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ΠΙΜΟΝΑΧΟΣ

A monthly newsletter with monastic issues for today's youth

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FATHER YOSTOS OF SAINT ANTONY

By: Rodolph Yanney, M.A.



In December 1976 when the monks of St. Antony attended the funeral service for Father Yostos they knew that an angel had departed from their monastery. For more than fifteen centuries the monastery, which was named after the great Saint Anthony and built near his cave, has been standing at the bottom of a high mountain looking over the Red Sea. In its long history it has seen many saints, and it gave the Church a number of its Patriarchs and bishops. But here we do not see a man who trod the road of sanctity through a life of heroic virtues. He was not a bishop, nor an abbot, nor even a priest. He did not preach, and he left no teachings, no writings and had no disciples.

Early Years

Father Yostos was born about AD 1910 in the village of Zarabee, a few miles from the ancient Coptic Monastery Al Moharraq in the province of Assiut. He was given the name Naguib at his birth. His father Shah-hat was a tailor, and this was the trade Naguib was trained in his early years. In his childhood he learned to read both Arabic and Coptic. He was chosen to be a reader in the church, and thus he assisted in the liturgy. About the year 1939 he answered the desert call and stayed as a novice in the Monastery of Saint Paul the hermit. In 1941 he moved to the neighboring Monastery of Saint Antony where he became a monk.

A Life of Simplicity and Poverty

During his thirty-five years as a monk the only sermon Father Yostos gave to his fellow monks and to the visitors of the great monastery and actually the only legacy he left for the whole Church was his



simple life. Poverty has been always one of the primary vows of monasticism everywhere, but it reached a new dimension in Father Yostos; he simply owned nothing. He used to carry no money; the small monthly allowance he took from the monastery, he held with one of the brethren who kept the money and gave it all to the abbot a short time before the death of Father Yostos. The money was used later to buy carpets for the monastery.

All the clothes of Father Yostos consisted of a worn-out tunic, a cap that became colorless through age, and an old shoe which he even rarely used. During the cold winter months he covered his shoulders with a blanket which a poor man would hesitate to keep in his house. These same clothes were later treasured by pious people who wanted to get the blessing of the man of God after his departure.

One day a wealthy lady visited the monastery to meet Father Yostos. When she saw him she was repelled by his dress and could not bear looking at his ragged clothes. She later saw him in the church, this time transfigured with spiritual glory, and she smelt the fragrance of beautiful incense emanating from him. The amazed lady tried to meet the Saint after church, in order to confess her guilt and declare her sorrow. But he fled and she never saw him again.

The cell of Father Yostos reflected his character. It consisted of two rooms built of clay and roofed with palm branches with no windows. Anyone could peep through or go inside because it had no door. There was nothing in it but the bare floor, covered with tiny gravel for lack of care, a small old mat and a pitcher for water. There was no bed, no mattress or pillow, no chair, nor even a plate or a cup. Everything there was placed on the floor the hard bread, the dry tomatoes, dates and onions.



There was nothing of importance in the cell except the volumes of the *Psalms*, the Church books for the Divine Office.

In fact Father Yostos did not consider that the cell was his. He used to wander in the monastery, day and night. When he needed rest, he sat under a tree or next to a wall. In his early years he slept on a tree block fallen on the ground. He ate his meals mostly sitting under a tree in the garden of the monastery. He used to fast for long hours after which he ate the bread fallen from the common table, which the monks used to throw away to the sheep. Sometimes he ate boiled beans. He had also a recipe of his own composed of bran, dried leaves, bread and onions. He never ate meat. His daily portion of food he gave to the workmen in the monastery or offered to the cats which used to follow him when he took his share of the cooked meal.



Spiritual Sources

For Father Yostos Scripture was his constant companion. He could recite long portions of the Epistles of Saint Paul. He had deep knowledge of the personalities of the Bible. His answers to questions were mostly by verses from Scripture. He loved the Church, its liturgy, its saints, even its building. He used to be seen kneeling in prayer in front of the church during the night. When the bell called the monks for the Daily Office, he was the first to enter the church. When time came for departure he did not like to leave; many a time the brethren had to use force to get him out of the church. During the worship he stood with his gaze fixed toward the icon of Christ.



He sang the psalmody in beautiful tunes, in the Coptic tongue which he spoke fluently. He approached the Holy Mysteries in reverence and fear. When he served in the altar during feast days he used to be dressed in the splendid tunic of the deacon, something totally in contrast to his usually poor clothing.

He prayed for hours every day. Having no place of his own, one could see him praying anywhere in the monastery, in the church, or the garden, or his cell. He spent most of his prayer time on his knees. Frequently, when overpowered by sleep he slept while kneeling. In his cell he did numberless prostrations on the ground which, for lack of care, was paved with sand and fine gravel; kneeling on these was an agony by itself.

For the prayers of the hours he used no book as he memorized all the psalms by heart.

To Heaven

Father Yostos died as simply as he lived. He was sick for a few hours before his death. One day he was found lying down with a fever in front of the guest house. A brother carried him to one of the rooms in the monastery where he gave up his spirit. One of the monks later saw a light shining around the place where Father Yostos was buried. Troops staying near by stated that a brilliant light had been flashing from the monastery for several successive nights. Also they saw the figure of a man in white clothes who carried a strong light and walked along the high wall surrounding the monastery. The monks of Saint Antony believe that Father Yostos who used to walk inside the monastery during the night has not left and is still, after his departure, touring the place where he has lived for so many years, and which he still loves.

(From: Coptic Church Review - Volume: 6 Issue: 3)



St Anthony's Legacy

By: Lisa Agaiby

“The land of Egypt is fertile, not only for growing fruits that perish, but for people who bear fruit according to God. Yes, other lands bring different kinds of fruit to us and we find enjoyment in them, but our pride is in our own fruits, yes, in what our land has produced, the likes of which are not produced elsewhere... Antony, says Athanasius, was Egyptian by birth. Where will the sun rise except in the east? And where do you wish Antony to shine forth except in Egypt... For most of the saints who have lived have been from Egypt or Egypt has attracted them from other places.”



It was this passage that I had been reflecting upon recently as I sat perched in front of the crevice that was once Antony's abode, high up on Mount Clysma in the majestic Galala South mountain ranges. With its dramatic backdrop of rock, and vast, infinite blue sky spread out above, this place felt closer to heaven than earth, and I understood why “more than anything else, Antony loved spending time on his mountain.” My thoughts drifted to the Monastery core below; the alleged site where Antony's monastic community grew up from the fourth century, and imagined how little daily life for the monks has changed in more than fifteen hundred years: it continued to be a life of private contemplation, communal prayer, and manual labour. People coming from foreign lands continue to frequent the Monastery with curiosity; however, those who once arrived in litters and camelback coming across from Alexandria and Palestine, were now replaced with those bussed in from the Red Sea resorts and a horde of pilgrims continue to flock to the Monastery weekly in search of the blessings of some ‘holy man’ who could work a miracle or to cure a disease. I recall the look of the abbot that day after fifty buses of people had alighted at the Monastery's gate, and suddenly understood how Antony must have felt when “he was being bothered by crowds of people.”



Nevertheless, Antony's legacy lives on in his successors whose monastic practice continues to be based predominantly on a life of prayer and work – both to provide for their community as well as “those coming to visit so they might have a little relief from the hardships of that rugged journey.”

Thinking of Antony and how “each day he sighed, reflecting in his heart on the heavenly dwellings,” my thoughts returned back to Bishop John of Shmūn whose encomium served to immortalise Antony, some two hundred years after the saint had departed.



Aside from being a fantastic piece of late antique publicity, what struck me about John of Shmūn 's words, were three things in particular: 1. his exaltation that Antony was beyond compare, 2. his declaration that Egyptians were living exemplars of the scriptures, and 3. that Egyptians by virtue of their Christian living, attracted the attention of those abroad.

The reputation of Egyptian monasticism that spread throughout the Late Roman Empire, through writers and pilgrims such as Jerome, Rufinus, Palladius, John Cassian and Melania the Elder, transferred Egypt from being a provincial backwater into a new paradise of spiritual perfection, enticing many, including men and women of the aristocracy, to emulate Antony's ascetic life of renunciation, prayer, work and contemplation. Accordingly, the world experienced a major shift in paradigm: attributes that characterised the lowest classes in society, specifically those who worked at manual labour, now became one of the major attributes that categorised and differentiated Christian asceticism from other forms of 'philosophy.' Consequently, in Egypt, we find a monk who came from a senatorial background, working with his hands side by side with an illiterate Egyptian peasant monk.

Yes, very little *has* changed.

Imitating the life of Antony, today the monks of Egypt became living exemplars that embodied the ideals that the scriptures described and present their lives as a living witness to the spirituality of St Anthony. Some of these exemplars are present today in every monastery, others we hear their tales of asceticism and holiness from their living disciples.

A Group of Students from St Bishoy's Coptic Orthodox School
spending the day at the monastery





What Time Is It?

"But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers" (1 Peter 4:7)



Many visitors who came to the Monastery, would seek him to ask for words of spiritual benefit, and Father Yostos would respond by giving them verses from the Bible. One such verse is from the Book of Proverbs: "A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb, but to a hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet" (27:7), and another is from the Book of Habakkuk: "Woe to him who increases what is not his - how long? And to him who loads himself with many pledges" (2:6).

The effect these verses had on those who heard them, were like arrows piercing the heart and penetrating the mind. The other response that Father Yostos was renowned for are his few words: "What time is it?" By saying these simple words, Father Yostos was attempting to attract their attention to the fact that time is passing quickly and very shortly we will see our Saviour face to face, and so we must be ready.

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Many people could not understand why he constantly asked about the time, and some even tried to ridicule him by responding with the incorrect time. However, it became clear to them that he was not speaking about the actual time, for he had the gift of knowing what time it was without a watch, and so when people would give him the wrong time, he would correct them. At times people thought that he was able to predict the time from the position of the sun, but in actual fact, God had given him the gift of knowing time. When the late Pope Kyrillos VI passed away, it was a very cloudy day and as they were transporting his blessed body from Cairo to the Monastery of Saint Menas, Father Yostos said the exact time in which the saintly patriarch had passed.



Therefore it was clear that the wisdom behind these simple words was to keep watch and be ready for the day when we will meet the beloved Lord Jesus Christ.

"...redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16).

And it is within this spirit that Father Yostos practiced his life of asceticism.



"Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand... Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!" (James 5:8-9).

One day a young doctor came to ask Father Yostos for advice, and he kept replying, "What time is it?" The young doctor could not understand why he was constantly asking for the time, and so in annoyance, he said to Father Yostos, "What's wrong with you? Why do you keep asking about the time? Do you have important appointments?!" But the saintly monk responded to him in gentleness and politeness, "My son, *to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.*" (Ecclesiastics 3:1).



By these words, Father Yostos was bringing to his attention that time passes and never comes back, so one must focus his attention first on the things of the Spirit before the things that are temporal.

A father of the Monastery recalled the following incident:

"One night while I was asleep in my cell, I heard a very strong knock on my door. So immediately I woke up and called out, "Who is it?" I was surprised when I heard Father Yostos' voice asking, "What time is it?" I felt so annoyed that I was woken up from sleep to be asked about the time and I told Father Yostos so. And then he left quietly. As I turned to switch the light off, I noticed a large scorpion on my pillow. It was at this moment that I understood Father Yostos' coming to me in the middle of the night and waking me from my sleep, was to save me from danger."

(From: The Garden of St Anthony, St Anthony Monastery)



A Group of boys from St Abanoub Church spending a retreat at the monastery.



Prayer program for December and January

Kiahk Praises:

Sat 12 th	Dec 2009	}	Vespers:	5pm – 6:30pm
Sat 19 th	Dec 2009		Midnight Tasbeha:	11pm – 3am
Sat 26 nd	Dec 2009		First Liturgy:	4am – 6am
Sat 2 nd	Jan 2010		Second Liturgy:	10am – 12pm

New Year Eve:

Thurs 31 st	Dec 2009	Midnight Tasbeha	11pm – 3am
		Holy Liturgy	4am – 6am

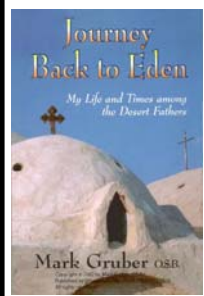
Glorious Feast of Christmas:

Wed 6 th	Jan 2010	Paramoun Liturgy	9am – 12pm
		Feast Liturgy	9pm – 12 am

The Garden of St Anthony, St Shenouda Monastery.



The stories of the saints are a practical application of how virtues that were acquired through hard work and spiritual struggle were reflected in their everyday life. The lives of our monastic fathers resemble a perpetual spring- that gives nourishment to the earth and hence produces a garden of beautiful flowers. Each flower has its own beauty, it's own colour, its own fragrance. But together they are beautiful. Likewise are the lives of the saints. Amongst those in the garden of Abba Antony are the following three unique and beautiful flowers who lived in the monastery during the 20th century: The monk Yostos al-Antouny, The monk Tadros al-Antouny, and The monk-priest Abeskhairon al-Antouny. This book gives a glimpse of their virtuous lives.



Mark Gruber, *Journey back to Eden: My life and time among the Desert Fathers.*

While in Egypt, I did not intend to keep a spiritual journal. My immediate, practical goal was to spend a year doing ethnographic fieldwork in order to write a dissertation for a doctorate in anthropology. My abbot had commissioned me to this end so that I could teach at the college affiliated with my Benedictine monastery. My academic mission and scholastic zeal precluded the writing of elaborate spiritual reflections in those days. This book is basically a story of modern spiritual adventure of an American who lived for a year among the Coptic monks of Egypt.