

# **Hegumen Father Mikhail Ibrahim**

## **Man of Prayer**

### **(1899 - 1975)**

#### ***Brief Biography***

Fr. Mikhail was born Mikhail Ibrahim Youssef on April 20, 1899. He was born in the village of Kafr Abdu, Quisna situated north of Cairo. He was one of five sons. His parents taught them the life of prayer, prostrations, and humility. Fr. Girgis, the priest of the church in Kafr Abdou, influenced young Mikhail and his brothers.

In 1908, Mikhail started attending the Coptic School in Quisna and completed his secondary education at the Greater Coptic School in Cairo. After High School, he was hired by the ministry of the interior as a police clerk serving in multiple places including Bilbis, Hehya, and Giza. He was an honest and hard-working civil servant. He helped form religious societies wherever he went. In Bilbis, he led the effort to build a church in that city. He spent his last years before his ordination to the priesthood in Giza, and resided in Old Cairo. This put him in touch with saintly people including Pope Cyril VI, who was then Fr. Mina the Solitary.

As a layman, he was known as a humble man who knew God in his heart. He was often seen kneeling and praising God, making the sign of the cross, as he approached the outer doors of the church.

When the priest of Kafr Abdu reposed, the people remembered their native son, Mikhail, and nominated him for the priesthood. He was 52 years old. He dedicated himself to the service of God and stopped practices such as collections plates and payment for services rendered by the church. A year later, he was elevated to the rank of hegumen. He arranged for a younger man to be ordained as a priest to assist him, but unfortunately, this young priest turned against Fr. Mikhail and accused him of being wasteful. Fr. Mikhail left Kafr Abdu for some time until peace prevailed. God used this incident to bring Fr. Mikhail to Shoubra where he entered a new field of service.

The late Fr. Marcos Daoud recognized in Fr. Mikhail a true partner in the service of the large congregation at Saint Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Shoubra. They ended up serving together for twenty years. Their services complimented each other. Fr. Marcos was a prolific writer and a translator of many great works Fr. Mikhail was a man of prayer and was trusted by many as a father of confession.

Fr. Mikhail lost three sons and his wife over the course of his lifetime. Two sons, Philemon and Paul died as infants. His eldest son, Dr. Ibrahim, had just been released as a Prisoner of War (POW) in the 1956 campaign. However, the effects of the war had been too much for him and he passed away a few days later.

These events became occasions for the power of Fr. Mikhail's faith and trust in God to shine forth. He was found thanking and blessing God at the funerals of Dr. Ibrahim and his wife Mary.

Fr. Mikhail himself departed on March 26, 1975. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III gave a moving and powerful eulogy praising the greatness of Fr. Mikhail. His Holiness described Fr. Mikhail as a man full of grace, kindness, and joy; he also spoke about his life of prayer.

Regarding the decision to bury Fr. Mikhail in the Cathedral, His Holiness said:

“When I requested from the church, St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Shoubra, Egypt (where Fr. Mikhail served), that Fr. Mikhail be buried here in the Cathedral, below the main altar, behind the shrine of St. Mark, the main and apparent reason that I gave to them is the follow reasoning: I told them that Archpriest Mikhail Ibrahim is a public person, not the property of one church. He is a father everywhere, in every region, and in every city. It is not appropriate, therefore, that he be interred exclusively in a certain place. Therefore, I prefer that he be interred here in the Cathedral, a public place.

“As for the real reason that is deep within me: I wanted that the body of this righteous man be kept here to aid us here in this place (the Seat of the Patriarchate of the Coptic Orthodox Church), in order to acquire his blessings . . .” (*At this point, His Holiness wept, and H.G. Bishop Youannis completed the eulogy*).

### ***Fr. Mikhail's Life of Prayer***

The following saying by the great Church Father, Saint John Chrysostom, captures the essence of Fr. Mikhail's life of prayer:

“Our spirit should be quick to reach out toward God, not only when it is engaged in meditation; at other times, also, when it is carrying out its duties, caring for the needy, performing works of charity, giving generously in the service of others, our spirit should long for God and call Him to mind, so that these works may be seasoned with the salt of God's love, and so make a palatable offering to the God of the universe. Throughout the whole of our lives, we may enjoy the benefit that comes from prayer if we devote a great deal of time to it.”

Here are some lessons about Fr. Mikhail's life of prayer:

#### ***He prayed unceasingly***

Fr. Mikhail would begin everything, whether big or small, with prayer. Thus, he lived out the commandment, “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He prayed before resolving family disputes, before discussing any subject, before eating or drinking (even making the sign of the cross over cups of water, coffee, or tea offered to him), before giving words of advice, and he would never refuse to pray liturgy whenever anyone asked him to pray for a problem or for just any reason. Thus he prayed the Divine Liturgy almost daily.

As a lay person, he was in charge of the Sunday school service in Hehya. He came one day to the servants meeting with some books and religious brochures that he wanted to keep for reading and studying. One servant suggested that they buy a cabinet for the Sunday school library. At once, Mikhail asked them to pray for the project. After the prayer, Mikhail asked the servant to open the Sunday school contribution box. The servant responded, “We just opened the box the day before yesterday and we had taken all that was in it. We just left a few pennies in the box as a continuation of the blessing. We also sent money to the Sunday school program in Giza to buy Christmas gifts for the children and we still owe them some money.” However, when Mikhail again asked them to open the box, they found enough to buy the cabinet and to pay the money they owed. This cabinet was the seed of a valuable library that contains more than a thousand books and serves the needs of the servants and congregation in the church.

As he traveled frequently between Cairo and Kafr Abdou, he would pray that God would keep his heart and the hearts of those traveling with him in Christ

throughout the way. He prayed for the passengers on the bus, for the driver, for the person collecting tickets, and even for the vehicle.

### ***Prayer Replaced Discussion***

He used to pray instead of involving himself in discussions and church politics. Once, an individual asked him to intervene in a certain church matter. Fr. Mikhail replied, “Nothing will make things more complicated than a lot of intervening. If you like to fast and pray, no one will stop you. If we spend the time in praying instead of talking about individuals, the problem will be resolved by itself.”

Whenever anyone came with a problem, Fr. Mikhail would tell him, “Be anxious for nothing, but by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6). He would ask them, “Did you put your problem before the Lord before coming to me?”

He taught others to pray slowly and deliberately. He told them to befriend the angel of unhurried and deep prayer and to cast away the devil of haste.

### ***His Relationship with the Agpeya and the Divine Liturgy***

He prayed the psalms often. He memorized them, and recited them on the way to church or on the way to a visit. If he walked with someone, he would be reciting the psalms instead of talking. He prayed some psalms on the heads of confessors before praying the absolution. This reminds us of the early desert fathers, who used to measure distances between the places they walked by the number of psalms recited along the way.

He continued in the prayers of the *Agpeya* even on his deathbed. Hours before his departure, he was in a complete coma. Suddenly he became alert and asked, “What time is it?” The servant at his bedside responded, “It is exactly midnight.” He asked to be straightened up in bed and prayed the complete midnight prayer.

The Divine Liturgy was at the heart of his service of prayer. The altar was always full of names and the problems of confessors. Thus, we also learn from him to cast our problems onto the altar. We believe that God is present on the altar in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and therefore we can obtain holy power, help, and strength to find peace and a solution to any problem we encounter. He would often say, “You can learn from the altar things that you cannot learn from any books.” It is startling to think of how many problems were solved, how many households saved, how many people reconciled, through the prayers and the attention of Fr. Mikhail at the altar. Even when the papers would pile up, he refused to clear them,

or he would summarize them on one sheet, or move the papers from one altar to another. Thus, he continuously prayed for others at the altar.

He asked for the prayers and intercessions of the saints. During the raising of incense, he blessed the members of the struggling church with the prayers of the members of the victorious church.

His relationship with the saints is also demonstrated in this story. A servant of the church went to visit Fr. Mikhail after the departure of Pope Kyrillos VI. Fr. Mikhail's daughter told the servant, "Please do not tell him about the departure of Pope Kyrillos," for fear that the news would greatly distress him and that Fr. Mikhail was ill with a heart condition at that time. In the course of their meeting, Fr. Mikhail asked the servant, "Did you know that His Holiness Pope Kyrillos has arrived to Christ?" The servant replied, "I know my father, but who told you about this?" He was silent and refused to answer even though the servant repeated the question twice. He answered, "Whoever told me, has told me." He continued to say how fortunate Pope Kyrillos was and that he hoped to reach the same destination. The servant said, "Do not say this. May God give you a long life and keep you with us." Fr. Mikhail replied, "Look, my beloved, as long as we have oil we shall shine, but when we run out, we shall return to Him."

### ***Prayer in Dealing with the Personal Problems of Others***

Fr. Mikhail dealt with every problem in prayer. H.H. Pope Shenouda III asked Fr. Mikhail to join the Clerical Council to help with family problems. One day he sat in the presence of a Bishop, the head of the Council, and some priests to discuss a dispute between a married couple. None of those present could find any solution to the problem. The presiding bishop asked Fr. Mikhail, "Why don't you tell us what you think Fr. Mikhail?" since he was silent. Fr. Mikhail responded, "Your Grace, let us pray." The Bishop responded, "We prayed prior to this meeting." Fr. Mikhail answered, "Yes, but we did not pray for this problem." They all stood to pray in the presence of the disputing couple and the Bishop asked Fr. Mikhail to pray. After the prayer ended the spirit of peace filled the couple and they hugged in front of all those who were present and dropped their complaint. One of those who was present joked with Fr. Mikhail saying, "You should have mentioned this suggestion from the beginning, Fr. Mikhail. It would have relieved us."

Once when Fr. Mikhail was sitting with many priests and servants, one of the servants said, "There is a butcher who is crude and always uses foul language. I went to reconcile him with his wife, and he cursed at me with the worst profanities." The priests told him not to feel bad, because they had a similar

experience with the butcher. Fr. Mikhail asked where this man lived, but the servants urged him not to go. Fr. Mikhail insisted and visited the butcher. He knocked on his door and when asked who it was, he replied, “Mikhail the priest of the church.” The butcher did not open the door and said, “Go back to your church, and do not ever visit me again.” Fr. Mikhail said, “Unless you open the door, I will start prayer here on the steps.” He continued his prayers saying, “The voice of the Lord quenches the flames of the fire. The voice of the Lord calms the troubled soul, gives peace to troubled hearts, and comforts the weary. Didn’t You say, ‘Come to Me all you who weary?’” Fr. Mikhail continued praying for fifteen minutes, and after he was done with his deep and simple prayers, the butcher opened the door and invited him in. Fr. Mikhail prostrated three times in front of the butcher asking for forgiveness. The butcher asked, “Forgive you for what?” Fr. Mikhail replied, “Because I neglected to shepherd the congregation of Christ. If I had visited you, none of this would have happened. Peace would exist in your house, and your wife would not be angry with you.” The butcher asked him to bring his wife who was living elsewhere. Fr. Mikhail went with the butcher. While the butcher waited outside the house, Fr. Mikhail brought the wife and three children and reconciled them together. Fr. Mikhail returned to church praying and thanking God.

### ***Prayer in Face of Death***

Fr. Mikhail prayed and offered thanks in all situations, even at the death of his loved ones. At the death of his wife, he said, “Thank God she has arrived at Christ, how fortunate she is, and may we have the same conclusion. Now I have three children and their mother in heaven, and they are all praying for us to the Lord.” At any funeral, he would always say with conviction that so and so was fortunate to be with the Lord. His heart was filled with prayer, and thus bore fruits of peace, comfort, and tranquility.

### ***Conclusion***

May we learn from the model of prayer that Fr. Mikhail has left for us, that we may approach all situations in our service with the prayer of a humble and contrite heart.

Pray for us, Fr. Mikhail!

**Glory is due to God forever, Amen.**