

The Apparitions of Mary at Zeitoun

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Of all the Marian apparitions, among the least known is that of Mary in Zeitoun, who appeared to both Christians and Muslims without leaving messages. In Arabic, the word Zeitoun means "olive", and olives being the symbol of peace, we see this as an encouragement to peace.

Zeitoun is a village in the region of Matrouh, near Cairo, the Egyptian capital. According to tradition, this is where Jesus, Mary and Joseph fled to escape the persecution of King Herod.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Saint Mark is located in Zeitoun. On the night of April 2nd, 1968, a luminous profile of a woman who was identified as the Virgin Mary appeared on the roof of this Church. Several witnesses were present at the scene and their detailed accounts are consistent.

However, appearances date back to 1920, when Tawfiq Khalil Bey, a Coptic property owner who had decided to construct a building in Zeitoun, had a dream-vision of Mary. She promised she would honor the place in a special way if he would build a church instead. He accepted and so the Church of St. Mark was built.

The main Zeitoun apparitions occurred between 1968 and 1970. On April 2, 1968, a handful of Muslim workers immediately recognized the Virgin Mary under the guise of a woman kneeling at the foot of the cross. Then there were other appearances, always linked to the luminous phenomena that came to be called a "Rain of Diamonds" and was accompanied by the scent of incense. The image of the Virgin was similar to that of the Immaculate Conception that appeared to Catherine Laboure in 1830, a devotion which had been made very popular by Catholic schools in Egypt.

Today, there are a number of video recordings and pictures that attest to these apparitions. Several investigations have also been made to verify the authenticity of these images. As the years have gone by, these apparitions began to attract more and more people, sometimes gathering large crowds of 250 thousand people from different countries and faiths: Christians, Jews, Muslims and even nonbelievers.

Mary usually appeared at night, often accompanied by luminous doves flying around her. Those who were present at these phenomena say that they saw the Virgin either walking on the roof and cupola of the church or kneeling, and on other occasions taking baby Jesus into her arms. The apparitions did not have the same duration. They varied by several minutes, but some may have lasted up to nine hours.

In order to discover more, the Orthodox Patriarch Cyril VI created an inquiry commission to authenticate these testimonies. Some of its members testify to having seen violet scented smoke rise from the Church just before the silhouette of a woman appeared, wrapped in a halo of light, and that all the people present at the time -- Christians and Muslims -- could also see it.

Once renovated, the Church was dedicated to "Our Lady of Light." The silent apparitions of

Zeitoun are considered to be an appeal to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. Pope John Paul II, who had sent observers to the place, declared that the Holy See respected the view of the local Church. Similarly, the Coptic Catholic Church profoundly respects the version of the apparition accounts provided by the Coptic Orthodox Church.

*Immaculate Virgin,
who accepted the light of the Holy Spirit,
and who has become the home of the living God;
Mother of light,
watch over your children,
especially those who have followed your Son
and have been persecuted.
We pray that the world gives attention to truth and justice.
Take away men's hearts of stone,
which makes them killers in the name of religion.
Let your light illuminate us all!*