

A sacred duty

Coptic pope consecrates Tenn. church

by Jeannine F. Hunter
News-Sentinel staff writer

NASHVILLE - Newly ordained deacon Youssry Azmy of Knoxville was among the greeters who ushered in the pope at St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church here Sunday.

"This is wonderful," Azmy said, beaming as he spoke to congregants and visitors.

Cairo-based Pope Shenouda III, the church's highest human authority, anointed oil on the altars, icons and tapestry, consecrating the new church home of St. Mina, Tennessee's first fully established Coptic Orthodox church of Egypt.

The cleric's full title is His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Coptic Orthodox Pope of the City of Alexandria, Egypt, and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark the Evangelist.

His visit to the state was the first by any patriarch of the church, which was established in the first century A.D. by its patron saint, Mark the Apostle, disciple of one of the oldest canonical Gospels.

St. Mark is the root of the church's ordained hierarchy, making the 77-year-old Pope Shenouda III the 17th successor.

"Coptic" is used to describe the indigenous Christian church in Egypt, its membership and its culture, as well as the liturgical language used in the church. While Copts make up less than 10 percent of Egypt's population, the Coptic community worldwide is estimated at 27 million. "Pope Shenouda's visit confirms our identity and makes a big bridge between us and our brethren in our homeland," said Knoxville resident Dr. Samia Hanna, a few days before Sunday's Mass. "The connection is strong. It also confirms our faith."

Hanna and her husband, mother and niece were dining at Azmy's house with his family, where they also discussed final preparations for the weekend. The visit included a banquet in downtown Nashville featuring Coptic church leadership from around the world, as well as American dignitaries.

St. Mina's priest, Father Boutros Boutros, was ordained in 1997 to serve as its first priest and was assigned to be a visiting priest for Knoxville's growing Coptic community. He officiates a service once a month for about a dozen families. Other weekends they either worship at other East Tennessee churches or travel to St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Nashville, which was started in 1986 and grew within a year from 18 families to its current 450

"(Pope Shenouda's) visit confirms our identity and makes a big bridge between us and our brethren in our homeland."

Dr. Samia Hanna
Knoxville resident

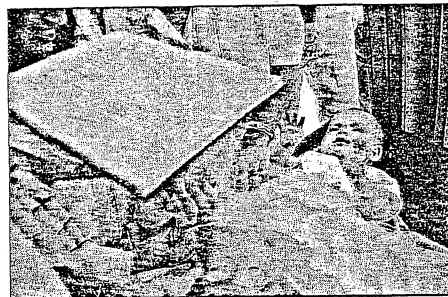


News-Sentinel photos by Amy Smotherman

ABOVE: Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church stands before the congregation at St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Nashville Sunday. The pope traveled from Cairo, Egypt, to consecrate the new church. BELOW: Seven-month-old Jessica Makram receives baptism and prayer during the consecration ceremony.



Women at St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Nashville listen to Pope Shenouda III as the new church is consecrated.



families, necessitating a larger building.

The 1,100-member church on Sunday featured worshippers standing down both sides of the ornate church, which has been renovated inside to conform to Coptic standards, including repositioning the altar so that it faces east.

Regulars often offered guests seats that were closer to the front, or they translated liturgy chanted in English, Arabic and Coptic.

During his visit to the U.S., Pope

Shenouda III also ordained deacons, a new priest from Houston and baptized several infants.

As religious texts are recited, babies are dipped three times - signifying the days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection - before they are dried and their bodies are anointed 36 times with oil. The same oil is used to anoint parts of the church building, including a large painting of Jesus above the altar which required Pope Shenouda III to climb a ladder during the service.

"I am very happy to have my baby

baptized by the pope," said Hanan Marcos after dressing her 7-month-old daughter, Jessica Makram.

Nearby, Olfat Nashed dressed her 40-day-old son, Peter Wasif, another baptized infant, in an outfit with tapestry and red and gold material all reminiscent of the priests' robes.

"It's a very important moment for the children, one I will explain as he gets older," Nashed said, adding, "This is a day I will not forget."

Jeannine F. Hunter may be reached at 865-342-6324 or hunter@knews.com.