said that he could not approve of the western way of thinking about Money because it was too obviously influenced by social and financial developments in the Capitalist world. The WCC conference had shown no serious regard for spirituality. But more important things were accomplished by such a meeting: "The Coptic church as a whole may not have gained anything from this conference, but I gained a great deal personally

²⁸ The story is recorded in many places and esp. in Tadros Y. Malaty, op.cit. and in Iris Habib El Masri, op.cit.

by interacting with Christian leaders and thinkers from many other churches. Even money does some good”.

If he disregarded money, he despised ecclesiastical preferment and church politics even more. Bishoi now found himself as the colleague of many established Alexandrian priests including one of his former Sunday School teachers, Father Mikhail Saad. Saad had been ordained in 1947 and was eventually to establish the famed House of Grace in Semouha, not far from the Sidi Gaber railway station and Mar Girgis church.²⁹ Saad was also an accomplished writer and preacher. Parishes can be competitive but priests like Kamel and Saad were models of cooperation. Place seeking was alien to them. They were both devoted to evangelism and social services. They wished to build up their congregations as the Body of Christ in their location. A fellow priest at Sporting comments on their exemplary relationship:

“They were colleagues and they had mutual respect for one another. Fr. Mikhail was known for his firmness and Fr. Bishoi for his modesty. On many occasions, and during private discussions with me, Fr. Bishoi gave wonderful and positive comments on Fr. Mikhail’s ministry”.³⁰

Of *Abouna*’s attitude to politics in general and church politics in particular Tadros Malaty has said:

“For him, his spiritual life and the edification of the Church have the priority even in his thoughts. He believed that the spiritual leader has the power to create leaders in all aspects of life. He encouraged young people to be proactive and have their role in the ‘Alexandrian general Board of Deacons’ (*El-Maglis El-Meli Elsakandari.*) At the time he did not accept the possibility that a priest should be chosen or appointed to this Board. Also he encouraged the Christians to get involved in the election of the members of the ‘Peoples Council’ (the Egyptian Parliament). But he did not share in the election”.³¹

Abouna always recognised individual talents and special needs in the congregation. One of the most successful developments at Sporting was the association founded to give support to children requiring individual attention. He was concerned for the number of broken families with nominal faith and for the fate of the increasing number of orphans in the parish. He entrusted Aida Gabriel Eskaros with the development of this work. He recognised the strength of her personality and admired her expertise with children. He also valued her skill in establishing valuable contacts throughout Alexandria. Aida had a natural gift for friendship with everyone. Because of his good standing in the district some landlords donated empty flats to the church, instructing Bishoi to use them as he saw fit. A number of service units for children were quickly established in the parish. He visited the flats every day and his attention to detail was such that he instructed Aida and her ‘carers’ to teach the children to eat with knives and forks, which was unheard of for children from such poor backgrounds in upper Egypt and the Delta. Whenever he suggested a new project for the children, he would say, “They are the children of the King”. Although this association was a major scheme of Coptic Christian Aid it was in reality the tip of an iceberg. *Abouna* initiated many different social services projects and they have endured. In 1986 the children’s association, which he had founded so many years before, purchased a villa of six dormitories with a dining hall and a

²⁹ The work was completed in 1993 when Saad was over eighty years of age.

³⁰ CSCIL. File ABKI. TYM. 10.01.

³¹ CSCIL. File ABKI. TYM. 10.01.

study room for twenty boys. Aida Gabriel is President of the Board administering this work into the new millennium.³²

Bishoi soon became aware of the need for more priests at Mar Girgis, a parish that was expanding exponentially. He called for vocations. Some members of the congregation were uncertain: it was often said that 'one priest in one parish is sufficient'. A distinguished Protestant minister advised Bishoi that it was always better to have only one minister-of-religion in a parish because of the inevitable differences of opinion. It was best to avoid clashes by excluding other ordination candidates. Bishoi ignored the warnings and with the passing of time there were five priests at Mar Girgis. The collaboration was a success. An accountant who became one of the ordained team, and eventually a distinguished theologian and author, remembers the sense of serving in a close-knit crew: "The secret of the success of St. George's parish in Sporting was the mutual love and understanding created in the church by our beloved Father Bishoi. The church was an excellent example of the reciprocal love that ought to exist between priests. We worked together as priests of one parish. Every item of pastoral concern was pursued with the spirit of love and with respect for each priest's opinion".³³ In fact Bishoi extended the team even more by surrounding the parish church with satellite churches. A natural consequence was that the parish church congregation grew marginally less, as a result of the expansion. He was delighted. The numbers of people attending the church at Sporting were of as little interest to him as the value of the monetary offerings. He was only impressed with administration when it aided the spiritual growth of the congregation. It was 'the *plebs sancta Dei*, the holy common people of God,' who mattered to him. [The phrase is in Dom Gregory Dix OSB, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, and a copy of the book still lies in Fr. Bishoi's study, worn and scored.³⁴]

It would be salutary if some future Coptologist were to create a monograph outlining the lives of Bishoi's many spiritual sons. They are too numerous to list here, but would include Hedra Bishop of Aswan, a wise and uncomplicated person who is widely respected by the clergy and laity in his Diocese; Bishop Tadros of Port Said, an active, diplomatic and 'politically correct' ecclesiastical administrator; Fr. Samuel Thebett sometime Engineer of Chicago, USA; Fr. Antonious Henein, the gifted and widely respected spiritual father of Copts in Los Angeles and throughout North America; Fr. Luka Sidaros who, before ordination, was a mathematician and university lecturer in Cairo; Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, the well-known theologian referred to above, and many other spiritually motivated priests. But careful study also shows that rapacious seekers of power in the church are listed amongst his 'sons'. These men stand in great contrast to their spiritual father. When a western scholar asked Tasouni Angel how this could be she simply smiled and named the persons concerned. One of *Abouna's* best-known and most audacious spiritual sons asked the same European if he had not heard that 'Even Jesus Christ himself had His twelve disciples and one of them was Judas Iscariot'. The same priest said that he had learnt from Abouna Bishoi Kamel how to cope with such vexing problems in the church: "I learnt from him how to manage the ever-existing paradox of applying Christian principles. For example: If I know something bad about someone, should I warn others from it to protect them, or should I cover-up for him in order to maintain love and avoid judging? Years later I still learnt from his basic principles and I was happy enough to grasp the paradoxes of church life".³⁵

³² Aida Gabriel Eskaros provided a complete dossier of documents to the present writer on 14.05.01.

³³ cf. Tadros Malaty (Trans. AJO.) op.cit. p.24

³⁴ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, London, 1945, pp.743.

³⁵ CSCIL. File. ABKI. USA/ 08.01.

In 2001 a dozen priests in Alexandria were identified as ‘sons of Father Bishoi’. But Tasouni Angel has identified several others from the time of *Abouna’s* ministry in the USA. One of his American ‘sons’ from Los Angeles eventually became Amba (Bishop) Dioskoros. This bright eyed, effervescent personality is now responsible for publishing and the media at the patriarchate in Cairo. In the USA he had studied at the California Institute of Technology gaining a doctorate in seismology. When he returned to Egypt to become a monk and adopted the name of his spiritual father becoming Abouna Bishoi al-Antuni (of the monastery of St. Anthony the Great) at the Red Sea. This monastic Abouna Bishoi was consecrated Amba Dioskoros on 10 June 1979, not long after the death of his greatest master. Another ‘son’ from Los Angeles was called Nabil Henein.

Abouna Antonious Henein was a fervent boy! Nabil Henein, as he was when we arrived in Los Angeles, soon became one of Abouna’s boys. We lived in the same house and everything Nabil could do he would do for us. He would drive Abouna anywhere. When we were coming back to Egypt he was crying and he ultimately went to the monastery. But he was advised to marry and work as a parish priest in the USA. This he did. Abouna Antonious can be very shy, but I know him as a fine man and an excellent priest in the tradition of my husband.

Coming from Tasouni Angel this is a fine testimony. Antonious Henein has his own pertinent recollections of his spiritual father.

“I met him for the first time when he came to establish the first church in Los Angeles in November 1969. At that time I was renting an apartment in a building owned by an Egyptian (Dr. Fahmi Attalla.) When Father Bishoi and his wife arrived, Dr. Attalla donated a rent-free apartment for Father Bishoi who resided there until the purchase of Saint Mark’s Church. Thus, I was living in the same building with Father Bishoi for a few months. When Saint Mark’s Church was purchased, Fr. Bishoi moved to a room attached to the Church. I also did the same thing to save the rent money and help with the Church’s monthly payment. That gave me the opportunity to know Father Bishoi not only on the level of being a parish member who is being served by him, like many others, but also on the level of sharing with him his everyday life. I witnessed that he applied in his personal life what he was teaching others. This made his teachings much more effective on me. I was learning by watching him as well as by listening to him. He was a living example of a Christian. Once he said, “People don’t need to hear about Christ any more, they have heard enough. They rather need to see Christ in us”.³⁶

In every area of his life, Father Bishoi concentrated upon the spiritual dimension and merely nodded towards those material things that are necessary to survive. One example is both illustrative and eloquently instructive. *Abouna* normally slept on the ground. If a guest came to the flat then he would sleep on the bed to hide the fact that he slept on the floor. He could not boast of his humility and asceticism.

³⁶ CSCIL File ABKI. AH/LA 08.01.

Four

For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation.

Rainer Maria Rilke

The twenty years of married life enjoyed by Father Bishoi and Sister Angel has a unique place in modern Coptic Orthodox annals but with a significant allusion to second century Coptic tradition. It was a married life of exceptional intimacy and devotion, which so clearly lives on beyond the death of one partner.

This marriage was a rare expression of two dimensions of religious service, the Coptic ministerial priesthood and the sanctified, if not officially 'consecrated', sisterhood. It was always a partnership in which Angel was seen as a 'Tasouni', literally 'my sister'. This has become the title used to address an active nun or consecrated woman in the service of the Church.

Nobody formally consecrated me really, but when Pope Kyrillos gave me the Holy Communion at the Nuptial Mass he came to me three times with the spoon. This Communion would only be normally given to Deacons – as he gave me Holy Communion for the third and last time he looked directly at me and said in a strong voice 'Now you are a Tasouni – a Deaconess'.

We always regarded the day of our marriage as the day of my consecration for service in the church.

Pope Kyrillos made this declaration on Tuesday 24 November 1959. In retrospect it should be seen as a revolutionary moment. Although women are excluded from many religious practices in the Coptic Orthodox Church, Tasouni Angel was, and remains, significantly proactive and in the eyes of many Copts the most important pioneer for women's active service in their church.

When we started at Mar Girgis in Sporting the children would always be told to address the female leaders in the church as 'Madame', in a French way, or as 'Miss' or whatever. Why did they use such terms? I think it was supposed to be polite. *Tasouni* – 'my sister' – is Coptic. Isn't it much nicer? I told them all to call me Tasouni and that was from that day in 1959. Many people think that Metropolitan Athanasius of Beni Suef got his ideas from the church in Alexandria – 'Tasouni' is now the term for every consecrated deaconess. This way of addressing a lady in active service for the church came from Pope Kyrillos and from the church in Alexandria when His Holiness told me, 'Now you are a Tasouni – a Deaconess'.

You probably noticed that some people use a French sounding name for me: 'Tasouni *Angelle*, not Angel'. Our friend Iris Habib El Masri uses the French form in her book about Abouna. You can use the English 'Angel'.

The official process for establishing full-time female service in the Coptic Orthodox Church has been much more cautious than the initiative of Pope Kyrillos. In January 1960 a parish priest at

Giza, in South Cairo formed a group of women to lead a consecrated life of service, but it was not until 19 March 1965 that an active community was officially established with episcopal approval at Beni Suef. By 30 January 1970 two women from this community were finally initiated as consecrated sisters. It is a startling fact that the rules and regulations for women's communities were not finalised until 1991.³⁷

The shared ministry enjoyed by *Abouna* Bishoi and *Tasouni* Angel was a critical force in the evolution of female service within an otherwise clearly defined hierarchical and patriarchal tradition. Their marriage remains decisive within the larger Coptic Renaissance of the twentieth century. It was also a marriage that affirmed an ancient Coptic tradition.

An early biographer writes: "It should be noted, with a sense of awe, that Bishoi and Angel lived in ascetic continence, denying themselves the mutual enjoyment of physical marriage".³⁸

I do not like it, but it is correct. Yes. You can quote it. Professor Iris Habib El Masri, our dear friend, wrote it. I do not like to say anything about myself, but we must keep the tradition alive. We do not have to invent a different way of saying it. Really, Father Bishoi and I had hoped to have a normal married relationship. We prayed to that end. His life as a priest had always to come first and we both agreed with that. Father had to pray every day and he used to pray with great length. Father had to serve the Church every day and that was the way of life for both of us. Our children were the children of the church. People often stayed in our home. Most days. People with special problems came. Father always came and told me that we would need to have someone to stay. He used to tell me that I need not ask what the problem was but just to see what happened. Some stayed for weeks, months or longer – one stayed for eight months. When the problem was solved – when all is well - then they can go. Many have come to be our children.

The loving parenthood of Bishoi and Angel was for everyone. The church at Sporting was their family. Their outflowing hospitality remains a byword in Alexandria over two decades after the priest's death.

The second century Coptic tradition repeatedly associated with the married life of Father Bishoi and Sister Angel concerns the twelfth Patriarch in the See of Saint Mark, Demetrius the First (189-231)³⁹, who was a contemporary of eight Roman emperors from Commodus (180-192) to Alexander Severus (222-235). Demetrius was an ordinary individual from Coptic farmer stock. He was illiterate and married. The *History of the Patriarchs* describes how his predecessor, the Patriarch Julian, had a dream in which an angel appeared and said that whoever brought him a bunch of grapes in the morning would be his successor. Although grapes were out of season at the time a Coptic smallholder found some and brought them to the patriarchal deathbed the next morning. Julian received the grapes from Demetrius a vinedresser. Then Pope Julian reported his dream to his attendants and died.

³⁷ The definitive study in English is Pieternella van Doorn-Harder. *Contemporary Coptic Nuns*. 1995 University of South Carolina, USA. See also *Le Monde Copte*, No. 16, *Dossier: La Femme*, Limoges France. 1989.

³⁸ Iris Habib El Masri op. cit. p.14

³⁹ The dates cited here are from the Coptic Encyclopaedia pp. 891-893. But Iris Habib El Masri, *The Story of the Copts*, MECC 1978. p.563 and Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt Ancient and Modern*, Cairo, 1977 pp.56 & 106 give different dates.

Demetrius the Coptic vinedresser was a layman. He had no wish to become patriarch but, despite his protestations that as a married man he was unfit for episcopal consecration, he was taken in chains to the *cathedra*⁴⁰ and consecrated virtually by force. The new patriarch had, in fact, been married as a child. He had lived with his wife as brother lives with sister, and in adult life they had agreed to continue together without a physical marital relationship. An angel now appeared to *Abba Demetrius the Vinedresser* and told him to reveal the truth about their conjugal life. The next morning, Demetrius celebrated the patriarchal liturgy without a text. Although reputedly illiterate he knew all Coptic texts off by heart. The mnemonic powers of Coptic Christians in the Greco-Roman period and of Middle Eastern people in general are widely respected by many scholars.

At the end of the liturgy all church members were commanded to remain behind. Demetrius took the glowing embers from a censer and placed them on his cloak, but the robe did not burn. His wife then had live coals placed upon her head-dress. It too did not burn. Demetrius told the congregation how he and his wife had lived together. The Coptic congregation immediately gave thanks to God for the reconciliation between tradition and necessity brought about by the revelation of this miraculous married life.⁴¹

All tradition has significance for the Copts and this particular tradition was to find unexpected but new life in the story of *Abouna* and his wife the *Tasouni*.

Wednesday 21 March 1979 (12 Baramhat 1695) in the Coptic Orthodox Calendar was the feast day commemorating the second century manifestation of the virginity of Saint Demetrius the Vinedresser. It was also the day of Father's death. Nobody could have known that both of them – the patriarch and the priest - had agreed to live with their wives without a bodily marital relationship. This significant fact was only celebrated on the day when Father Bishoi died. On that day it was known for the first time that this was in fact how he too lived his life, following the example of Pope Demetrius. One of the priests at the Patriarchate in Alexandria said this. It was a reminder of one Coptic Orthodox tradition.

It is also a reminder of related traditions in the contemporary Coptic Orthodox Church and in the Early Church. They ought not to be ignored. *Tasouni Hannah*, one of the two sisters consecrated for service on 30 January 1970, and the first mother superior of the active community at Beni Suef, had been forced to marry by her in-laws when quite young. She and her husband agreed to lead a celibate life. This was a success. Her husband died whilst in his twenties and she entered the community at Beni Suef. Here again we are reminded of patristic precedence. Saint Amoun, a desert father of the fourth century, carries a similar tradition. Amoun (295-353) “was the first of the monks to settle in Nitria. He was of noble birth and had rich parents, who forced him to marry against his will. When they had compelled him to this, he persuaded the girl in the bridal chamber that they should both preserve their virginity in secret. A few days later he departed for Nitria, while she for her part exhorted all her servants to adopt the celibate life, and indeed converted her house into a monastery”.⁴²

⁴⁰ The throne of a bishop.

⁴¹ The Feast of the manifestation of the Virginity of Demetrius is celebrated on Baramhat 12, Julian Calendar 8 March, Gregorian Calendar 21 March.

⁴² *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*. Trans. Norman Russell. Mowbrays, Oxford 1980. p. 111

The seventh century *Patrum Spirituale* of John Moschos bears a related tradition in the story of a priest of Samos “who was a very remarkable man. His parents forced him to marry against his will. Not only did this man not allow himself be led into the temptation of delight, even though he was young and legally married, but he even persuaded his wife to live with him in purity and continence. Together they learnt the Psalter and together they used to sing all the psalms in church, both preserving their virginity into old age”.⁴³

In contemporary society, whether occidental or oriental, self-gratification is the approved norm and it is instructive to reflect upon these venerable traditions, and their modern Coptic equivalents, where asceticism, self-denial and above all celibacy are so greatly valued. It may be rare to hear talk of renunciation of any kind in the post-modern world; especially where the primal force responsible for human survival is concerned. But ever-greater humility and purity of heart have been identified as the goal of celibacy among the Coptic Desert Fathers and equally among the Desert Mothers. The latter naturally receive much less attention in a patriarchal society.⁴⁴ One modern Western celibate has affirmed the Coptic Desert tradition: “I think that *that* would be what characterises my own experience more than anything else – the ever-increasing desire for humility and purity of heart.”⁴⁵ Certainly, we see this humility and purity in the life of Bishoi and Angel.

The visitor to St. George’s, Sporting in Alexandria at the beginning of the third millennium finds that the authentic parental ministry of *Abouna* and *Tasouni* continues. In her everyday re-enactment of their vocation since his death, Sister Angel has a natural authority and dignity that many church leaders would be glad to have.

Any western pilgrim to Egypt who had visited traditional Coptic shrines would be likely to look for *hanut* at *Abouna’s* shrine. The *hanut* is used to honour the relics of saints. It consists of some spices and perfumes often available under cover or stuck to a mass-produced icon of the person being honoured. *Hanut* can be found everywhere in Egypt. The spices have usually been poured onto the tombs of the local saint or in some cases on the caskets containing the relics of earlier saints. On the discovery of the body of a saint some bishops and priests put the *hanut* on the body itself. Tadros Yacoub Malaty has said that he dislikes the application of this preparation to the body.⁴⁶

Laying the *hanut* under transparent sticky paper on a card or folder is common practice in Coptic Egypt but it can also be unpopular “having no roots in our church. This practice developed recently, and for many theologians it is not acceptable”.⁴⁷ *Tasouni* Angel is frequently approached with requests for *hanut* from her husband’s shrine but she has forbidden their use, though she does allow many different pictures of Father Bishoi to be produced on prayer cards and calendars. The portraits are all extremely popular, like the ubiquitous images of Bishop Abram of Fayoum, Pope Kyrillos the Sixth and *Abouna* Yustus al-Antuni. Icons of these three popular holy men hang in the flat where Father Bishoi Kamel died. He lived daily in their domain.

Tasouni Angel guides, admonishes and instructs in a little room close to her husband’s shrine. Her first moments upon arriving at the church are always with him. Young people who are anxious, distressed or merely curious find in the widow of this surprising partnership an affective presence

⁴³ Cf. *Patrum Spirituale*. English: *The Spiritual Meadow*. Cistercian pub. Michigan USA 1992. p.88.

⁴⁴ See Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A study of repentance in Early Monastic sources*. Oxford 1987.

⁴⁵ Fr. Thomas Keating OCSO in Fall/Winter 2001 edition of *What is Enlightenment?* Massachusetts USA 2001.

⁴⁶ CSCIL. ABKI.TYM.10.01.

⁴⁷ CSCIL. ABKI. TYM. 10.01.

in their extremity and doubt. Tasouni is a doctor of the soul and a healer. She, with the strength and status of a mother for all, smiles and weeps with them, pointing them forward with hope.

Five

The invocation of the holy name of Jesus is the simplest way of praying always. When the holy name is repeated often by a humble attentive heart, the prayer is not lost by heaping up empty phrases, but holds fast to the Word and ‘brings forth fruit with patience’.

Catechism of the Catholic Church⁴⁸

Bishoi Kamel was a man of prayer. He constantly affirmed that the main work of the priest is “to pray for his people and to offer the liturgical sacrifice for their sake”. Father Bishoi loved to pray the Eucharistic liturgy of St. Basil the Great every day and on most days he did. In Egypt and in the Coptic Diaspora, he continued to celebrate a daily Liturgy until overtaken by his final illness. He believed that “prayer is the servant’s power in every aspect of the service”, and that it is the priest’s responsibility to teach his people the life of prayer. “Failing to do so means teaching them nothing”.⁴⁹

There were three distinct areas of prayer for *Abouna* in both personal practice and as a teacher in the parish. We know that the first of these was liturgical prayer. There were two other dimensions of prayer of comparable value that occupied his mind and heart: These were the prayer of the mind, expressed in meditation and theological study, and personal prayer, focused especially upon short prayers like the Jesus Prayer. In his prayer, and in each of these areas, he liked to pray with orderly deliberation. He wished to follow the classical method of not merely paying attention to words but letting the mind be in the heart, being present before God in full awareness of the Divine Presence and with an attitude of simplicity and humility. He invested time in prayer.

Pope Kyrillos had once told Bishoi that the divine office of *The Raising of Incense* could become ‘a major event in the devotional life of those Copts who were not free to attend the Eucharistic Liturgy every day’.⁵⁰ We have also seen that Yussef Habib, an early but significant educator for Bishoi, was a regular worshipper at the rite of *The Raising of Incense*. This daily form of liturgical prayer is short and can be celebrated at morning or evening. One of the prayers clearly alludes to Psalm 141.2, which explains the intention of this particular act of worship:

“Let my prayer be counted as incense
before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as
an evening sacrifice.”

The Raising of Incense is a brief but moving liturgy, including the Lord’s Prayer, but with an important physical element, in the preparation and use of incense. Incense can further concentration and express commitment to the creation, in a sense marking the ‘transfiguration of matter’. Incense may have deeper harmonies. We know that Bishoi absorbed many patristic insights and was certainly engaged with one early interpretation of incense:

“Should one wish to make incense, one will mingle, according to the Law, fragrant gums, cassia, aromatic shell and myrrh in equal amounts (cf. Exodus 30:34). These are the four

⁴⁸ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, popular and definitive edition, London 2000. p.568.

⁴⁹ All quotations here occur in Tadros Malaty op.cit. & Iris Habib El Masri op.cit.

⁵⁰ Tasouni Angel CSCIL audiotape. 14.05.01.

virtues.⁵¹ With their full and balanced development, the intellect will be safe from betrayal”.⁵²

Penance is a central element in the service. The incense is “a savour unto the forgiveness of sins”.⁵³ The service can be said in Coptic but the Arabic translation is widely used. English translations are generally very poor. Some are grammatically correct but they are empty of all poetry. The Coptic text beautifully refers to the One who loves mankind, usually translated in raw English as “Lover of Mankind”.

People returning from work in Alexandria, and those who simply needed to pray in church with a congregation, came to *Mar Girgis* in large numbers for the *Raising of Incense*. Fr. Bishoi was a regular and enthusiastic participant. The instinct of the patriarch was correct and this service proved to be a meaningful devotional constituent in the new parish life at Sporting.

To enter the study of Abouna Bishoi and examine his substantial library is to engage in a voyage of discovery. We detect a scholar of universal sympathies and profound orthodoxy. We are challenged with our own limitations. The ecumenical range is impressive: here are the Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92) on the Old Testament, the Roman Catholic Pope John the twenty-third (1881-1963) in his *Journal of a Soul*, Max Thurian the Taize monastic on Mary the Mother of God, a number of Student Christian Movement commentaries from the European Protestant exegete Joachim Jeremias and the Pelican commentaries of the Anglican Denis Nineham on St. Mark and the Congregationalist John Marsh on the Fourth Gospel. These works are all in English editions.

In liturgical studies, Bishoi’s library includes a carefully annotated copy of *The Shape of the Liturgy* by the Anglican Dom Gregory Dix OSB (1901-52), the classical study of the Divine Liturgy by the Byzantine mystical writer St. Nicolas Cabasilas (b. c.1322) and several volumes by the distinguished Russian Orthodox Dean of St. Vladimir’s New York, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann (1921- 83).

Bishoi engaged in close readings of many modern Eastern Orthodox theologians. He was a regular subscriber to the *St. Vladimir’s Quarterly* from Crestwood in the USA and greatly admired the Russian pastor St. John of Kronstadt (1829-1908).⁵⁴ But within Orthodoxy he concentrated upon patristic studies. He became a master in this sphere, having a special interest in the Cappadocian Fathers.⁵⁵ He had his personal copies of the weighty - in every sense - English translations of the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers.

Materials for Biblical study in this large private collection include over twenty SCM commentaries and the entire American Expositors Bible. Translations of the Holy Bible in a number of European languages stand on the shelves, with several different Arabic versions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁵¹ The four virtues are prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice. They are usually contrasted with the theological virtues of faith hope and charity.

⁵² Attributed to Evagrius of Pontus. See. *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Vol. One. Faber, London 1979. Trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware. pp. 57.

⁵³ Trans. of the Coptic by JHW.

⁵⁴ For over 50 years St. John of Kronstadt was a parish priest near St. Petersburg. His autobiography, *My Life in Christ*, was well known to Abouna Bishoi and in many respects their lives of mysticism and parochial service ran in parallel.

⁵⁵ St. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Gregory of Nyssa (younger brother of Basil). They were the chief influence leading to the final defeat of Arianism. Copies of their works are in Fr. Bishoi’s library in 2002.

In his prayer of the mind Bishoi was essentially focused upon the recovery and growth of classical orthodoxy in the Coptic Orthodox Church but he was well read in many subjects, including politics and current affairs. He read the leading Arabic newspaper *Al Ahram* every day, with other weekly newspapers. But his preferred reading was always the Holy Scriptures.

It is often said of Bishoi that he did not so much read the Bible as eat it, for it was part of his spiritual and intellectual metabolism. His concern was to celebrate ceaselessly the reciprocity between Holy Bible and daily life. Tasouni Angel can remember many occasions when *Abouna* spoke to her about his attempts to integrate Biblical passages into their lives.

We were keeping money for people, working as a kind of bank so that they could be confident about the safe keeping of their savings. One day a person came into the flat and stole the money. I worried about how to pay the money back. Father said that we must not worry. It was a beautiful opportunity to integrate a verse from the Bible into real life. He chose Philippians 4.6: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God". Faith was rewarded. Father received an anonymous donation to the church without any specification given about what the money should be used for. We decided not to use the money immediately, for we wanted to wait and see if the person - if the thief - would become known. No contact was made so when the people eventually came to ask for their money we distributed the donation to them. There was enough money for everybody and fifty Egyptian pounds left over. Our neighbour came to the flat with cookies on the same plate from which the money was stolen. I wanted to confront her. Father said that I should not. Instead he gave me a verse to live with. It was Hebrews 10: 34: "...and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting". We accepted this as a word to live by in these circumstances.

Father Bishoi's translation of a part of the *Philokalia*⁵⁶ was a major event for theologians involved in the Coptic Revival. This translation is indicative of an important opening towards Eastern Orthodoxy which has taken place amongst some Coptic intellectuals in the twentieth century. The translation of the *Philokalia* also marks a return to aspects of their own patristic credentials by a significant number of Coptic theologians.⁵⁷ After long centuries of theological torpor, followed by a nineteenth century revival essentially inspired by Biblical Protestantism, the Copts were once again seeking their primitive heritage.

Bishoi wanted to recover the structure of a theology that establishes the contemporary church in positive continuity with the past. He was not interested in bare nostalgia or anxiety about the privileges lost by the Church in the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century. He was in search of "the living memory of the Bride kept eternally youthful by the Love that dwells within

⁵⁶ The *Philokalia* is a collection of texts from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries by spiritual masters of Eastern Orthodoxy. It was first published in Venice in 1782.

⁵⁷ See *Thinking With the Church* in John H Watson *Among the Copts*, Brighton, 2000. pp.119-141.

her”.⁵⁸ The great Coptic Revival of the twentieth century, in which Bishoi was a major player, certainly owes most to Protestant Biblical studies but there is a growing body of lay scholars who are skilled and authoritative scholars in Patristics. The Cairo Centre for Patristic Studies is the best example of the patristic renaissance in Egypt.⁵⁹ The Centre works from primary sources. Bishoi’s translation of the early section of the *Philokalia* entitled *On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-three Texts* is a pioneering work. It is perhaps the first translation of this essay into Arabic, but it is translated from an English version. Bishoi Kamel follows the Greek *Philokalia* in ascribing the texts to St. Nilus of Sinai, though modern research has revealed it to be the work of Evagrius of Pontus and he, serendipitously, spent the last sixteen years of his life in Egypt.

Father Bishoi lived with this text for several years, in a state of mental and spiritual osmosis, and from all that we know of him it is obvious that this material was absorbed into his whole being. The following sentences are merely suggestive:

- If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.
- Prayer is the energy which accords with the dignity of the intellect; it is the intellect’s true and highest activity.
- Prayer is the remedy for gloom and despondency.
- Prayer is the fruit of joy and thankfulness.
- Prayer is the flower of gentleness and of freedom from anger.
- If you patiently accept what comes, you will always pray with joy.
- If you endure something painful out of love for wisdom, you will find the fruit of this during prayer.
- Bread is food for the body and holiness is food for the soul; spiritual prayer is food for the intellect.⁶⁰

Father Bishoi Kamel limited himself to the translation of the seventeen English language pages of Evagrius *On Prayer*. Tadros Malaty translated the rest of Volume One of the English language *Philokalia*, and a member of the Sporting congregation completed the whole of Volume Two.

An extension of this exploration of Orthodoxy was the publication of a small book about the Jesus Prayer. Dr. Emile Aziz (Now Bishop Moussa, a general bishop responsible for Youth Work) prepared this text. “Abouna Bishoi published the translation through the parish church, and encouraged the congregation to read it when he spoke at church conventions and during his personal visits”.⁶¹ “He loved short prayers like the Jesus prayer (Arabic. *Al-salah Yasu*’) and frequently asked penitents at confession to repeat it as a penance”.⁶² Fr. Bishoi wrote his own book on the prayer, entitled *Salat Yasu*’. It is still in print.⁶³ In common with most of *Abouna*’s spiritual sons, Father Antonious Henein recalls Bishoi Kamel “encouraging me very much to use the Jesus prayer. I still try to practice this use of the prayer, following his advice”. *Abouna*

⁵⁸ This phrase comes from *Oriental Lumen*, an apostolic letter of John Paul the Second. Though it dates from 2 May 1995, Fr. Bishoi could only have approved it, as do many indebted to this interesting Apostolic Letter. Catholic Truth Society, London 1995, p.17.

⁵⁹ See: *Centre Patristique du Caire, Le Monde Copte* No.13, p.5, Limoges, France, 1988. In addition to significant translations from Patristic Greek the Cairo Centre translated one of the most important works of Modern Eastern Orthodox scholarship into Arabic: *Being As Communion* by Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon (New York 1985). The Arabic is the outstanding modern contribution of the Centre.

⁶⁰ Trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware. op.cit. pp. 55-71.

⁶¹ CSCIL. File ABKI. TYM. 10.01.

⁶² Tadros Y. Malaty op.cit. p. 28.

⁶³ Tasouni Angel CSCIL audiotape. 15.05.01.

believed that to say the name of Jesus in a devout way was sufficient. If the name of Jesus becomes the centre of life it draws everything together. “He just told me to practice it”.⁶⁴ Bishoi was conforming to the advice of the great Russian expositors of the prayer: “The practice of the Jesus Prayer is simple. Stand before the Lord with the attention of the heart and call to Him, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’. The essential part of this is not the words, but faith, contrition and self-surrender to the Lord. With these feelings one can stand before the Lord even without any words, and it will still be prayer”.⁶⁵

In the light of the epigraph heading this chapter, taken from the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it is not surprising that many students of ascetic theology believe that the Jesus Prayer is now being used by more Christians in our own day than ever before. The highest evaluation of the prayer occurs in the writings of ‘A Monk of the Eastern Church’ who was once a Catholic priest: “We say ‘Jesus’ and we rest in a plenitude and totality that can no longer be taken from us. The name of Jesus then becomes the bearer of the whole Christ. It brings us into his total presence”.⁶⁶

The Jesus Prayer had a special appeal for Bishoi because of its roots in Holy Scripture (Esp. Luke 18:35-43 cf. Matthew 9:27, Luke 17:13, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:9-14, 1 Thessalonians 5:17 & etc).⁶⁷

The Jesus Prayer, an ancient but simple petition that blossoms into contemplative prayer, usually appears in its most perfected form in Greek:

- *Kyrie Jesu Christe huie tou Theou eleison me ton hamartohlon.*

In Coptic Orthodox usage the form is likely to be:

- *Ya Rabb Yasu’ al-Masih ibn Allah irhamni, ana al-khati’a.*

There are many possibilities. The Standard English use is invariably:

- *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*⁶⁸

The widespread use of the Jesus Prayer in contemporary Egypt must be attributed to the revival of Coptic monasticism and the concurrent renaissance in theological studies.⁶⁹ Pope Kyrillos the Sixth and Matta El Meskeen were both prominent advocates of this prayer. Although it is sometimes asserted that the Jesus Prayer has been widely practiced in Egypt from the time of St. Antony the Great and St. Paul of Thebes, it is more accurate to say that the prayer has been restored as a part of the renewal of contact with the great Eastern Orthodox churches. The prayer became a central element in the recovery of an Orthodox tradition in Egypt. Pope Shenouda has described Abouna Bishoi Kamel as the perfect representative of this tradition of prayer.⁷⁰

In private prayer, through reading, translating and writing Abouna Bishoi was prepared to look out of Egypt into the wider Church, but in liturgical prayer he liked to identify himself with the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. He often said that he was conscious of the presence of St. Basil of

⁶⁴ CSCIL. File ABKI. AHLA 08.01.

⁶⁵ Bishop Theophan the Recluse, *Letters on Christian Life* (German), Wiesbaden, 1947

⁶⁶ Preface to the Arabic trans. of *The Jesus Prayer*, Chevtogne, Belgium. Revised English edition. New York, 1997.

⁶⁷ There is an immense literature, including Simon Barrington-Ward, *The Jesus Prayer*. Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford, 1996. Brother Ramon & Simon Barrington-Ward, *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together*, Oxford, 2001. Tito Colliander, *The Way of the Ascetics*, Oxford 1983. Per-Olof Sjogren, *The Jesus Prayer*, SPCK, London 1975. Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name*. SLG Oxford 1974.

⁶⁸ See Kari Vogt, *The Coptic Practice of the Jesus Prayer in Between Desert and City*, Oslo 1997. pp. 111-120. See also, *Le Monde Copte*. No. 3. p.55, 1977: No.19, pp.33-35. 1991. Limoges, France.

⁶⁹ See esp. *Al-Bustan al-Ruhban* (The Garden of the Monks), Beni Suef, 1968. Matta El Meskeen *Hayat as-Salat al-Orthodoksia* (Orthodox Prayer Life), Monastery of St. Macarius, 1952.

⁷⁰ In the Arabic version of Ware’s *Power of the Name*. The Arabic is undated but published at Sporting.

Caesarea at the liturgy, just as he had known the nearness of St. Mark in Los Angeles. He was always proud of the great patristic theologians who had taught in Alexandria; not far from Mar Girgis at Sporting. He loved the thought that; 'We stand upon the shoulders of giants'. Father Bishoi always prayed with the Church Triumphant:

"Fr. Pishoy (sic) realised his membership in the body of Christ through his daily practice. He enjoyed communion with the whole Church, especially the *Theotokos*, the holy apostles, the early Fathers and the saints of all ages. He experienced this communion not only in the liturgical worship but also in his private room or wherever he was. I can say that Fr. Pishoy was really a close friend to the heavenly hosts and saints".⁷¹

Tasouni Angel Bassili has explained how her husband's life as a priest came first. Both accepted this. His life as a pastor she recognised as energetic, loving, intelligent and compassionate. Parochial life can be frighteningly claustrophobic. Institutional life is often obstructive. Father Bishoi was one of those who rose above every restriction into an all-inclusive dimension of living. He prayed. He prayed each day. He prayed all day. Liturgically he prayed at great length; on the street and in the car he prayed with the incomparable Jesus Prayer and at a thousand bedsides he prayed in intercession and supplication. Many who did not know him, when he was alive and praying, now find him to be a support in a world that is troubled and disjointed.

⁷¹ CSCIL. File ABKI. TYM. 10.01.

Six

“Neither sword, nor fire, nor exile, nor imprisonment disturbs me. I will not do what should not be done and I will not adopt what I have excommunicated in my own writings. I wrote that a bishop or metropolitan could not become a patriarch. How could I excommunicate myself by legalising today what I have forbidden yesterday, and by accepting what the holy fathers before me refused to accept.”

Abba Khail, Forty-sixth Patriarch of Alexandria AD 743-767.

Father Bishoi Kamel was a gifted scholar and careful theologian. He was also a priest of almost indefinable spiritual intuition, constantly wishing to be a witness for traditional Orthodoxy in the Coptic Orthodox Church of the twentieth century. His opportunity came in the seven months of patriarchal interregnum between Kyrillos the Sixth and Shenouda the Third. He did not choose the forum for the debate but it chose him. He was definitely more than equal to the occasion, though he lost the argument.

Pope Kyrillos the Sixth died on 9 March 1971. Within days of the patriarch’s death a rigorous and at times heavy-handed election campaign began.⁷² At Sporting in Alexandria, Bishoi noted that there were “many pamphlets in our hands.”

At first *Abouna* kept several copies of each new pamphlet and offered them to members of his congregation, but within a few weeks he had focused his sights upon two or three pamphlets. It took him a fortnight to produce his own, hand-written circular that was xeroxed and distributed in an edition of a few hundred.

In May 2001, three of the 1971 pamphlets can still be seen in Fr. Bishoi’s study in the Naucratis Street flat. These three leaflets enable us to examine the essentials of the debate at that time and to appreciate the importance of Fr. Bishoi’s moral testimony. The three pamphlets were all written within weeks of each other and are listed here in what may be the correct chronological order:

1. ‘CHURCH RULES for choosing the Patriarch’⁷³ was published within hours of the death of Pope Kyrillos the Sixth. It was deliberately prepared. There are seven pages of text in Arabic (4 pages in the English translation prepared for this essay). The leaflet contains a number of passages extracted from editions of the Magazine of the Sunday School Movement in the 1950s.

At that time the magazine’s Editor-in-Chief was Nazir Gayed, who was later to be a monk (1954), bishop (1962) and finally patriarch (1971). Nazir Gayed first became Father Antonious of the Monastery of the Syrians, then Bishop Shenouda, with responsibility for Education, only eight years later and, after just nine years, Pope Shenouda the Third. His rise through the hierarchy was rapid.⁷⁴

⁷² For an historical discussion see Otto F.A. Meinardus *Christian Egypt Faith and Life*, esp.pp.89-141. Cairo, 1970.

⁷³ CSCIL.NR/S01 A. Trans. from the Arabic by Dr. Nabil Raphael.

⁷⁴ It should be noted that the ‘general bishop’ Shenouda had only been a monk for 8 years before episcopal consecration. This is a very short period in the formation of a monk. We might compare this arrangement with that of a Western monk like Cardinal Basil Hume, a Benedictine who served in the same monastery for 35 years before his consecration as Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. It is frequently noted that Matta El Meskeen has remained a plain monk for over half a century. Pope Kyrillos had been a monk and solitary for over 30 years before his election to the patriarchate

2. 'HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS concerning Patriarchal Succession'⁷⁵ was prepared by the Coptic Orthodox House of Transcription at Shoubra in Cairo but does not name an author or editor. There are eight closely printed pages of Arabic text (5 in the English translation used here).

3. Father Bishoi Kamel wrote 'ECCLESIASTICAL TEACHINGS'⁷⁶ and his widow gave the manuscript to the present writer, though it is signed by "the Children of the Papal Diocese, published in the great city of Alexandria in memory of our bishop Pope Kyrillos the Sixth". The handwritten and Xeroxed text is thirty-five pages in Arabic (12 pages in English translation).

1) 'CHURCH RULES for choosing the Patriarch'

'Church Rules' clearly wishes to establish that diocesan bishops may not become the patriarch. It quotes with approval an article by Yassah Abdel Messieh because he is simply claiming to express the tradition of the Church in the Canons of the Ecumenical Council of Nicea (AD 325) and of two local fourth-century councils at Antioch and Sardica. The author of 'Church Rules' also approves the condemnation of Agabios who was a bishop before accepting the patriarchate of Antioch: "It was like a man marrying a girl then leaving her to marry her mother".

'Church Rules' draws attention to a Coptic council of 1865. Following the death of Demetrius the 110th patriarch, this council proclaimed that "any bishop or metropolitan who already has a diocese and tries to become patriarch may be excommunicated". Bishop Johannes, the Metropolitan of Giza, is quoted from his journal of 6 April 1954: "I have seen and observed what happened in the last election for the Patriarch, when a bishop was appointed, and I concluded that nominations can only come from the monks. This will preserve dignity and respect for everybody".

Nazir Gayed condemns those Copts who have elected a 'metropolitan' – *motram* - as patriarch in modern times: "It is clear that any Synod deciding to by-pass the decisions of ancient councils may be excommunicated". Gayed believed that a layman might become patriarch but not a metropolitan – "Church History informs us that deacons, businessmen, government employees and legislators have all become patriarchs but we do not come across one example of a metropolitan who became Patriarch of Alexandria. [It may be noted that there was - for some protagonists - a careful, polemical distinction between *oskaf*, bishop and *motram*, metropolitan. It will be important for any 'general bishop' wishing to ascend to the patriarchal throne to define the difference between his role and that of a diocesan leader, either a *motram* with a defined metropolitanical role or any *oskaf* who had a precise geographical area to call his own].

'Church Rules' has a fairly clear agenda. It presents a convincing argument against the election to the patriarchate of members of the episcopate who have their own geographical diocese. The pamphlet seems to have been designed to suggest that the Canons and Traditions invoked against diocesan claimants to the patriarchal throne would not apply to 'general' bishops. The position of 'general bishop' was new in the Coptic Orthodox Church at this time. These monks were consecrated to the episcopate, generally after a very brief period of monastic service, with clearly defined duties but without a diocese. They formed something like a Roman Curia and were departmental heads, having explicit executive responsibility. It seems clear that 'Church Rules' was produced because its editor knew that it would be essential to 'prove' that a general bishop

⁷⁵ CSCIL. RY/SO1/ B. Trans. from the Arabic by Dr. Rodolph Yanney.

⁷⁶ CSCIL NF/SO1/C. Trans. from the Arabic original by Miss Nirmeen Fawzy & Eng. Sawsan G.A. Hulsman-Khalil.

could become patriarch. There were two general bishops who were possible candidates for the post of Patriarch in 1971.

Abouna Makari Es-Souriani (b. Sa'ad Aziz 8 December 1920 – 6 October 1981) and Abouna Antonious Es-Souriani (b. Nazir Gayed 3 August 1923) were consecrated as 'general' bishops on 15 September 1962. Makari became Amba Samuel with responsibilities for social affairs and ecumenism and Antonious became Amba Shenouda with the mandate to supervise Coptic Education. Both general bishops entered the electoral programme in 1971. Both were men of considerable interest. Samuel was 'a small bustling man with a big heart',⁷⁷ an enthusiastic ecumenist and a brilliant reformer in the field of community service. His radical views were always advanced with remarkable refinement. Shenouda was a politician. Immediately after his appointment as a bishop he established his *dars el-guma'a* (the lesson of Friday) when he became recognised as an important public speaker. Neither Shenouda nor Samuel was a traditional Coptic bishop.⁷⁸ Both were demagogues. The most famous bishop of the early twentieth century was Abram of Fayoum (1829-1914) who scarcely spoke in public. He was a spiritual director and hardly left his diocese.⁷⁹ Pope Kyrillos was similar. He was famous as a hermit and miracle-worker and selected as patriarch because of his noted holiness. He is not known to have preached more than a few times but was famed as an exorcist, confessor and spiritual director.

It is impossible to know what Kyrillos believed about the possible appointment of a general bishop to replace him.⁸⁰ Some Copts believe that Kyrillos favoured the election of Samuel over Shenouda. Others are certain that he had deliberately created the concept of general bishops to exclude from the patriarchate those ambitious men he had selected for the new general episcopate. The many supporters of this view also hold that Kyrillos had deliberately not appointed Abouna Matta El-Meskeen, the spiritual father of the Monastery of St. Macarius, as a general bishop, in the expectation that he would become Pope. Matta El-Meskeen was very clearly a candidate within the traditional rules, but he had for some time experienced his own problems with Pope Kyrillos.

2. 'HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS concerning Patriarchal Succession'

If the Sunday School booklet appears to be a preparatory apologia for the general bishops, 'Historical Documents', a work of great simplicity and clarity, seems to gently shift the balance towards monastic candidates. Although the second pamphlet rehearses some of the material in 'Church Rules', including reference to the early Canons of ecumenical and local councils, it tends to emphasise certain liturgical points of importance. It discerns an inherent conflict in two separate episcopal consecrations for one man, and affirms that there is no rite of consecration in which a bishop or metropolitan may be consecrated as patriarch, with the implication that a patriarchal consecration is somehow superior to any customary episcopal consecration. 'Historical Documents' makes it clear that the fierce controversy in the Church, which arose because three of the last five patriarchs had formerly been consecrated metropolitans to dioceses, is far from over:

"Without any doubt, we have not yet forgotten the bitter fruit that the Church has reaped as a result of breaking this law during the time of the three Patriarchs who came before Kyrillos the Sixth. We cry to God, asking that he will not permit a repetition of this dark era in the

⁷⁷ *The Times*, London. Obituary. Monday 12 October 1981.

⁷⁸ For an interesting discussion of the sociology of Coptic Monasticism see Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts* Revised Edition. Cairo 1989. pp.186-197.,

⁷⁹ See esp. S.H. Leeder, *Modern Sons of the Pharaohs*, NY, 1918. pp. 265-304.

⁸⁰ But see the present writer's *Abba Kyrillos*, CCR, USA 1996 pp.37-44 & *Among the Copts*, Brighton 2000, pp.45-71 & 93-

holy Church. We believe that God will inspire our councillors and give them wisdom so that we may not fall again under the anathema of the holy Fathers“.

We do not know the author or authors of the booklet from the Shoubra House of Transcription. We do know that the writers were anxious to remind all Copts of their unavoidable but distressing endurance of the patriarchal ministry in the three decades before Kyrillos the Sixth. Pope John XIX (113th patriarch from 1928-42), Pope Macarius III, (114th patriarch from 1942-45) and Pope Joseph II (115th patriarch from 1946-56) were all diocesan bishops.⁸¹ All three had also been appointed metropolitans before their elections to the throne of St. Mark. Although the Copts regretted the reigns of John and Macarius, the notorious career of Pope Joseph the Second was regarded as especially shameful. He had joined a monastery as a teenager and by 1920 was consecrated a bishop in Upper Egypt. From 1942-44 he was acting patriarch and on 27 May 1946 was enthroned as patriarch. A series of scandals led to his suspension on 21 September 1955. Joseph died on 14 November 1956.⁸² There was an interregnum until the election of Kyrillos the Sixth in 1959. The authors of the Shoubra pamphlet would almost certainly have agreed with those many Copts who have felt that the difficulties experienced by the Copts in recent years are a “kind of divine judgement on the Church for breaking the canon law and removing these metropolitans from their sees.”⁸³

It may be noted that these three pamphlets, and many other similar products of the period, discuss the consecration of Pope Kyrillos the Fourth (reigned 1854-61). He was a young, reforming monk from the Monastery of Saint Anthony at the Red Sea who had worked in Ethiopia. Some have claimed that he had been a ‘general metropolitan’ who was then promoted to the patriarchate. All three pamphlets deny this, but for different reasons. It is generally agreed that Document No. 2687 in the Coptic museum, Old Cairo establishes that he was not a bishop at the time of his election. Much intrigue and uncertainty is attached to the figure of Kyrillos the Fourth who is believed to have been poisoned by Sa’id Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, on 30 January 1861.⁸⁴

3. ‘ECCLESIASTICAL TEACHINGS’

Father Bishoi Kamel wrote his highly controversial tract on the ‘Ecclesiastical Teachings’ after close scrutiny of all the related material. He was a man with a trained mind. He shows himself to be aware of all the problems outlined above, but he is convinced that general bishops may not be raised to the patriarchal throne. It must be borne in mind that he had met and admired both Shenouda and Samuel, that he was a friend of Matta El-Meskeen and a devoted follower of Kyrillos. It seems quite clear that he wished, at the time, to offer a considered, spiritually motivated guide for the people in his care. Fr. Bishoi was honest, perhaps too honest and straightforward for his own good. In addition to the words of Pope Khail, quoted above, his paper carries two scriptural epigraphs. “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37). “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8). At the time when he started writing his ‘Ecclesiastical Teachings’ Fr. Bishoi did not believe that Shenouda, in particular, was seeking election to the patriarchate. It would have been a complete

⁸¹ See Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*. Cairo, 1999. pp. 279-282.

⁸² See Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*. Morrow, New York 1963.

⁸³ G.H. Bebawi in *Bishops, but what Kind?* SPCK London 1982. p. 72

⁸⁴ See Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, London 1968. pp.103-106.

volte-face. Shenouda, as Nazir Gayed, admittedly in the years before general bishops, had earlier appeared to be one who denied any possibility of election from the episcopate to the patriarchate.

Fr. Bishoi advanced five main arguments in his pamphlet and, though some of these do not call for extensive restatement here, each must be noted.

- The ancient traditions and canons of the Coptic Orthodox Church state that the Patriarch of Alexandria should only be chosen from among the monks, and with a priestly rank not higher than that of archpriest. Fr. Bishoi believed that the Copts have always chosen their patriarchs from among the monks and in cases where this has not happened the election has been a disaster. He, too, cites the rubrics in the Consecration Rites. Referring to the Rite he quotes Yohanna Ibn Zakaria Ibn Al-Sebaa who wrote: "If the candidate is a monk he should be wearing the Great Schema. If he is not already wearing it, he should now. If he is a priest he is to be raised to the rank of archpriest. Then he is ready to be taken to the papal throne of Alexandria".

The practice of wearing the schema at a Coptic episcopal consecration can "definitely be dated back to the Middle Ages, but may have its roots in the sixth century or even earlier".⁸⁵ Pope Shenouda abolished it in 1972.

- On 29 June 1959 the Coptic Church and the Ethiopians signed an Agreement. Article four of this Ethiopian-Coptic covenant stresses that the Coptic Patriarch is chosen from among the monks and the new Patriarch-Catholicos for the Ethiopians should also be chosen from among monks "according to the valid laws and traditions" of the Copts, "within the terms outlined above", and that "this agreement is legally binding". The agreement includes the phrase; "This is the valid principle in the See of St. Mark".

Fr. Bishoi adds a comment. "The only person who will say that the Church does not state explicitly that a bishop cannot be consecrated patriarch is the bishop who wants to be patriarch".

- The Coptic Orthodox Church does not have 'general bishops' who are in any sense more eligible than any other bishop to be patriarch, for all are ineligible. "A bishop who is without a diocese and a bishop who has a diocese are both equal in rank. Both of them are bishops and both are ineligible for the patriarchal throne". The 'general bishop' is only different from a diocesan by not having a geographical area as his diocese".

Bishop Shenouda had earlier illustrated this point himself. On 10 May 1967 a new 'general bishop' was consecrated by Pope Kyrillos the Sixth and named Gregorios. He was appointed Bishop for Higher Education. Shenouda as Bishop for Education sent a telegram to the Pope: "The laws of the church prevent two bishops being consecrated for one diocese".

Fr. Bishoi adduced that "There is a diocese, although it does not have geographical boundaries. As long as there is a diocese there is no such concept as 'generality'. Why does anyone say that there is a general bishop when our own Bishop for Education himself states that he has a parish?"

His final comment on general bishops is perhaps too generous to the individuals involved. "They deserve our respect and appreciation for their many services and overflowing love for the holy Church. The kind of appreciation they should receive is not to be promoted to the patriarchate".

⁸⁵ G. H. Bebawi op.cit. p.71

- The hands of consecration cannot be laid twice on any bishop and no bishop or metropolitan can be moved from one diocese or jurisdiction to another. Fr. Bishoi criticises those who have said that the way out of the dilemma is to draw attention to the likely existence of an earlier “accession rite” for a bishop who is raised to patriarch. With heavy irony, he comments: “I beg the reader to tolerate my ignorance and stupidity. I have never heard of an ‘accession rite’. Do they mean a ritual by which the bishops before Pope Kyrillos the Sixth were proclaimed as patriarchs? Is it a proclamation ceremony? It has never happened, throughout Church History, that a bishop became a patriarch”.
- The Apostolic Tradition, jealously preserved in the Coptic Orthodox Church, declares that if the people accept the consecration then God accepts it, but if objections are raised then consecration must be delayed. Fr. Bishoi produces a rare peroration. “Even if your claims, that general bishops and metropolitans can be consecrated patriarchs, have substance, there is an orphan people here crying ‘We do not want you’. Are the previous pamphlets shouting ‘ We do not want you’ insufficient for you? ‘ Are the thousands of signatures saying ‘ We do not want you’ not enough for you? Is a cry like this not enough to stop your accession? Thousands here are shouting, “We do not want a bishop or metropolitan to sit on the papal throne’ “.

Bishop Samuel, Bishop Shenouda and Father Matta were all nominated for the patriarchate. Matta’s name did not appear in the final round of voting, though a little known monk from the Monastery of St. Makarios gained several hundred votes from the many Copts who were opposed to the appearance of the names of bishops in the lists. Samuel, Shenouda and the lesser-known monk all received adequate electoral support. Bishop Samuel obtained the maximum number of votes from the Electoral College in the final phase of the patriarchal election of 1971, but his name was not drawn from the chalice at the final altar lottery. Mohammed Heikal, in his major study of the Sadat period, unequivocally states that the ballot was rigged in favour of Shenouda.⁸⁶ Heikal is generally acknowledged to be one of the most influential commentators in the Arab World. He has edited *Al Ahrām*, the impressive and widely quoted Arab daily newspaper. If Heikal was right about Sadat’s involvement in Shenouda’s appointment it is surprising that relations between president and patriarch soured so quickly. It is necessary to remain sceptical about Heikal’s claims. No conclusive evidence has ever been presented.⁸⁷

Soon after the election of the new Pope, Fr. Bishoi met His Holiness Pope Shenouda and told him that he would never have written his pamphlet if he had known that the Bishop of Education was going to “put himself forward to be Patriarch”. Pope Shenouda summoned Father Bishoi to his office. They were locked away together for over four hours. I do not know what was said. Father never discussed it. But, afterwards, he kept on telling me that he would never have written the leaflet if he had known that Bishop Shenouda had wanted “to put himself forward” to be the Coptic Patriarch.

One of Bishoi’s spiritual sons, writing thirty years later, comments: “I think that a ‘general bishop’ is not a traditional thing in the church. A Bishop is a shepherd, a father, and therefore must have a flock, i.e. a Diocese. Therefore, I think that even discussing the possibility of a general bishop becoming a patriarch is not a valid question”.⁸⁸ At the beginning of the new millennium, many

⁸⁶ Mohamed Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*. Andre Deutsch, London 1983. p.162.

⁸⁷ An extremely interesting and very important examination of Shenouda can be found in P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Modern Egypt*, Fourth Edition, London 1991. pp.421-3, 451

⁸⁸ CSCIL. File ABKI. USA 05.01.

Alexandrian Copts will still say that they believe that Shenouda never forgave Bishoi for his intervention in this fierce contest. The interlocutor will always be reminded that the conversation is private and that there must be a constraint upon any attribution.

Father Tadros Malaty believes that *Abouna's* pamphlet “was never intended as an attack on the Pope personally, but rather on the politics involved. According to our tradition, the Pope should be elected from among the monks only. As a church principle, Fr.Pishoy (sic) refused to accept the election of the Pope from among the “Bishops in general”. However, once election was over, Father Pishoy resigned to God’s will and there was no conflict whatsoever between the two of them. His Holiness Pope Shenouda the Third used to say that he loved Fr. Pishoy because in his writings he expressed his thoughts but never attacked personalities”.⁸⁹

It is perhaps too much, even for a loyal Coptic priest, to describe the shrewd handling of the election as “God’s will”. The four-hour conversation with Shenouda, and Bishoi’s vigorous defence of Coptic Tradition suggests that the issues surrounding the election were not resolved in the priest’s mind. His contention that the only appreciation given to episcopal candidates ought to be that they are not ‘promoted’ could not be more conclusive. But he would certainly have yielded to patriarchal pressure, not because he was lacking in courage, or because he thought that the outcome of the election was right, but because he already knew the cost of this kind of controversy for the Copts in a Muslim Land. Within the context of church polity, and the wider Coptic Renaissance at that time, Father Bishoi Kamel must also have been conscious of the skilful manipulation of the election by one group of claimants to ecclesiastical power. A new generation of ambitious monastics had emerged from the Sunday School Movement and the wider Renaissance. It can be argued that their campaign was not only successful but also necessary.

Towards the end of his life, in the late seventies, Father Bishoi had another major disagreement with Pope Shenouda on a dispute about Church Order and Orthodoxy. This concerned the question of *episcopi vigantes* (Latin “wandering bishops”) and their incorporation into the Coptic Orthodox Church.⁹⁰

The Coptic Orthodox Church has a long history of involvement in irregular consecrations, going back for several centuries. Individual members of the Coptic episcopate were involved in uncanonical acts of consecration in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Father Bishoi had travelled extensively before this 1970s controversy surfaced and he knew what *episcopi vigantes* were, especially from his experience of these groups in the USA. *Abouna* believed, quite correctly, that the patriarch did not know what “wandering bishops” represented. He was certain that none of the roaming representatives of these sects embodied an authentic orthodox congregation or tradition.

Episcopi vigantes is the name given to persons who seem to have been consecrated as a bishop in an irregular or clandestine manner or who, having been regularly consecrated in the past, have been excommunicated by the Church that consecrated them and are in communion with no recognised See. It seems certain that no excommunicated bishop has ever been received into the

⁸⁹ CSCIL File ABKI. TYM. 10.01.

⁹⁰ There is a substantial scholarly discussion of this subject in A.J. Macdonald, *Episcopi Vigantes in Church History*, London, 1945; H.R.T. Brandreth, *Episcopi Vigantes and the Anglican Church*, Revised London, 1961 & P.F. Anson *Bishops at Large*, London 1964. For this discussion I am indebted to four priests in Alexandria (April 1994) and two Copts in the American Diaspora (1989-2001). CSCIL USA 12.04. 89. 11.12.89. 06.94.01.95. 05.97.

Coptic Orthodox Church but some who have an uncertain Canonical status may have been received by the Coptic Pope.⁹¹

“A man is also included in this group (the *episcopi vigantes*) when the number in communion with him is so small that his sect appears to exist solely for his own sake”.⁹² This definition would have most significance for the Coptic Orthodox Church when it receives *episcopi vigantes* who are unlikely to have sizeable congregations or to be monks.

No mainstream church has ever fully accepted the consecrations of wandering bishops. A major difficulty for the Eastern Orthodox family of churches is that many *episcopi vigantes* seem to have been consecrated by a single bishop, himself possibly regular but acting in isolation. Other wandering bishops might have been involved in many successive acts of consecration from different sources. In the unusual world of the *episcopi vigantes*, therefore, there are frequently said to be a number of possible lines of episcopal succession but these are all generally perceived to be irregular. In some cases it is reported that “many people have claimed ordination as bishops where it is questionable whether the ordinations ever took place”.⁹³

The notion that a person with adequate funds, who perhaps wished to run a church as a part-time activity, might seek and obtain some form of irregular consecration was quite outside the experience of the Coptic patriarch and the Church in Egypt. Commonplace occidental claims against *episcopi vigantes* of simony, if only by voluntary donations, were unimaginable for the Copts. The Coptic patriarch was anxious to bring together Europeans and Egyptians in one ecclesial body to show that the Coptic Orthodox Church was a catholic or universal body, rather than a national church. This had ecumenical and political significance. *Abouna* understood. It was also clear to him that not only were the episcopal orders of these *episcopi vigantes* irregular but that such persons were not even canonically baptised according to Coptic traditions. For centuries the Copts did not uphold Catholic or Eastern Orthodox baptisms. This meant that a “wandering bishop” being incorporated into the Egyptian Church would not yet be a Copt. They must first be baptised and pass through the Coptic priesthood to the episcopacy.

Before *Abouna* had time to discuss the issue with the patriarch, some form of union had taken place. The Coptic Pope was disturbed when he later understood the possible affects of accepting *episcopi vigantes*. But this problem could hardly be a serious priority for Shenouda who was at this time under extreme political pressure in Egypt. He could not be concerned about a marginal executive matter. In ecumenical circles the patriarch had always been perceived as lacking in judgement. This was harmful for the Copts. An explanation was quickly devised to deal with the situation and to satisfy *Abouna Bishoi*, who was respected as a Copt with international experience, which the patriarch lacked, and as one who was acknowledged as an authentic spiritual leader. It was stated that the merger was definitely not a sacramental act. It was to be described as a political and expedient action that could be reversed. There were no legal implications. The Pope had not *ordained* or *consecrated* but he had ‘appointed’ someone in an administrative action. Several thoughtful Copts continued to believe that their patriarch had no idea what *episcopi vigantes* were. In July 1976 Pope Shenouda demanded the silence of *Bishoi* on this issue. Being the man that he was, the priest conformed.

⁹¹ A wonderfully entertaining record of *episcopi vigantes*, of special interest to Coptic Orthodox Christians, is found in Alan Maxwell Bain, *Bishops Irregular*, Bristol, 1985, Revised 1989.

⁹² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Third Edition. Oxford 1997. p.555

⁹³ *The Free Encyclopedia*, Wikipedia, On-line, 01.2001.

Father Bishoi Kamel retains great moral and spiritual authority over twenty years after his death. Rumours persist in Egypt and in the Coptic Diaspora that Pope Shenouda the Third had asked for the destruction of all copies of *Abouna's* pamphlet about ecclesiastical teachings and patriarchal succession.⁹⁴ In the world of ecclesiastical subterfuge it is impossible to establish the truth or falsehood of such claims.

Ecumenical experts in the patriarchate have indicated that the issue of *episcopi vigantes* has created grave difficulties in the Coptic Diaspora but that every attempt has been made to accept the patriarch's personal decisions on this matter as final. It is in the interest of the Church in Egypt that all discussion be restrained or repressed.

Tasouni Angel retains her own copy of 'Ecclesiastical Teachings' but regards the issue as peripheral, so long after her husband's death:

Just before Father Bishoi departed, in March 1979, His Holiness Pope Shenouda visited him. The Pope was on one of his regular visits to Alexandria from Cairo or the Wadi Natroun. There were photographs of Pope Kyrillos, Matta El Meskeen, and of His Holiness Pope Shenouda on the walls of our flat. The Pope looked at them all, knowing that Pope Kyrillos the Sixth, Father Matta El Meskeen and Pope Shenouda had each been involved in personal conflict, sometimes struggling against each other in the Church. His Holiness said that it was truly amazing that Father Bishoi could hold all three of them together in his heart. Pope Shenouda knew that Father always opened his heart freely, without unnecessary flattery and with real modesty. That was his way. Pope Shenouda said it was an example to everyone.

⁹⁴ The Maadi based RNSAW (Religious News Service from the Arab World) intends to publish the work in Arabic and English in 2002.

Seven

The fire of hatred burns bonds of amity and shrivels the soul of the faithful whether they be Muslim or Christian.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr⁹⁵

The unassuming Muslim *fellahin*⁹⁶ in a village of the Nile Delta or virtuous Islamic city workers in Alexandria are generally more open to the Coptic Orthodox Church, and appreciative of its spiritual values, than the sheikhs from Assyut and Cairo mosques or the new generation of politico-religious ‘students’. The sheikhs may have graduated from Al-Azhar but might just as easily have been caught up with modern Islamic activists in one of the so-called fundamentalist groups. When spiritually motivated Muslims and Christians are neighbours a reverence for piety is palpable. The loveliness of a pure heart and mind is recognised and admired by all.

Abouna Bishoi lived a life of transparent beauty and it is possible to find Muslims praying at his tomb in Alexandria long after his death. He was known as one who loved Muslims and he received and responded to their daily appeals for his prayers. Those Muslims praying at his tomb in May 2001 were pleased to declare, though in their own words, the biblical affirmation: “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5.16) Many Muslims in Egypt and abroad have claimed that they were healed from sickness through the effectual intercessory ministry of this Christian priest. When Bishoi was in hospital in London an Iraqi woman from Baghdad asked Tasouni Angel to give her a glass of water over which *Abouna* had prayed. She always attributed her healing to drinking this water.

Another patient in the same hospital was a prince of the Royal House of Saudi Arabia. He was extremely apprehensive about the injections prescribed by his surgeon and prone to genuine anxiety. After some discussions with the Coptic priest he eventually took the injections and returned home in good health. Some words from a letter he later wrote to Bishoi are instructive:

“ My heart is aflame with love for your pure soul, a soul filled with the tenderness that engulfed us whenever we were with you. We implore God (*Allah*)⁹⁷ to bring you to good health and strength soon. We wish you a happy life. A thousand *salaams* to you. The Peace (*Salaam*) of God (*Allah*) and his blessings to you. *Salaam* to our beloved sister Angel, whom we will never forget. *Salaam* to you both and to all who are yours.

My dear, I hope this letter reaches you while you are robed in the health and happiness which we pray for you.

⁹⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Concilium Christianity Among World Religions*. Netherlands, February 1986. p.10 Professor Nasr was born in 1933 graduated in physics, maths and the history of science and philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard. He has held a number of professorships and lectureships. He is a leading liberal spokesman for Islam.

⁹⁶ Not just a ‘peasant’ but one who cultivates the land, a husbandman, a tiller of the soil.

⁹⁷ In many respects, there is a common vocabulary for Muslims and Christians in Egypt and the Arab World See Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian*, Kentucky, USA 1991, p.285:“...some joint vocabulary avails to enshrine the common theological themes, which...preexist the disparities”(of Islam and Christianity). Examples are *Allah* (God), *Rasul* (apostle), *Rahim* (mercy) *Injil* (gospel).

Your brother, your son, affectionately, Hassan.⁹⁸

Tasouni Angel remembered Hassan with genuine affection:

Hassan would come every morning to Father's room after we had finished our daily prayers and hymns: these we always did together in hospital, and through our married life. Father used to sing *She-re Ma-ri-a* (the Coptic *Ave Maria*) to Hassan. It was a Coptic hymn he loved so much because of what it teaches about Our Lady Saint Mary, who suffered but was taken up. The Muslim loved this and he used to ask about Saint Mary – Father used to ask Hassan if he did not know about Mariam in the Qur'an, especially Surah nineteen, which carries her name? Hassan was surprised and pleased about this. Father always loved to say the *Hail Mary* in Arabic for his Muslim visitors, but only after he had said it in Coptic first.

Many Arabic speakers – Jordanian, Libyan, Iraqi, and Kuwaiti – were patients in that London hospital. They often spoke with *Abouna* about their personal problems and more frequently asked spiritual questions. They invariably thanked him for the sense of holiness they felt when they were with him. These guests would always kiss his hand as they left. They were more often Muslims than Copts.

In Sporting, Father Bishoi had already made a striking ecumenical or inter-faith gesture in the 1960s, during the building and painting of the parish church. He commissioned a Muslim artist to paint the *Christ in Glory* on the eastern wall⁹⁹ of the sanctuary at St. George's church. The same artist painted the frescos¹⁰⁰ in the dome of the same church. These are classical Italianate images of the four evangelists. Coptic art has since been added to the church. A good artist was required for this work and Bishoi would not discriminate against a Muslim artist if he were the best available in Alexandria at that time.

Discrimination against the Copts is a daily reality in Egyptian life. Copts are excluded from many positions in Egyptian society just because they are Copts. Some discrimination is certainly more obvious than mere institutional differentiation, which the Copts have known for centuries. At least three bombing attempts were made on the church at Sporting or upon the daughter churches founded by Father Bishoi. Like many priests, when seen in the streets in their flowing black clerical robes, Bishoi was the object of spitting and buffeting. He would return home with the spit of Muslims dripping from his clothing. Tasouni Angel was often very annoyed. *Abouna* told her that the spit was "the treasure of Christ." There was one young lad in the neighbourhood who would shout out anti-Christian abuse and regularly pelt the approaching priest with orange peel. One day *Abouna* heard that this boy had broken his leg in an accident. The Christian priest went out of his way to visit the Muslim family. The parents were deeply apologetic for the boy's behaviour. They were overwhelmed by Father Bishoi's kindness and by the gift of oranges for the sick child.

⁹⁸ The Arabic original can be found in Abouna Luka's book of Abouna Bishoi. Volume 2. pp.134-136. See Sources above. cf. Iris Habib El Masri, op.cit. pp.23 ff.

⁹⁹ The *apse*.

¹⁰⁰ The author has not been able to determine if the work is *fresco secco* or *buon affresco*.

Bishoi Kamel was always comfortable with individual Muslims but never with Islam. He accepted the well-established habit amongst Arabic-speaking Christians of considering Islam as a Christian heresy, and was a willing and well-read disciple of Saint John of Damascus (circa AD 660-749) who was the most notable exponent of this tradition.¹⁰¹ St. John was an Arab Orthodox Christian, but before joining the monastery of Mar Saba¹⁰² in Palestine he had worked as a high ranking civil servant in the Umayyad Muslim caliphate and was a close friend of Al-Yazid, who succeeded as caliph in 680. St. John had a superior knowledge of Islam. His close reading of the Qur'an is constantly revealed in his writing, as it was in the writings of his twentieth century disciple. *Tasouni* constantly noticed how *Abouna* meticulously read the Muslim holy book.

Father Bishoi read the Qur'an carefully and knew what it was about.

St. John of Damascus affirmed Christianity as the final fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures and the true and last religion. He sensitively proposed a negative assessment of the prophet Muhammad, as a heretic who had adapted the Theology of Judaism and Christianity in his own much later version of monotheism. In theory, Islam accepts Christianity as a faith revealed by God. Islam also acknowledges Jesus Christ as being sent by God and having miraculous attributes including his virgin birth. Islam understands the gospels, subject always to redefinition, as being a revealed book. Christians are affirmed as the *ahl al-kitab* (the people of the book).¹⁰³ But Muslims see Christianity itself as a heretical distortion corrected by the much later revelations of Islam. In their most traditional forms, Christianity and Islam, both heirs of classical Judaism, have common, exclusionist claims and both commend a God to end all gods, and the Revelation to end all revelation. It is therefore "unthinking to set Islam and Christianity side by side, as if in monotheism at least they have something in common. In reality, nothing separates them so radically as the different ways in which they appear to say the same thing – that there is only one God".¹⁰⁴ These words from Karl Barth, by general consent the greatest Christian theologian of the twentieth century, would undoubtedly have found an echo in the thought of Father Bishoi Kamel, who often said, "Islam's power is not in what it knows but in not knowing enough".

Abouna always respected the search of individual Muslims for the eternal reality. He looked on them with courtesy and was constantly aware of the divine likeness within them. Their striving for Christian faith was another aspect of the transfiguration of the Cross. Their painful exploration and, in some instances, their triumphant possession were signs of redemptive suffering and resurrection. Bishoi baptised many Muslims who converted to Christianity - much better to say, converted to Jesus Christ as Lord and God. Theoretically there should be no problem. In the Qur'an, at *Surah 2. Ayah 256*, we read that, "There shall be no coercion in matters of faith".¹⁰⁵ The words are fine, but it is lamentably true that the harmonious relationship between Father Bishoi and his Muslim friends was often destroyed as a result of internal Islamic debate and disagreement about freedom of conscience and the right to convert.

¹⁰¹ cf. Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden 1972).

¹⁰² See Wm. Dalrymple. *From the Holy Mountain*. London 1997. pp.288ff.

¹⁰³ See e.g. *Surahs* 5.68, 77: 2.144: 74.31 with many other examples.

¹⁰⁴ Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics 2:1* .T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1957. p.449

¹⁰⁵ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, Gibraltar 1980. (The rendering of *din* as *faith* or *religion* depends upon the context.) Other translations in English indicate the trustworthiness of the translation. "There is no place for compulsion in religion". A. Kenneth Cragg *Readings in the Qur'an* Collins, London 1988. "Let there be no compulsion in religion" Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an*, Lahore, Pakistan 1934.

One of the converts from Islam at Mar Girgis, Sporting was a teacher, in fact an administrator as well. I think she was a Deputy Headteacher. She was baptised as a Christian at Sporting and as a direct result she lost her job in the Alexandria Education system. It was only because she had become a Christian. Many restrictions were placed upon her. That was usual then. She suffered very deeply – psychologically – because of the situation. She was abused and hunted for becoming a Christian. It was awful. There were problems for a long time with her children. Her sons said that they were going to kill her for apostasy because of the shame she had brought on the family. The children confronted Father too. She suffered terribly.

After one baptism, administered by *Abouna*, a conspicuous convert decided that he had a monastic vocation. Careful weeks of Christian formation in the parish at Alexandria convinced Bishoi of the authenticity of the calling. He eventually took the man to the Wadi Natroun and left him in one of the Coptic monasteries so that the new proselyte could test his vocation. Some months later *Abouna* returned to the desert area to visit the novice at the cloister. There followed a series of events that are widely recorded in Coptic accounts of Father Bishoi's life. The story is one of the many surprising supernatural narratives associated with Bishoi Kamel and his untiring ministry amongst Muslims.

As Bishoi was driving alone down the desert road, a ragged old Bedouin seemed to appear suddenly out of the air. He flagged the priest down and asked for a lift. He asked to be taken to a certain lonely spot on the desert road. *Abouna* agreed, but before they had reached the selected place, the Bedouin told the priest that they had gone far enough. "We are already close enough to the place". When the man left the car, in an uninhabited and desolate place, he suddenly seemed to vanish into the desert, as quickly as he had appeared a few miles back. Next day, in Alexandria, Father Bishoi met two brothers of the Muslim who had become a monk. With tears in their eyes, they explained that they had intended to kill *Abouna* on the loneliest part of the desert road, but they had not dared to carry out their plot because of the one who sat beside him. Some accounts of this story speak of nail prints in the hands of the Bedouin. We are reminded of the leper who appeared to Francis of Assisi and of the naked beggar who met Martin of Tours. In hagiography the leper and the beggar were, in different centuries, Christ.

The Muslim who became a Coptic monk joined the Monastery of the Romans because it was the monastery of Pope Kyrillos the Sixth. He was ordained as *Abouna Mina El Baramousi*. He was a great servant of God, and an accomplished speaker. He spoke often for the Church. Many years later he was tragically killed in a car accident.

Bishoi wrote a number of short commentaries on the relationship between Christian faith and liturgical practice. One of his notes about the noontide prayer, the sixth hour of liturgical prayer, refers to "The hour of the glory of Christ in which the salvation of mankind was completed and the Lord reigned from a tree." In the same essay, though now only in the Arabic original, we discover an impressive addition that is illustrative of an untypical but genuine Coptic response to Muslims:

"Thank God. Today, at noon, everybody prays at the same time. We hear the muezzin calling (*Adhan*) our brothers the Muslims to prayer at their mosques. That call to prayer

(*Salat al-Zuhr*, when the sun passes the meridian) will be a testimony against us in the day of judgement if we have neglected the noontide prayer of the sixth hour”.¹⁰⁶

During the obsequies after Bishoi’s death in 1979 one of the many Muslims who attended the service was found at the church gate sobbing uncontrollably. He explained that he had spoken to the priest some years earlier when his daughter was engaged to be married. He had no money for her trousseau and other traditional marriage expenses. Abouna Bishoi supplied everything they needed.

Another eloquent Muslim testimony was made that same day. A duty police inspector looking at the substantial crowds said that he was expecting more than half a million people at the funeral: “I think that the Christians have not given Bishoi Kamel the honour due to him”. His colleague was amazed: “I have never been at such a well-attended funeral, with the mourners so full of openness and thankfulness”. The inspector simply replied that anyone, Copt or Muslim, who had been in close contact with Father Bishoi, would agree with his criticism:

“I can tell you that if you had asked him to undo your shoe laces, he would not only have accepted but would have done it with gladness and cheerfulness. He gave himself to everyone. That is why I said that they did not give him the honour due to him”.

Relations between Christians and Muslims in the Alexandria of Father Bishoi could be excellent at the personal level. He always encouraged good will and mutual respect. At the official level the situation remains uncertain.

“Christian Arabism has to reckon with the abiding instinct of Islam to conscious superiority and dominance...The future has to be on Islam’s terms. These seem likely to remain incorrigibly assertive, unequal, sometimes hostile, and rarely other than superior, politically inferiorising and religiously entrenched, as spiritual finalities whose credentials are not open to or in need of Christian participation”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Iris Habib El Masri op.cit. p.44.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Cragg. op.cit. pp. 280-281.

Eight

**You must go home by the way of the Cross,
To stand with Jesus in the morning.¹⁰⁸**

T.D. Ferguson.

Organised religion of any kind - Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant - tends to express itself in terms of power. Leaders of all churches are inclined to be preoccupied with their rank and influence. This truth is undeniable and the habitual practice of ecclesial control is all-pervasive, exercised as much in Egypt as is in the West. Quite apart from the sphere of simple bureaucracy this spirit affects faith itself. Unmistakably, in the realm of faith, the Being of God finds expression in theologies of triumph and arrogance. In 1524 Martin Bucer, a German Protestant who became the Anglican Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, was deeply conscious of the problem. He took the service books in Strasbourg cathedral and put his pen right through the beginnings of all those prayers containing references to the attributes of Divine majesty and justice, qualities of deity which are much loved in some parts of the Church. Bucer wrote in the words 'our Father' instead. There have always been ministers in every church who have derived their knowledge and understanding of God's nature from the study of Christ in his humiliation and suffering. Their icon has not been that of the *Pantocrator*¹⁰⁹ but of the Christ of extreme humility, naked and bleeding upon the cross. Abouna Bishoi memorably expresses a Coptic ideal:

"Powerlessness has its own speech. Weakness has its own triumph. The world cannot be served from a place of power, but it can be served from the cross. On the cross the world stabs its own heart, but the cross is a school and to run away from it is to run away from the future".¹¹⁰

On 14 May 2001, the present writer asked *Tasouni* if, after some years of reflection, he had understood the life of *Abouna* by saying that the *leitmotif* of Bishoi's life was the Cross. She said that this was certain. It has also been suggested that the comprehensive soteriology that he expounded through two decades of ministry is vital for our interpretation of his daily ministry as confessor, teacher and liturgical celebrant. Fr. Tadros Yacoub Malaty assented with the following explanation:

"In the case of Father Pishoy (sic), when we mention soteriology we can certainly say that he focused upon the saving and healing cross. But in this way, through the cross, the works

¹⁰⁸ The song, "By the way of the Cross", appeared in 'The Musical Salvationist', February 1937, and was reprinted in 'Songs for Men's Voices' (London: Salvationist Publishing and Supplies Ltd., 1950) and in 'Songs for Men' (New York: Salvation Army Supplies, Printing and Publishing Dept, 1961). The words and music were credited to Envoy T D Ferguson (USA) in the 1937/1950 publications, and to Tom Ferguson in 'Songs for Men'. Tom Ferguson was born in Jamaica, the third son in a family of five children. He worked for a time on fruit steamers, trading between Jamaica and Boston (USA). He was converted on 15 August 1898 becoming one of the first Salvationists in Boston. From November 1912, Envoy Ferguson wrote several Gospel songs, including 'By the way of the Cross'. He worked as an engineer, and for a time was employed at the New England Provincial Headquarters of the Salvation Army. He was a delegate to the International Congress of 1914. A gifted singer and songwriter, Ferguson wrote many early-day Army songs. He died in Boston, in 1959. I am indebted to Gordon Taylor the Archivist of the Salvation Army's International Heritage Centre and gratefully acknowledge the use of these words which have great significance.

¹⁰⁹ The Greek word means 'Ruler of All'. Such an icon would depict the divine majesty of the Creator under the human features of the Incarnate Son of God. It may be patient of a much more 'humane' interpretation but is generally fearsome. See esp. the film *Brother Son and Sister Moon* directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1973) and the Andrei Tarkovsky film of *Andrei Rublev* (1966).

¹¹⁰ See John H Watson, op.cit. pp. 142, 150.

of the Holy Trinity were the core of his ministry. The Bible for him is to have the experience of the daily heavenly life viewed from the perspective of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary".¹¹¹

Just as Bishoi would have embraced the words of the Afro-American salvationist that head this chapter, so he would have found a spiritual companion in Simone Weil (1909-1943), the strange French-Jewish mystic, and would-be Roman Catholic, who wrote much about the Cross:

"There are many Christians who have no part in Christ because they lack the strength to recognise and worship the blessed Cross in every affliction. There is no better proof of feebleness of faith than the way in which people, even including Christians, sidetrack the problem of affliction when they discuss it. All the talk about original sin, God's will, Providence and its mysterious plans (which nevertheless one thinks one can try to fathom), and future recompenses of every kind in this world and the next, all this only serves to conceal the reality of affliction, or else fails to meet the case. There is only one thing that enables us to accept real affliction, and that is the contemplation of Christ's Cross. There is nothing else. That one thing suffices".¹¹²

Echoes of Weil's words are heard in the final years of Bishoi's life. In 1976 he was diagnosed as having cancer. He accepted the cancer in two ways, as agony and as joy. Of the agony there can be no doubt. He related this to the mysticism of those, like the Italian friar Padre Pio,¹¹³ who come close to the Crucified in their pain. The joy was his expression of the Cross as the means of redemption and wholeness. For Bishoi it was highly significant that the Copts celebrate the Feast of the Cross by singing the hymns normally used for Palm Sunday – songs of happiness and celebration. He believed that the gladness swallowed up the distress and he came to call cancer 'the disease of the Kingdom of God'. When he lay dying he fixed his gaze upon an icon of Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross and frequently said that she had chosen "the best place ever found".¹¹⁴

In September 1965 Bishoi had made his only pilgrimage to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem:

"The deepest influences on me were an altar, which stands at the (traditional) base of the Cross, and then an icon of the Crucifixion. In the icon Mary Magdalene is bent over Our Lord's feet kissing them. As for the Virgin Mother of God, she was standing erect in silence. I felt as I gazed on all this how much Christ had endured for me".

Bishoi was deeply affected by this lonely pilgrimage:

"I found the church empty, so I stayed for a long time. I prayed earnestly that I might overcome my failings and indifference, and my inability to crucify myself and die with Christ. Then I asked the One who had been buried here to remember his servants in Alexandria. I begged Christ's pardon, who was crucified and scourged for me. I discovered a river flowing from the life of Jesus into my life".¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ CSCIL. File ABKI. TYM.10.01.

¹¹² Simone Weil, *Additional pages on the Love of God and Affliction*. Collins, Glasgow 1974.

¹¹³ Padre Pio of Pietrelcina (25 May 1887-23 September 1968) was a Capuchin Friar who bore the stigmata and was beatified by Pope John Paul the Second.

¹¹⁴ Tadros Y. Malaty op.cit. p. 28.

¹¹⁵ cf. Iris Habib El Masri op.cit. pp.36 ff.

It was not until some years after Father Bishoi's death in 1979 that a penetrating, personal perspective of this pilgrimage – and specifically of that time in the Holy Sepulchre – emerged from someone who had been a silent and secret observer of those quiet moments. A man who eventually became a monk of the monastery of St. Antony the Great at the Red Sea was present in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and watched while Bishoi venerated the holy icon. The eyewitness became conscious of light emanating from the priest's body. For as long as Bishoi stood at the site of the Crucifixion light radiated from him. (This turning point in Bishoi's biography will be subject to analysis in future decades. The present writer has no written sources of this event but only a few recorded reminiscences. Tasouni Angel met the witness, Abouna Angellos al-Antuni many years after the death of her husband). In Coptic terms this episode was a miracle affirming a saint. It can perhaps bear interpretation within an Eastern Orthodox framework, which may serve future commentators. In the Theology of the great Athonite teacher Saint Gregory Palamas (c.1296-1359), God is essentially apart from other beings by His uncreated nature. The human condition is the created state, but when the saints, like Moses on Sinai or the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, transcend the merely human and communicate with God, then they participate in His uncreated life and light.

“Knowledge of God...is not a knowledge that necessarily demands that the knowing subject be exterior to the object known, but a union in uncreated light”.¹¹⁶

As the man of prayer stands before the holy icon he sees light and he is light. In 1965 Father Bishoi Kamel saw the transfigured cross at the altar. He looked into the world of the holy icon. The icon was a window into the life of God for him. Bishoi experienced within himself, although without deceptive self-regard, the transfiguring Cross. The light entered into him, shone forth from him and was seen by a witness.

It is clear, from this incident alone, that it would be quite wrong to suggest that Bishoi's awareness of the centrality of the Cross and the Crucified One arose primarily because of his encounter with cancer in 1976, though it is certainly true that his endurance of this sickness was illuminated by his spirituality. The Jerusalem experience was equally decisive for him. Much has been written about his confrontation with cancer and it has even been said that “He longed for this disease and asked for it”.¹¹⁷

This is not correct. He loved people who have cancer. He used to visit them more than twice a day when they were very sick. He would speak to them about heaven and about the cross they were bearing. He explained this illness as a mark from God that they were going to heaven quickly. He never asked for anything himself. When he was very sick he could not stand or sit. I said that he ought to ask for good health. He said that he did not need to ask his Lord for anything. “I am in his hands. I am ready to receive whatever he gives me”.

I remember him saying that to be a priest was to carry the Cross.

The ‘affliction’ mentioned by Simone Weil was essentially a spiritual concept with the widest ecumenical reference, but it always had an extended communal reference for *Abouna*. As a Coptic

¹¹⁶ John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, New York 1974, p. 116.

¹¹⁷ Tadros Ya'coub Malaty, *Pastoral Work in the Life of Fr. Pishoy Kamel*. USA 1979. p.23 English Language translations of Coptic Orthodox books – from the Arabic language – are so often bad that this may be inaccurate.

Orthodox Christian he was conscious of the public, historical, even political dimension of the Coptic experience of *affliction*. Not only in his own suffering from cancer but also in other aspects of life he comprehended the Cross. We have seen that he even likened the priesthood to affliction. But for Father Bishoi there was not, nor could there ever be, any human activity in whatever area of life, of which Christ's Cross was not the paramount and hidden truth. The life of the Christian was the Cross for him.

Despite his consciousness of the cancer, the seriousness of the prognosis, and his experience of severe physical discomfort at the end of 1976, Father Bishoi carried on with all his pastoral duties until just after Christmas 1977 (The Copts celebrate Christmas on 29 Kyak in their calendar which at this time coincided with 7 January 1977). Three days after the Coptic Christmas, on the instructions of his doctor and with assistance from the State Medical Services he left for London, accompanied by his wife, Tasouni Angel.

After meeting the resident Egyptian Medical officer at the Egyptian Embassy in Kensington, Bishoi was taken to the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead. The hospital was originally situated on Gray's Inn Road in central London but in the early 1970s it moved out to a beautiful site where weeping willows touch Hampstead Pond on the edge of the Heath. *Abouna* was placed in the hands of the distinguished Scottish neurosurgeon Ian Reay McCaul.¹¹⁸

Fr. Bishoi had the cancer in the spinal cord at the region of the second cervical vertebra. This tumor was pressing on the occipital nerve as it grew causing severe pain. Due to the severity of the pain he was complaining of diplopia in the right eye. But when they examined the brain in London it was completely intact. In time the tumor caused the right arm to be immobile.

Mr. McCaul the surgeon of the Royal Free Hospital did an operation to remove as much as he could from the tumor. After the operation Father's right eye had recovered, but the right arm was still immobile. I was very worried about that, but the doctors told me it would take at least two months to be normal.

Because of the one-hundred-year closure period imposed on patients' records in the United Kingdom, it is impossible to reproduce the case notes dealing with Fr. Bishoi's cancer. It is, however, important to note that he experienced severe pain in this period and he offered it as a prayer for the world as much as for himself. It seems likely that Abouna Bishoi had a primary or secondary tumor between the cervical spine and the base of the skull. This tumour was compressing the nerves, which supply an area of the skin at the back of the head (*occipital* nerve), the right arm, and a muscle that dilates the right pupil. He experienced blurring of vision (*diplopia*). The surgery was exceedingly complex. That the Radiotherapy (X-ray Treatment) was followed by chemotherapy suggests a secondary tumor. Through all this *Abouna* and *Tasouni* lived in a purity of faith which is a reproof and challenge to unbelief.

After two weeks it was the feast of St. Mary. On the eve of this much-loved celebration, Fr. Bishoi asked me to buy some flowers to decorate the icon of St. Mary to commemorate her feast. Next morning on washing his face Fr. Bishoi found himself moving his arms normally, we were absolutely delighted and thanked our Lord Jesus and his beloved mother St. Mary. The doctors

¹¹⁸ Ian Reay McCaul MB ChB (Glasgow) 1941. FRFPS (Glasgow) 1949 FRCS (Glasgow) 1962. FRCS (England) 1963 was consultant Neurosurgeon in several London hospitals. He was a member of the Society of British Neurological Surgeons.

were very surprised for what happened. After the operation he took about 22 sessions of radiotherapy followed by chemotherapy treatment. He received many visitors.

The visitors naturally came from the growing Coptic community in the United Kingdom, but as we have seen many others turned up from virtually any Arabic-speaking group in London. News of this extraordinary priest had spread by word of mouth. It is a surprising truth that *Abouna* was able to conduct a pastoral ministry from his hospital bed. “For all who visited him, he seemed an angel from heaven.”¹¹⁹

In addition to Ian McCaul there was an Australian doctor named Foggerty. He was a lovely man. He used to do his rounds at the Royal Free and he would always stay with Abouna. He used to say “Father when I see you I feel that I am with Saint Paul. Your long beard makes you look like Saint Paul, and your writing pad and pencil remind me of the apostle’s epistles”. They frequently spoke and shared together.

The whole visit to London took about 3 months from the 10th of January 1977 to the 19th of March (10 Baramhat, one of the major feasts of the Cross in the Coptic Orthodox Calendar).

Early in that New Year Bishoi had received some letters from the great Coptic spiritual director Father Matta El Meskeen (Fr. Matthew the Poor), Abbott of the monastery of St. Makarios. In this correspondence, Matta confirmed the place of the cancer in *Abouna’s* spirituality:

“The sickness of the faithful servant whose heart remains uplifted by faith and love, speaks more abundantly than the strength of thousands of the strong”.¹²⁰

At another point:

“God reverts to the use of man’s weakness, even the weaknesses of the body, for witnessing. In the broken body God confirms his word and uplifts the hidden ministry of suffering”.

Towards the end of an early letter, Matta enjoins Bishoi:

“Joy be to you in your sufferings”.

A later letter from ‘Matthew the Poor’ concludes:

“My greetings with my love. Nothing can explain the bonds of Christian brotherhood and unity except the Cross of Christ”.

Bishoi warmed to Matta El Meskeen because these sentiments were in essential accord with his own theology of the Cross. It is not possible to say what deep anxieties *Abouna* experienced during this period, but his response as a theologian and priest is quite clear:

¹¹⁹ Iris Habib El Masri. op.cit.p.26

¹²⁰ cf. Iris Habib El Masri, op.cit. p. 28.

“The mind can be a centre of fear, psychological anxiety and acute apprehension concerning the future. These psychological difficulties deprive us of calm and a sense of security. This is the Cross of psychological problems. But meditating upon the cross we attain a higher, purified focus: ‘The Cross is the song of my triumph. It is all my life’ “. ¹²¹

His later statements reinforce this:

“The cross and I are in a continuous dynamic relationship”.

“We have daily experience of fellowship with the Crucified”.

Like all patients he wished to be well, but his sense of inward liberation always came to him through his concentration upon soteriology and the cruel means by which salvation was achieved at Calvary: “It is impossible to realise the power of the Resurrection without the fellowship of the sufferings of the Cross”.

The alliterative conjunction of cross and cancer has its own gravity. There is great force in the manner with which a clinical specialist of several decades’ service describes cancer with striking imagery:

“Knowing no rules, cancer is amoral. Knowing no purpose other than to destroy life, cancer is immoral...When it kills its victim, it kills itself. A cancer is born with a death wish...in a word, cancer is asocial”.

At each stage of his discussion the doctor is struck by what he calls “the malevolence of Cancer”.

“The likeness is to an insidious, groping parasite, attached by sharp-clawed tentacles to the decaying surface of its imperiled prey”. ¹²²

It is not too fanciful to see the embattled cancer patient and his doctor in a parallel life-and-death medical struggle to that spiritual struggle called *Anfechtung* ¹²³ outlined by Luther and envisaged by Father Bishoi in his analysis of the Cross as a place of confrontation:

“The hour when Christ was crucified for the salvation of the world is an hour of confrontation and struggle. All the powers of evil coalesce. Pilate refuses to acknowledge the Truth. Herod espouses hypocrisy and runs. The chief priests have hearts full of rancor. All these are against Christ and faith seems weak. But the cross is not his weakness and defeat. It is love in its highest degree and deepest depth. It is love for Pilate & Herod and the chief priests. It is the triumph of love over hate”. ¹²⁴

Cancer is hated. Evil is also hated. Cancer is more feared than Evil. But love is triumphant over all malignancy, whether spiritual and physical. The polarity and the reciprocity are inescapable.

¹²¹ Tadros Y. Malaty & Iris Habib El Masri op.cit. CSCIL File ABKI trans. GS.

¹²² Sherwin B. Nuland. *How We Die*. London 1994. p.210ff.

¹²³ Martin Luther spoke of *Anfechtung* as a life-and-death struggle in which faith is almost lost.

¹²⁴ Iris Habib El Masri. op.cit. p. 46. but this translation is in CSCIL File ABKI. Trans. GS 04.89.

Many teachers who have concentrated upon the exemplarist nature of Christ's sacrifice have like Bishoi continually returned to the idea of the Cross as the expression of love rather than propitiatory sacrifice:

"The Cross is not an immobile form upon which Christ hung one day long ago. It is the compassionate beating heart of God, longing for all mankind".

It was of central importance for Bishoi the Copt that this work of love be done by the Christ whose nature must be expressed in the formulae of St. Cyril of Alexandria: "the one nature of God incarnate" (*Mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene*). This is the favoured christological profession of the Copts. *Mia* expresses 'one as a unity', 'one out of two natures', and not 'one divine nature', the Monophysite position of which Copts have been accused historically. Writing in English, Bishoi occasionally referred to the saving act effected by the one incarnate Christ as "this dazzling fact". His gloss on the Christology was also written in English: "He has made of the two natures One. That means that he is an integrated Whole in whom the divine and the human were united without mixing nor confusion nor change". Only such a Saviour could bring about such a salvation. Bishoi would have approved of the approach of his co-worker Tadros Malaty who, also writing in English, in more recent Coptic Theology, speaks of "the One united nature of Christ".¹²⁵

The primary expression of all these diverse thoughts was most firmly and inclusively avowed in the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great, which is the Theology of the Church, sung and reenacted. *Abouna* tried to celebrate it every day.

"The death of our Lord is power, for the cross is the power of God. The slain body carries spiritual power that is absolutely necessary for our lives as Christians. Therefore, each time we share in the Body of Christ we must firmly believe in the strength carried in the sacrament. The moment when we offer the Mystery is a wondrous, mystical moment. It is the central confrontation of death with life. It is the moment when life bursts forth from the death of Christ. This supreme moment of Holy Communion is the whole of our lives.

The journey of my life in Christ through the Communion is the journey to Gethsemane, where I share with my Lord in his sufferings for others. It is where I watch with Him for an hour. I eat and drink to share with Him in the cup of my fellow humans who are suffering. By this eating and drinking I am already with Him, longing for heaven which he offers me".¹²⁶

Abouna taught that it is essential to envisage oneself and each Christian as a cross-bearer. Not only in the physical agony of cancer but also in the daily witness of the baptised, Bishoi thought of the individual believer's identity with the sufferings of Christ: "Our Lord declared: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me'. Therefore, Christians must be cross-bearers, but they must be joyous cross-bearers. The apparent weakness of cross-bearing and the foolishness of embracing this cruel instrument of torture is, as St. Paul says, 'stronger than men'".

¹²⁵ See esp. Tadros Y. Malaty. *Christology according to the Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches*. (The Orthodox Concept. 8), Sporting-Alexandria, 1986.

¹²⁶ Iris Habib El Masri. op.cit. p. 47.

Bishoi even imagined the noble procession of Coptic Orthodox saints as a pilgrimage of cross-bearers, seeing the cross not only as the “sign of the Son of Man” but as the “sign of all the children of God” who bore the cross:

“There is no saint without a cross.

The cross is self-denial: Ask Macarius the Great or Arsenius.

The cross burns up lust: Ask Mary the Egyptian or Pelagia the Harlot.

The cross overcomes avarice and worldliness: Ask Antony or Pachomius.

The cross is cooperation: Ask Bishoi or Bimen.

The cross is conversion: Ask Mark the Evangelist or Paul the Apostle.

The cross sustains faith: Ask Athanasios, Kyrillos or Dioskoros.

The cross is a path of love: Ask the ascetics, desert-dwellers and martyrs.

There is no saint without a cross.”¹²⁷

Any biographical outline for *Abouna* will state that the Cross occupied the central place in his theology, his preaching and his living. But this is a painfully inadequate synopsis. He saw in the Cross the light of Creation in Genesis, the light of the Prologue to St. John’s Gospel, the light of the Mount of Transfiguration and the Easter Light of Resurrection. Father Bishoi lived in a world where all things, even that malevolent killer cancer, could be the Cross of Exultation. These convictions are not abstractions. For a believer like this man they must be lived through. The sacred demands upon the cross-bearer are quite plainly to take up every day the cross, to affirm whatever each day brings as the will of God, to offer back to God every evening all the joys, cares and sufferings of this unique day. It is impossible to imagine the exercise of these spiritual insights in mundane terms for, as Tasouni Angel has said,

Abouna died very slowly.

From 1976 until his death in 1979 Bishoi carried the cross, but it was the same cross he had always borne, even in the full bloom of health and success. The witness of all who knew *Abouna* is that for this singular cross-bearer the cancer seemed little to him because of the transfiguration that was set before him.

Two biographical testimonies concerning Bishoi were offered after his death.

The first came from the pen of a Jewish convert to Christianity. He lived in Alexandria but eventually became a Protestant evangelist in the Lebanon:

“All his nearly six thousand days as a priest and all his waking hours at home and abroad, all his heroic will in the face of cancer and all his spiritual power, all the passion of his outgoing heart, not a fragment of his life but the whole, were, it seems clear, offered as an oblation to Christ in the Church. This was a life so different from the average ecclesiastical career in any church. This witness raises the priestly humility at Sporting to comparable

¹²⁷ cf. Iris Habib El Masri. op.cit. p.75

ecumenical heights with those of the Cure d'Ars St. Jean-Baptiste Vianney¹²⁸ and the Russian priest St. John of Kronstadt".¹²⁹

The second comes from a Coptic Orthodox priest:

"Although he spent his last two years fighting cancer, the smile never left his face. His house and his heart were always open to his congregation. Many admitted that they found comfort in their illness or trouble just by looking at their Father or hearing about his patience. When I heard these stories, I always remembered the words of St. Augustine, that a priest lying on his sick bed...may be more effective in his service than with all his preaching".¹³⁰

The mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox saints is often characterised as a mysticism of light and resurrection, and much Western mysticism is described as devotion concentrated upon the crucifix, the saving Blood of the Saviour and the propitiatory death of 'Christ in our place'. Father Bishoi would probably not have balked at any of these authentic expressions of faith. Perhaps he united these elements in himself? But his mysticism should be defined as a mysticism of the transfigured Cross. He knew that a proper disposition of the heart would lead us to salvation and perfection. He was a man of intellect who obeyed the instruction to keep the mind in the heart. He had a powerful awareness of the Church of God as a family of believers. He was deeply committed to a discernment of the place of Our Lady in the economy of salvation. For Bishoi the way to overcome, and to bear the cross, was by prayer and the breathing of the Holy Name, which is more powerful than evil and death.

¹²⁸ St. Jean-Baptiste Marie Vianney, the Cure d'Ars (1786-1859) is the patron of Roman Catholic parish priests and as a confessor frequently heard confessions for over twelve hours each day.

¹²⁹ G.G. Habib, *Christians in the Arab World* (Arabic). Beirut, Lebanon, 1989. p.77.

¹³⁰ Tadros Y. Malaty, *A Spiritual Leader. Fr. Bishoi Kamel Ishak*. Coptic Church Review, Vol.2. No1. Spring 1981. pp.20-23.

Nine: EPILOGUE

In the last weeks of his life, Father Bishoi was very sick, in bed, and sporadically prey to dementia, but he was at times still strong enough to write. He recorded some of his last thoughts and prayers in a commonplace book or journal.¹³¹ The following eleven epigrammatic notes, though brief and occasionally abrupt, nevertheless provide a final but essential insight into the mind of this priest-theologian.

- The life of each Christian is a way marked by sweet crosses. Each cross ends in glory.
- The Way of the Cross is a school. Escaping from it means losing your future.
- My Lord Jesus, grant me understanding to grasp the strength of your cross. Make me feel not defeated but victorious through the power of your cross.
- My Mother, O Blessed Virgin Mary, whose own soul was pierced by a sword, and who shared in the fellowship of those who carry the cross, pray for me. Help me to carry my cross. You are experienced in carrying the cross, teach me and help me.
- Simon of Cyrene pray for me. May I bear the crosses of others with happiness, love and without complaint. You were forced to bear the greatest cross. Even if I am forced to bear lesser crosses, help me to follow your example.
- The Way of the Cross is my way to eternal happiness. It is the place where the soul meets Christ.
- Those who are careless with their cross lose their crown.
- The cross was not something that just happened during the Lord's life on earth. It was a must: a must for Christ and a must for us.
- A priest looks at a young, enquiring adult and he sees someone for whom Christ died. He looks at any sinner and he sees not the sinner but the one who takes away sin. The aim that motivates a priest is to serve the Crucified. Each person comes with the commendation of the Lord of Glory.
- The cross is not a theme for contemplation for a day, or even a month, or for any particular period, but the love for the cross is the whole life of the Christian.
- A priest wears a garment with a cross embroidered on the front, giving him a chance to see Christ carrying the priest's own pains, labours and sins.

Father Bishoi Kamel Ishak reposed in the Lord at 8.00 a.m. on Wednesday 21 March 1979 (12 Baramhat AM 1695). He died at home in Flat 7, 10 Naucratis Street, Camp Caesar, Alexandria.

¹³¹ CSCIL File ABKI. 11.00.Translation A.J. O. cf. materials in Iris Habib El Masri op.cit. pp. 35-81 & Tadros Y. Malaty op.cit. 10-13.

Groups of priests and deacons from the parish church and from other Alexandrian churches were present. Immediately after his death they joined Tasouni Angel in the prayers for the dead.

We began dressing Abouna in his priest's robes. He had told me to bring them from the church to our flat one month before his death, and when I asked him why he needed them at home, he said: "It may happen that we travel suddenly to any place." When we had completed the robing and the prayers it was 10 o'clock. Some parishioners brought the coffin from the church and placed it just next to Abouna's bed and put inside it a golden robe, then the priests lifted his body dressed in the white robe and lowered him into the funerary box. The church provided a hearse.

By 11.00 a.m. Abouna Bishoi's open coffin had been placed next to the *haikal*¹³² curtain, which hangs across the central opening in the iconostasis. The priest is traditionally placed with his feet facing the altar, symbolic of his role in presiding at the liturgy and guiding the people to Christ in the sacrament. In accordance with Coptic custom, he wore a mitre and held a white cross decorated with gold. He lay there and vast numbers of Alexandrians passed in single file around his catafalque to receive a final benediction. There were many Muslims in the crowd. Entering from the south side of the church, all the company went through the chancel to the sanctuary, kissed the cross and then the hand that held it. In death, as in life, the Cross of Christ remained at the centre of Father Bishoi's ministry. After the acts of veneration, the visitors left the church by the north-eastern door. The steady stream continued day and night right up to the time of the funeral, which took place on Thursday 22 March 1979. The prayers began at 5 p.m. and were led by the Coptic patriarch and supporting bishops. The congregation filled the church, the crypt, the courtyards on the south and north sides of the building, and then spilt out into the streets filling the pavement and roadway for several blocks. The priest's body was laid immediately in the tomb prepared for him under the church.¹³³

In the last decade of his too short life *Abouna* reached a level of mystical experience and contemplation which may well place him amongst the greatest religious thinkers of the twentieth century. For long periods he had suffered from excruciating pain but he learned to gather together all his pain and to set it in the context of Christ's Passion. He willingly embraced the distress of cancer, the often harsh and hostile "facts-of-life" for a Copt in an Islamic context and the even more crippling imposition of the ecclesiastical institution upon a sensitive Orthodox priest. He accepted them and transformed them. For Bishoi these afflictions were ways into the silent presence of the divine reality. The kind of religion that is merely consolation was anathema to him. He welcomed the transcendent and the immanent in religion, the spiritual and the bodily, embracing these intensities in his theology of the Cross.

"Life stories retain their power when theories fade".¹³⁴ In a purely secular context this observation makes sense. In the context of the exceptional life story of Bishoi Kamel it is, to the contrary, the unfailing 'theory', the foundation in Christian theology, spirituality and ethics, that gives authority to the story. There are very few lives, whether recorded or forgotten, that are completely whole. The journeys of most human lives are filled with twists and turns, ups and downs or the constant spinning of a daily merry-go-round. Biographies too, even very short biographies, tend to be little more than a series of time-stretching sequences with isolated mountain peaks chosen for exposure

¹³² See the *Introduction* to this essay.

¹³³ The architect was Farag Akladios the original architect of the parish church (d. 1992).

¹³⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself*, London 2001. p.1.

and research. This life constantly reaffirms itself at any moment of critical examination, as being of one piece, a life of wholeness and completeness.

The evidence of this particular study is that this was the story of a saint. Individual churches have their own processes for beatification, canonisation and glorification, but such legal matters are not the business of this essay. What must always be of concern in the biography of a holy person is that the perfect reciprocity between confession of faith and life should be always in evidence. Archbishop Nathan Soderblom of the Church of Sweden has expressed the issue with great clarity:

“When God’s rule has penetrated a man’s heart and life so that the divine love and righteousness become the main factor, we speak of a saint. Saints are such as show clearly and plainly in their lives and deeds and in their very being, that God lives.”¹³⁵

Abouna Bishoi Kamel Ishak of Mar Girgis, Sporting, Al-Iskandariyah, Misr embodied this righteous clarity and simplicity, seeing in life’s pain and joy the transfigured cross of Christ.

¹³⁵ Cited by Gordon Rupp in *I seek My Brethren*, London, 1975. p.30.