

ANBA ABRAAM (1829-1914)

The friend of the poor

(Part 1)

How pleasant to the soul is to be free from the bonds of earthly life, enjoying calmly the stories of these fathers, tasting the sweetness of the work of Christ in the life of His children, and smelling His aroma through their behaviour.

The biography of "ANBA ABRAAM" is a life and fellowship with the Lord. It is an odor that had been diffused in every home in Egypt, and its fragrance emanated in all the Eastern world. Some westerns also inhaled it, and came to meet him.

The famous writer "LEEDER", heard about him from some western Catholic people, and he hastened with his wife to visit Egypt, in order to meet the old Saint, and the Bishop of Fayoum.

Let us mention some statements this English writer had written after visiting our Father. He wrote a special chapter describing this visit in his famous book [1].

The English writer said : "There is a man in Egypt whose name is unknown to the ruling class, and who is yet the most talked of and the most venerated in all the valley of the Nile. Although he is Christian Bishop, he is just as much a Saint of heaven to the Moslem and the Christian."

He also added : "Before I even thought of seeking an audience with this wonderful old man I had heard Catholic people as far away as France speaking of the Bishop of Fayoum and Gizza in Egypt as an ascetic in whose powers confirmed all the signs which our Lord had said should follow them that believe, "In My name they shall cast devils .. they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover ...".

This old Saint, whose power is known all over the Eastern world, is in the direct and unbroken succession of those early Christians ...

No matter where I had gone to Egypt, I had heard again and again about the Bishop of Fayoum. Incredible stories were told to me of his self denials, his fastings, his mystical wisdom, his power of divination, his faculty to exorcise evil spirits and to cure all manner of sickness, and of the comfort his words gave to the afflicted both in soul and in body; of his unlimited kindness of the poor .. "

The wife of Late Nassif Mahrous spoke about the effect of their meeting with the Bishop. She said, "some ladies and I were welcoming Mrs. Leeder after her

visit to the Bishop. She told us in French that she had been in the presence of Christ and was filled with the spirit of God."

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Whoever accepts our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sake became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich, does not cease from groaning inwardly, longing to spend and be spent for very man, especially who are incapable of giving back what they receive.

Those would be willing to bear the burdens of all people, walking in the way of Golgotha, following the steps of our Master, leaving everything behind, suffering for the sake of all men and singing, "I have been crucified with Christ".

Our Father "ANBA ABRAAM" experienced practical fellowship with the Lord, so he loved the poor in a wonderful way. Whenever he went, he was surrounded by them, for in him they found their comfort and felt his loving fatherhood.

Once, on an Easter night, his disciple told him that Hanna Bey Nakhla had sent various kinds of food and a turkey. The father blessed the sender, and with a gentle sweet smile asked his disciple to put the food on the tables, and call the poor people, the blind and the patients who were in the first floor of his home to come and eat. He stood watching his children and taking care of them as they were eating. Yet he ate only radishes and some butter milk.

Once in an "AGHABI BANQUET", the cook made a table of fried fish for the rich, and another table of cooked fish for the poor. When the bishop entered to have dinner with them, he saw the two tables, and he firmly ordered the cook to mix the two kinds of fish. "Who wants to eat from the mixture, let him eat". God does not separate the poor from the rich, all are the same to Him". When the poor heard that, they rejoiced for his real fatherhood. The rich moved by his love for his children and his high spirituality and they also ate from the mixture.

It was said that the Nobles of the Bishopric saw the Bishop's home not suitable. They agreed with their father to renew it. The collected L.E. 200, a valuable sum at that time, and brought it to him to make an appointment with a building contractor. The bishop looked at them saying "I have already built, my sons". "Where is the building, our father ?! There is no change at all !", they said. "I have built a house for you in the eternal life", he replied.

One day a poor non-Christian citizen went to one of his rich relatives asking for a subsidy for his wife, who was about to give birth to their child, but he refused, and this sadly distressed the poor. The poor citizen vowed that

he would ask the bishop himself. He went to "Anba Abraam" and related his story. The bishop said : "Is the bishop for the Christians only ?", then he gave him the only pound which was under the pillow. As the poor citizen was leaving, he met a monk who was surprised that his brother "The Bishop" had given the poor citizen all the money that he had, so he took the pound from him and gave him 20 cents instead. The citizen returned to the bishop and complained to him. The bishop called the monk, took the pound from him, and gave it to the poor together with the 20 cents ... and angrily sent the monk away. After three days, the monk returned to ask for his forgiveness, which the bishop did grant. At that time, a letter arrived containing a money order and great offerings, then the bishop called the monk and said "See ..". The monk bowed before him modestly saying "I'm not like you .. Our Lord bestowed upon you the gift of offering".

The bishop's contemporaries related that many persons were coming to Fayoum to bring gifts and offerings. The rich men were very generous in their offerings, but he never looked at the amounts, instead he put all the money and gold under the his pillow, so that when any person came to him asking for help, he would reach under the pillow, and give whatever he found. It's said that in his time, there was no poor in Fayoum, for they all found in the bishop's house their own home from which they could get what they needed.

A well-known story is told about three young men who decided to make a plot to take advantage of the bishop's love of the poor. Two of them approached him saying that the third had died, and they had nothing to bury him. The bishop nodded his head, and gave them an offering saying, "Take this and bury him ..". They left laughing, but they got so astonished when they found that their friend had actually died. they tried to return the money asking the Bishop's pardon. He forgave them but did not accept the money, telling them to go and bury him.

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The mystery of the greatness in our Father Anba Abraam is that he was a man of prayer. The prayer in our church is not a troublesome routine, nor a hard law that we are subject to, but a taste of sweetness of being sons of God.

We converse intimately with him, and also with love we blame him kindly !! In tear we proclaim our repentance, and with joy we thank him. We do not only pray for our benefits, but also, for the benefit of others.

Our holy father devoted his life for pray, as he loved God. He was filled with power. He was accustomed to gather all his children every evening, at his home to pray the psalms and to read some chapters of the Holy Bible.

The people who slept in the room close to his, related that he used to rise up at midnight to pray the psalms and stay up until dawn. And he used to repeat the words : "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me", praying it with zeal. All who met him testified that his prayers were very deep in spirit until his senility.

The English writer LEADER said : "It was with deep emotion that I looked into the face of this modern saint To doubt his right to the title was impossible for the power of a pure and beautiful soul itself felt at once, with a force that was almost overwhelming".

"The eyes looked out of a calm, grave face, fringed with a small white beard, which in no way obscured the sensitive mouth. The turban was worn father back than is usual. Leaving the broad unwrinkled forehead to suggest that the ascetic, in this case, had been governed by a fine intelligence".

"Taking the cross in his right hand, and holding it closely over our heads, the Bishop poured out, mostly in the Coptic language, in tones of rapt devotion, the wonderful prayers and blessing of his Church".

"Of the mere words, I of course recognized little, except the often repeated "Kyrie Eleison" (Lord have mercy). But I was thrilled nevertheless by the childlike earnestness of the man who uttered them; never had I heard prayer which seemed to establish a link with the Throne of Grace with such instant security; it seemed as if earth fell away , to leave this man speaking in clear presence of God himself".

Late Naguib bey Erian said that some believers saw a beam of light coming out of his window at night while he was praying.

The man of God, Anba Abraam loved Jesus Christ, and had communion with God on the basis of going on the way to Golgotha following the Cross, where he left everything willingly. Was refused and humiliated from people for the sake of the heavenly glory. He left all his personal dignity with will and joy and without grumbling. He was a loving kind father for the poor and the rich alike, and he was never conceited.

The British author Mr. Leader investigated everything about the character and life of our father after he had visited him. He said he always saw our Bishop hiding his hands with the sleeve of his garment in order to prevent any one from kissing his hands.

Mr. Leader said: "It is usual, I believe, in every Christian church to kneel in receiving a bishop's blessing but on no account would Anba Abraam consent to any person kneeling before him "To God alone" he said , "was such obeisance due". He was distressed that I felt obliged to kneel , but when I explained that my first reverence was to God , and then to his good servant, he gently gave way".

The Bishop never permitted any of the deacons to say in his presence any statement, that they usually say before reading the Bible to show their respect to him. He absolutely did not distinguish himself from his people, and he never sat on a chair different from that of his sons. In the sanctuary he used to stand up all the time during the liturgy when he got older and weaker he used to sit down on the carpet when ever he get tired.

Our father Anba Abraam was very pleased when any of his sons called him "Our father", and never permitted anyone to call him "Our Master". When the Pope wanted to give him the higher rank of "Metropolitan", he refused completely.

We can clearly see the kindness of this Bishop through the stories told by the people: "Once, during the service of sun lay morning the Bishop noticed that the deacons were not keeping harmony in their prayers. After the service had ended he remarked to the "teacher" about that. The teacher misunderstood him and did not attend the evening prayers on that day. The Bishop inwardly feeling the teacher's anger due to his misunderstanding went to his home asking for forgiveness. When the teacher saw him he wept saying "I beg you to forgive me". Then the Bishop returned to his home late at night.

When the Bishop became very famous, he did not leave his children and escape in the desert, flying from vainly glory, but he only refused to meet any one coming to him merely for honoring him. This is what the British writer witnessed; saying: "The old man apparently had no liking for the idea of being sought out by a traveler as a celebrity; this was not his Master's work. If any man is poor, or sad, or ill, or had need in anyway spiritual advice, or counsel, then he could see him, but not otherwise".

When the Prince Serguios (Uncle of Nicola of Russia) and his wife, heard about him they came to visit him in 1898. The Governor received them, and the Coptic Noblemen of El-Fayoum tried to buy new furniture for the Bishop's home, but the Bishop refused completely. The visitors came and bowed in front of him on the ground, and he prayed for them. When they offered him a bag full of golden pounds, he refused and lastly he took one pound and gave it to his son Rizk. The Prince said that he did not feel such as inspiring awe all his life as at that moment when he was standing in front of this saint Anba Abraam.