

THE INDEPENDENT UK - Myrna and the oil:
an everyday miracle: How does a woman
become a modern saint? In Damascus Brigid
Keenan met Myrna Nazzour and saw for
herself . . .



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There is a cafe by the Great Mosque in Damascus where, every evening, a storyteller in traditional striped robe and fez sits on a stool on top of a table and reads tales of good and evil and magic and mystery to an audience of attentive old men gurgling their hookah pipes. Medieval television, someone has called it.

Damascus is a city that relishes stories - even in daily life, truth and fiction are inextricably interwoven so it seems appropriate that it was here that I came across a strange story.

To be strictly truthful, I first heard about Myrna in England: knowing that I was about to go and live in Damascus, a friend mentioned that there was supposed to be a young woman there who had visions of the Virgin Mary and whose hands oozed oil. Once in the city, and on my way to see this Myrna, I found myself extremely nervous - how do you greet someone who claims to have talked directly with God and touched the feet of Mary?

In the event it was all very ordinary - 29-year-old Myrna was clambering out of an ancient Austin and laughing with her husband, Nicholas Nazzour, on the pavement outside their rather battered old house in the Soufanieh district of Damascus.

Myrna's story hinges on a tiny, cheap reproduction of a Russian icon of the Virgin and Child in a white plastic frame. Her husband, who had been a hairdresser in Germany for seven years before they were married, bought 10 of them in a souvenir shop in Bulgaria on his way back to Syria as presents for his Greek Orthodox relatives. He was not in the least bit religious, but the pictures were a snip at quarter of a dollar each.

Two were left over, and when he married Myrna they put them on their bedside table. Six months later, on 27 November 1982, Myrna noticed that one of the pictures was leaking oil. They put it in an ashtray, but soon had to find a bigger container. Next, the by now terrified Myrna found that the palms of her hands were oozing oil. They contacted the Greek Orthodox church in Damascus, which sent three priests to witness what was happening. No sooner had they left than two men from the Syrian secret police arrived with a doctor. They took the frame to pieces and tore off a corner of the picture for examination. They made Myrna wash her hands in front of them, but the oil came back again. The doctor checked that nothing was hidden up her sleeves and rubbed her palms. More oil seeped out. The police put the picture back together again and immediately oil began to ooze from it. They left, saying God is great.

News of the 'phenomenon' - as the events are always referred to - flew around Damascus and crowds began to appear. 'It was only six months after our marriage,' said Nicholas. 'We were still on our honeymoon, you could say, but we could never get into our bedroom because it was full of people praying, and our bed had sick people in it. We had to sleep on the sofa in the sitting room.'

Three times Myrna developed stigmata - wounds in the forehead, hands, feet and side - and five times in 1982 and 1983 the Virgin appeared to her on the roof terrace of their house.

'She was sitting in that tree across the road,' said Myrna, as though she were talking about her own daughter climbing trees, 'then she came towards me.' 'Through the air?' I asked. 'Yes, through the air, and she stood there, and I knelt down in front of her and put my hands on her feet and they were warm.' Where the Virgin had stood, a pool of oil stained the concrete floor of the terrace. A couple of years ago the Nazzours re-did the terrace but left that part of the original floor so that you can still see the stain.

The Virgin had messages for Myrna to pass on - that Christians should pray for peace, love one another and pray for the unity of the Christian churches -

particularly apt in Syria, where Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Syriac, Maronite, Nestorian and half-a-dozen others celebrate Easter on two different days.

The last vision was in 1983, but Myrna continued to receive messages until 1990, when she was told that there would be no more until the Christian churches celebrated Easter on the same day, but that oil would continue to appear on her hands from time to time.

Each year in November, on the anniversary of the first 'phenomenon', Myrna attends a special mass in one or other of the Christian churches to pray for unity. There were about a thousand people in the Maronite church in Damascus last November. Towards the end of the mass, a whisper went round the congregation that oil had appeared on Myrna's hands. I could sense mounting hysteria and decided to leave - oil or no oil. But eventually the crowd organized itself into an orderly queue passing in front of Myrna, who made the sign of the cross on each forehead. I joined it, and when I reached Myrna, asked if I could see the palms of her hands. They were shiny with oil.

Hundreds of people, including some distinguished doctors and psychiatrists, have seen many of these strange events - they have even been videoed - and no one has been able to find evidence of any trickery. The oil has been analyzed and is 100 per cent olive oil.

In a very Damascene way, Myrna's miracles are accepted as perfectly natural. None of the churches has made any pronouncement about the 'phenomenon'.

The Papal Nuncio in Damascus said to me that he thought the best evidence for the truth of the story was the Nazzours' own lives - especially Nicholas's. Twenty years older than Myrna, he'd been a man of the world, liked a good life. 'Neither of them were religious people at all - but now they lead a life of prayer. You could possibly fake that for a few months, but not for 12 years,' said the Nuncio.

It is hard to see that the couple have made any material gain from the 'phenomenon'. A sign hangs in their house saying that no donations are accepted. The Syrian government offered them a new house because their own is crowded with up to 500 pilgrims at a time. They refused it, preferring to stay where the 'phenomenon' occurred.

On each of the half-dozen times I have seen Myrna she has been wearing the same black and white checked jacket and skirt and slightly scuffed black shoes. She

drove me to her local market to buy vegetables in their 30-year-old Austin, and I couldn't help thinking that the miracle that day would be if the car made it there and back. Nicholas sold the seaside restaurant in which he had invested his hairdressing savings because it was too far from Damascus, and he was urgently needed at home to cope with the crowds coming to pray in their house. He now works with his brother, a goldsmith, and they have a small jeweler shop on the ground floor of the house.

The miraculous picture, now protected by a glass dome, is the focus of a small shrine in one corner of the courtyard. Their bedroom is unchanged, except that they now have two children, Myriam, seven, and Jean-Emmanuel, six, who share it with them. Myrna is constantly interrupted by people coming to see her. She was doing the ironing in the living room when we arrived to take photographs. On the walls are a hotch-potch of pictures and souvenirs from her travels (she has visited Australia, Canada, America, Belgium, Holland and France, at the invitation of local communities).

A young mother arrived to ask Myrna to bless her new baby, a middle-aged man came to pray, a girl friend popped by, her father dropped in, and an elderly woman came to cry on her shoulder.

Myrna looks tired. She is up at six o'clock every morning to do the school run and the household chores before her other work of praying, visiting the sick and the dying, hearing peoples' problems. In the afternoons there are prayer meetings in the house from 4.30 to 6pm, then the children have to be put to bed and the washing done (she can't use the machine in the morning because of a regular power cut, and in the afternoon the noise would disturb prayers.) Later at night she retreats to a tiny chapel she has recently arranged next to the roof terrace where she had the visions; there she prays and writes down her thoughts. The first time she knelt there last year oil came out of her hands and she 'printed' her palms on the end papers of the Bible on the altar - you can clearly see the two greasy hand prints.

Before I left, I watched Myrna closely as she sat listening to an elderly woman's troubles. Her intense black eyes and pale, rather sad face were oblivious to everything except the old lady. I suddenly had a strong feeling that she didn't exist herself, that she was only a channel through which a message could be passed. When I said goodbye to Nicholas I told him what I'd felt. 'You are right,' he said. 'She is like a tube of communication. She has the cleanest heart I have ever known, so it is a stainless steel tube. But you know, Myrna herself says this, she says she is only a postman.' (Photograph omitted)