

Abba Mina the Bishop

by Ramez Rizkalla

[Abba Mina] was an ascetic monk who was known for his temperance in everything. He excelled greatly in the life of fasting and stillness... Many were his prayers and liturgies; he was a monk that was immersed in his monasticism. He was loved by all, and revered by his sons in monasticism... He lived as a monk prior to his consecration as a monk, and continued in the life of monasticism after his ordination as a Bishop... He was a role-model for his children in his being a spiritual individual who was meticulous in his life... He was a gentle, calm and silent individual, who only spoke when it was necessary... He was very pitiful on the people, and gracious in giving. (H. H. Pope Shenouda III)

Abba Mina The Bishop The Spiritual and Ascetic Monk

I. INTRODUCTION

“The stories of the just,” writes St. Isaac the Syrian, “are desirable to the hearing of the innocent as constant watering is to young plants.” The faithful constantly thirst for the opportunity to hear or read about the just who have struggled in this age and conquered, because of their genuine desire to emulate these models of Christian life and perfection, hoping to follow the faith which they both taught and lived by. For this reason, I have decided to give a somewhat brief and simple account of a luminous planet, whose spiritual light shone for all as a guide in this dark generation of ours. This “faithful and wise steward” whose light shone before all men as a model for good works, is the Thrice-Blessed and Thrice-Reposed Abba Mina the Bishop, first abbot of St. Mina’s monastery in the wilderness of Mariout, and disciple of Pope Kyrillos VI of good memory.

The story of Abba Mina the Bishop – who like Elisha the Prophet, had the spirit of his spiritual master rest on him – is truly inspiring and beneficial for all those who are seeking practical means by which they may attain Christian perfection. Abba Mina was one who constantly struggled in his life, joyfully bearing the Cross of physical ailment. Despite his physical ailments, he never allowed for himself to slow down in his spiritual race for Christian excellence. In his time of adversity, he was a great role-model for those surrounding him, simply because he would not allow for anything to separate him from the love of Christ. It was, therefore, necessary to bring to light an account of this Cross-bearer, so that all those who may stumble upon this article may be filled with fervency to struggle as this great champion of Christ did, till they arrive safely at the harbour of salvation. It was also necessary to make the life of this pious individual known to many, due to the unfortunate fact that there is a scarcity of sources available on the life and times of the Great Abba Mina. May this humble article be a source of edification for its readers.

II. HIS LIFE IN THE WORLD

Soliman Rizk (Abba Mina the Bishop) was born on the 23rd of January, 1923 (15th of Toubah, 1639 AM), in the rural town of Tanta, Egypt. From his childhood he manifested a meek and reverent manner, with a love for solitude. Soliman was one who always devoted all of his free time to reading and prayer. Despite having merely completed a secondary education, he was endowed with spiritual intelligence and wisdom, like St. Antony the Great, which amazed the most knowledgeable individual that had to deal with him. Soliman began preparing for the life of monasticism in his early youth and did so by practising the life of love, calmness and stillness. Young Soliman also exercised temperance and asceticism. In Tanta, where he began serving, he learned the Midnight Office from the town's prominent cantor, thus further preparing himself for the life of monasticism through prayer and praise.

Soliman was a very ritualistic individual who was immersed in the life of prayer and enjoyed greatly serving the Midnight Office. He was also known for leading prayer meetings in the Church of the Virgin in Hai ElSagha, where his followers and spiritual students would observe him praying in reverence and repeating in all humility the words of the Lenten doxology, "for there is no servant without sin, nor a Master without forgiveness." Alongside his love for hymnology and the Midnight Office, as well as his leadership of prayer meetings, Soliman served in Sunday school. Furthermore, he was known for serving by himself in poor villages which were in dire need of service. In these simple villages, Soliman established a reputation for leading many to the life of repentance and was thus loved by all.

Due to his many dedicated services, Soliman was chosen in 1950 to serve as the overseer of the Sunday school library in Giza. This was a service which was considered to be extremely important and time-consuming, and one to which Soliman decided to completely dedicate himself.

III. LIFE OF CONSECRATION

At the age of twenty-seven, Soliman Rizk resigned from his full-time occupation and decided to consecrate his life for service, thus dedicating his entire time to the service of God. In Giza, he put a great deal of care in teaching and outreach. Soliman was known for personally organizing the curriculums and delivering them to the various regions around Egypt, alongside an attached spiritual letter which he would take time to write.

Soliman was not known for being a preacher, but he did have a reputation for his exuberant outreach. He would regularly visit the youths in secret and would engage them in spiritually stimulating and uplifting conversations. His relationship with those around him began to increase and so did his services, which encompassed every region in Egypt. This was all, however, done in secret, because he did not wish to be boastful.

Despite the vast number of services which virtually consumed all of his time, Soliman never abandoned his prayers and praises, but rather grew in them. His desire to

constantly grow in the life of prayer and praise led him to a simple Church in Old Cairo that went by the name of St. Mina, and in which served a pious and ascetic monk by the name of Mina the Solitary, who would in the future ascend to the Patriarchal throne of St. Mark the Apostle as Pope Kyrillos VI.

In the Church of St. Mina in Old Cairo, Soliman Rizk took it upon himself to distribute the Church's magazine, which was entitled Harbour of Salvation. The relationship between Soliman and the producer of the magazine – Fr. Mina the Solitary – began to grow on account of Soliman's distribution of the magazine, and ultimately led to Soliman serving as Fr. Mina's personal deacon. Due to his great love for Fr. Mina, Soliman would travel to Old Cairo on a daily basis to chant the Midnight Office with the monastic Recluse, and would participate in the daily Raising of Matins and Vespers Incense and Divine Liturgies over which the Recluse would preside. Going to Old Cairo became not only a part of Soliman's daily spiritual routine, but a part of his service as well, for he brought several youths to Fr. Mina in order to practice the Sacrament of Repentance and Confession. The relationship between Fr. Mina and Soliman Rizk grew to the extent that Soliman was appointed as the personal deacon of the Patriarch when Fr. Mina ascended the Papal throne.

IV. POPE KYRILLOS VI'S DISCIPLE AND PERSONAL DEACON

In May of 1959, a new and bright chapter in Church history began. The dark cloud which once overshadowed the Coptic Orthodox Church passed and the era of true reformation began with the ascension of Fr. Mina the Solitary to the Patriarchal throne of St. Mark the Apostle. Fr. Mina the Solitary – now Pope Kyrillos VI – immediately began ridding the Church of corrupt individuals and replacing them with spiritual ones. Amongst the first spiritual individuals who were brought in by Pope Kyrillos to serve under him were Soliman Rizk whom the Pope immediately appointed as his disciple and personal deacon. Despite the always busy and hectic environment of the Patriarchate, Soliman Rizk – who now went by the name of "Brother Soliman" – kept his inner peace and stillness through the daily attendance of Matins and Vespers Raising of Incense and the Divine Liturgy with his spiritual master, Pope Kyrillos. All of this and the daily Midnight Office service which he prayed with Pope Kyrillos became a fixed ritual for Brother Soliman and would continue with him for the rest of his life.

At the time, Pope Kyrillos began the preparation for the construction of St. Mina's monastery in the wilderness of Mariout. Throughout the preparatory stages, Pope Kyrillos groomed his disciple, Brother Soliman, for the life of monasticism and for the spiritual leadership of the monastery that was to be built. Upon the completion of the monastery, a new chapter in the life of this pious individual was about to begin.

V. SOLIMAN RIZK BECOMES A MONK AND ABBOT

On the 2nd of September, 1964 (27th of Mesra, 1680 AM), Pope Kyrillos VI consecrated in what was considered to be a momentous occasion for the monastery, Brother Soliman as a monk by the name of Fr. Mina Ava Mina alongside six others. On that day as well,

Fr. Mina was appointed by the Patriarch as the abbot and spiritual Father of the monks. Shortly thereafter (13th of September, 1965 – 6th of Baouna, 1681 AM), Fr. Mina was given the honour of priesthood so that he may preside over the monastery's Divine Liturgies and hear the confessions of the monks and those who sought his spiritual guidance. Four years later (8th of August, 1969 – 2nd of Mesra, 1685 AM), Fr. Mina was elevated to the rank of hegomen. In his first year as a monk, Fr. Mina's health began to deteriorate and this marked the beginning of his struggles with bodily sickness. In 1964, Fr. Mina began experiencing severe migraines and his temperature would suddenly rise. The abbot was urged several times by his sons in monasticism to go to a hospital where he may be diagnosed and treated for his ailments, but as a true monk, Fr. Mina refused to leave the monastery and would work side-by-side with the other monks in construction. Those who worked with him say that Fr. Mina often overworked himself without rest despite his physical condition. In spite of everything, Fr. Mina always had a smile on his face and worked hard so that the monastery might one day become a glorious monument for the honoured Martyr St. Mina and its founder, Pope Kyrillos VI. After having been urged for a long time by Pope Kyrillos to seek medical attention, Fr. Mina Ava Mina agreed to go briefly to Alexandria, where he may be given medical attention. In the hospital in Alexandria, Fr. Mina was diagnosed with Rheumatic fever, which side effects include partial paralysis and the loss of function of one or many senses. Fr. Mina was not troubled by the diagnosis, but was rather thankful for this Cross which was given to him by the Lord.

On the 27th of August, 1970 (19th of Mesra, 1686 AM), Fr. Mina Ava Mina was appointed by His Holiness Pope Kyrillos as Patriarchal Vicar in Alexandria, combining this with his duty as abbot of St. Mina's monastery. In Alexandria, Fr. Mina continued the same spiritual regiment which he was accustomed to and which was handed down to him by his spiritual master, Pope Kyrillos. This regiment entailed waking up at three o'clock in the morning to perform the Midnight Office, followed by Matins Raising of Incense and the Divine Liturgy, then Vespers Raising of Incense in the evening. Furthermore, like Pope Kyrillos, Fr. Mina began paying surprise visits to different Churches in Alexandria in order to inspect their services and to pray the Divine Liturgy. According to first-hand witnesses of Fr. Mina's service in Alexandria, Fr. Mina caused an unprecedented spiritual movement in the city. In 1972 (shortly after the repose of Pope Kyrillos VI of blessed memory), Pope Shenouda III proposed to ordain Fr. Mina as a Bishop over the then-vacant Bishopric see of Damietta, but Fr. Mina declined, simply asking to return to his monastery. Fr. Mina, however, out of obedience, spent one day in Damietta and was then given permission and blessing to return to his monastery.

Despite Fr. Mina's refusal to take on the responsibilities of a Bishop in Damietta, Pope Shenouda was insistent on making him a Bishop. Eight years later (1980), Fr. Mina was surprised to read in an edition of the Keraza magazine that Pope Shenouda was to ordain him on the Feast of Pentecost as a Bishop over the monastery of St. Mina. Upon reading the news, Fr. Mina returned to his cell and began weeping. The rest of the monastery received the news with great joy, because of what was to become of their spiritual Father.

VI. FR. MINA AVA MINA BECOMES THE FIRST BISHOP OF ST. MINA'S MONASTERY

On the Feast of Pentecost (25th of May, 1980 – 17th of Bashans, 1697 AM), amidst cries of “worthy, worthy, worthy,” Pope Shenouda III layed his hands upon Fr. Mina Ava Mina, thus elevating him to the rank of Bishop of the monastery of St. Mina in the Wilderness of Mariout. According to Abba Demetrius of Malawi, Abba Mina – as he was now called – never once practiced his authority as a Bishop, but rather continued living as a simple monk. In his letters, Abba Mina always signed as “the unworthy of being called a monk.” Furthermore, Abba Mina refused to be called Sayedna, but insisted that people address him as Abouna. As a Bishop, he never once consecrated any icons or Church vessels, nor did he ordain any deacons, but he always called upon Abba Demetrius of Malawi, who was his spiritual son and a monk from the monastery of St. Mina, to perform all of these duties.

On the 31st of January, 1996 (22nd of Toubah, 1712 AM) and on the Feast of St. Antony the Great, Pope Shenouda III clothed Abba Mina the Bishop with the Holy Schema, alongside Abba Sarabamoun, Bishop and abbot of St. Bishoy's monastery in the Wilderness of Shiheet, and Abba Metaaos, Bishop and abbot of Deir ElSourian in the Wilderness of Shiheet. Having been adorned with the Holy Schema, Abba Mina continued to struggle even further in his monastic life until he fell asleep on the 11th of December, 1996 (2nd of Kiahk, 1713 AM). Many mourned the loss of this spiritual giant, including Pope Shenouda, who returned abruptly from a trip to Australia to offer his condolences to the monks of St. Mina's monastery. There is much more to be said about Abba Mina the Bishop, such as how he struggled with sickness, how God worked numerous miracles through him and the sort of spiritual advice that he gave. However, due to time and space, one is unable to write about these here, but hopes to write about them in the future. May the memory of this God-loving Bishop be eternal, Amen.