Theme and research

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International Conference on Spirituality

MATTHEW THE POOR

A Contemporary Desert Father

21 - 22 May 2016

Monastery of Bose

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the passing of igumen Matta el Meskin from death to Life, the Monastery of Bose in collaboration with the Monastery of Saint Macarius in Egypt is organizing an International Conference on Spirituality dedicated to one of the most important figures of contemporary Coptic monasticism.

Matta El Meskin (1919–2006) was a monk and igumen of the Monastery of Saint Macarius in the desert of Scete, considered by many as a person of extraordinary human and spiritual gifts. He was one of the most luminous exponents of Egyptian Christians and the father of an important spiritual, monastic, and cultural rebirth within the Coptic Orthodox Church. If it was the love of God that impelled father Matta to leave the world for an extremely poor monastery of Upper Egypt, the Monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor, he was not spared the cross of incomprehension and isolation by church hierarchs. Today, nevertheless, in the era of pope Tawadros II, primate of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Christians of Egypt begin to gather the fruits of father Matta's profound spirituality, and his work continues to spread.

The profound yearning of abuna Matta's entire monastic life was that of always living radically the Gospel, remaining physically separated from the world, but united to all men through prayer, love, hospitality, and spiritual and theological writings. Matthew the Poor created around himself a real and true theological and spiritual school. Today his disciples are scattered not only in Egypt, but through the whole world, thanks to the diffusion of his works through their translation in fifteen languages.

Matthew the Poor is capable of speaking to contemporary men, wherever they may be, with the force of language and of spirituality of the ancient desert fathers. Through the works of this monk runs a thread that holds them all united: grace, God's ineffable love that in Christ realized the reconciliation between earth and Heaven, is always greater and more generous than our misery and littleness and is always capable of transforming us. Man's action is primarily cooperation with the Holy Spirit that becomes a humble waiting and welcoming. His theology has been defined an "epiphanic and experiential theology". The leitmotiv found in all his writings is that God is a mystery revealed in Jesus Christ, but who until the parousia continues to be veiled in part. The salvation carried out by him, hence, is known through personal revelation by the concrete and daily experience of communion between man and God, possible only in the Holy Spirit. Scripture itself, in order to be understood spiritually, must be accompanied by an unveiling, on God's part, of its profound contents, not perceptible superficially, and must be experienced in daily life.

In this we have the specific spirituality of father Matthew: a mystical and intimate life that ruminates the Scriptures and the fathers, far from easy moral precepts and empty dogmatic assertions. Monasticism as perceived and lived by Matthew the Poor is specific within the panorama of contemporary Coptic monasticism: austere and profoundly rooted in the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, it is at the same time cultured and open to the contemporary world. At the Monastery of Saint Macarius abuna Matta gave life to an important rebirth, reforming its community life and undertaking and immense work of restoration and enlargement, which lasted many years and gave work to many workers. In ten years the number of monks grew from the original ten to about eighty; today there are about 140. About a thousand hectares of land have been wrested from the desert, improved, irrigated, transformed into cultivated fields, gardens, fruit orchards, and pastures, giving work to about 700 dependents, who today live in a small village annexed to the monastery. The small Eden of the Monastery of Saint Macarius has thus become a model for many other monasteries.

Matta el Meskin, a tireless supporter of Christian unity, is the author of about a hundred writings and an enormous oral corpus, about which still little is known.

Bishop Anba Epiphanius, abbot of the Monastery of Saint Macarius and successor of abuna Matta, together with the best experts on the Coptic world and Egyptian monasticism, will reflect on the various aspects of this great spiritual and prophetic figure, who has not yet been fully discovered.