Concerning Monsignor Luigi Accogli, Apostolic Nuncio

By Father Élias Zahlaoui • Translated from French

Concerning Monsignor Luigi Accogli, Apostolic Nuncio, I will highlight:

1. The main stages of his relationship with Soufanieh
2. One or another of his writings

1. The Main Stages of His Relationship with Soufanieh

For this section, I gladly draw upon my book "Soufanieh, chronique..." ("Soufanieh, Chronicle..."), published in 1991 by Éditions de l'O.E.I.L.

Wednesday, October 12, 1988

I visit the new Apostolic Nuncio in Damascus. I present him with the six copies of my reports on Soufanieh, which his predecessor had requested of me so that they might be sent to the competent authorities in Rome. He asks for my personal opinion. I give it to him unequivocally and without hesitation. Finally, he asks me for a brief note on Soufanieh so that he may grasp the essentials. He also wants a concrete proposal from me regarding the phenomenon.

Friday, October 14, 1988

I hand the note on Soufanieh to the Apostolic Nuncio. I conclude it with the following two paragraphs:

The 1st: Such is my personal opinion: the Church alone is qualified to judge such phenomena. However, for my part, I do not hesitate to tell anyone who asks me that Soufanieh is a divine intervention. Moreover, a tree is known by its fruits.

The 2nd paragraph contained two proposals:
(1) The establishment of an investigative committee made up of various specialists, to submit an objective report to the proper authorities.
(2) The intensification of prayer for the opening of hearts and minds, to which Soufanieh urgently invites us.

Saturday, October 29, 1988

In the evening, I meet the secretary of the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops in Syria, Father Mitri Athanasios. He informs me that the Apostolic Nuncio has requested that the case of Soufanieh be studied at the next session.

Saturday, March 11, 1989

The Apostolic Nuncio runs into me "by chance" at the Italian Hospital in Damascus. Several nuns are accompanying him. He greets me and says to me point-blank: "Defend yourself. You must defend yourself." He continues by claiming that Myrna is accused of taking oil-producing

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pills and practicing spiritism. I reply directly and without hesitation: "Even Christ was accused. And when He raised Lazarus, they decided to kill Him and to kill Lazarus along with Him... As for anyone who claims that Myrna takes oil-producing pills that secrete oil, that person embodies sheer imbecility!"

Wednesday, March 15, 1989

I write a letter in French to the Nuncio following up on our encounter at the hospital. Here it is verbatim:

> Damascus, March 15, 1989
>
> Your Excellency,
>
> Allow me to follow up briefly on our providential encounter on Saturday the 11th of this month at the Italian Hospital, in the presence of Sister Fiorina, the Mother Superior, and your niece.
>
> Many things were said, as if "by chance." Yet they were so important that they could not have been said "by chance." "Very grave" accusations seemed to have been leveled against Soufanieh and "those" who pray there, to the point that you told me, with a smile, "you must defend yourself."
>
> Allow me to tell you, Monsignor—whatever your personal position on Soufanieh may be—that, at the point things have reached, it is not up to me, nor to those who pray at Soufanieh, to defend ourselves, but rather up to those very people who never cease to attack it A PRIORI.
>
> Too many FACTS and too many WITNESSES are present, demanding an acceptable explanation...
>
> And people have been waiting for this explanation for six years and four months...
>
> Now among these facts, there are some that took place at the Nunciature in Damascus itself...
>
> And among these witnesses, I feel bound to name at least two: His Excellency Monsignor Nicola Rotunno and Monsignor Eliseo Ariotti. And their written testimonies must be in the Soufanieh file, both in Rome and at the Nunciature in Damascus...
>
> You ask me, Your Excellency, to defend myself...
>
> Against whom and against what?
>
> If I am accused, let them have the courage to put me on trial. I am a priest of the Holy Catholic Church and I submit to all her decisions and judgments.
>
> And I wait in the greatest serenity, yet also in the greatest sorrow, in the face of Church leaders who persist so blindly.
>
> If those who "explain" Soufanieh through "pills" or "spiritism" were telling the truth, they would have, in order to be consistent with themselves, to put me on trial and suspend me. For how could they allow themselves to let a "charlatan" or "idiot" priest exercise the slightest responsibility in the Church?
>
> It goes without saying, Monsignor, that I speak in my own name, without any allusion to so many bishops and priests, some of whom have taken the liberty of writing very

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> favorably about Soufanieh, such as Monsignor Georges Hafoury and Father René Laurentin.
>
> Your Excellency,
>
> Easter is approaching soon. I pray to the Lord, through the intercession of His Holy Mother, to help you help the Church of Syria to TRULY live the strength and joy of His Resurrection, in the restored UNITY of His Mystical Body.
>
> Please accept, Your Excellency, the assurance of my filial affection and my profound respect.
>
> *[Signature]*

Tuesday, March 21, 1989

Six days later, the Nuncio replies to me with the following letter, dated March 21, 1989:

> Damascus, March 21, 1989
>
> Reverend Father Elias,
>
> I have received your letter dated March 15, 1989, concerning certain attitudes toward "Soufanieh," of which I take note.
>
> I take advantage of the upcoming Easter solemnities to extend to you, Reverend Father Elias, my warm wishes.
>
> *[Signature]*

Friday, September 8, 1989

Upon returning to Damascus, I telephone "the house of the Virgin." Myrna informs me that the Apostolic Nuncio paid a visit with his secretary, and that they saw the Holy Face in relief on the concrete of the terrace, beneath the statue of the Blessed Virgin.

Saturday, September 9, 1989

At Soufanieh, I meet an Egyptian nun who was there when the Nuncio and his secretary arrived. The nun assures me that she, too, saw the Holy Face.

I go up to the terrace and look for a long time at the spot indicated. At first glance, I make out nothing. But little by little, the features of a suffering face appear, in astonishing relief. I immediately ask the photographer Samir Hanna to capture this "face" on film, in the hope that the camera will make it clearly visible.

Sunday, September 10, 1989

I have lunch at the home of the Sisters of Perpetual Help. Four sisters are present, including my sister Lucie and the two sisters Macrine and Céline Sioufi. Both take the initiative to tell me about the Nuncio's visit to Soufanieh, where they happened to be. On the terrace, he looked at the ground for a long time, then turned toward them and spoke in French this sentence, which I immediately wrote down:

"I had to come here in order to see the Holy Face!"

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I immediately ask them for their written testimony. They try to evade the request. Then, seized with anger, I reproach them for fearing men more than God, and I leave.

That evening, Sister Macrine telephones me to tell me that she has written out the testimony together with her sister.

Tuesday, October 10, 1989

The photographer Samir Hanna brings me the photographs of "the Holy Face" seen on the terrace, beneath the statue of the Blessed Virgin. The photograph is astonishingly clear. He makes about ten prints for me, which I immediately take to Soufanieh. Myrna is putting little Jean-Emmanuel to sleep in his swing. I show her the photograph. She rejoices. Then I ask her about prayer.

— "Father, I pray every minute. For example, right now, I was saying the Rosary while rocking the little one."

Monday, October 16, 1989

I bring the Apostolic Nuncio a letter regarding Soufanieh, to which I attach two photographs of what he himself called "the Holy Face."

Tuesday, November 28, 1989

In the morning, I visit the Apostolic Nuncio accompanied by Father Adel Khoury. The latter tells him what he has seen, his impressions, and what he intends to write as soon as he returns to Germany. The Nuncio encourages him to write and to have it translated into other languages. As we are leaving the Nunciature, the Nuncio even says to Father Adel Khoury, pointing his finger toward me: "Encourage them to continue their work."

When we return, I ask Father Adel for his general impression. He weeps as he speaks to me.

Thursday, December 7, 1989

The Apostolic Nuncio celebrates Mass at the Nunciature and invites, in addition to the Sisters of the Italian Hospital, Myrna and Nicolas. At the end of Mass, oil covers Myrna's hands. Sister Fiorina, from the Italian Hospital, telephones me to report this event. She adds that the Nuncio took Myrna's hands and rubbed them, saying: "Why, it really is oil!"

Saturday, December 16, 1989

In the morning, a telephone call from the Apostolic Nunciature. The Sister informs me that Father Pierre Duprey, my former theology professor in Jerusalem, arrived the day before and wishes to speak with me. Then Father Duprey himself comes on the line to tell me he intends to come see me at my church. He arrives an hour later. We have no shortage of topics of conversation. Soufanieh also comes up, quite spontaneously. I had prepared a small file for the Father, including Christian Ravaz's book. Among other things, Father Duprey tells me:

"Continue to tell us in Rome what is happening. We are following all of this attentively."

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I expected nothing more. I note that Father Duprey has held for many years in Rome the post of Secretary of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Subsequently, he was consecrated bishop on January 6, 1990, by His Holiness Pope John Paul II.

Wednesday, May 2, 1990

For the first time, I visit the Nuncio's new secretary, Monsignor Sérapion, who is African. I hand him the documents concerning the latest events at Soufanieh. He speaks to me of his personal impression of Myrna, whom he found "astonishing in her simplicity and humility, both in her demeanor and in her answers."

"Yet," he tells me, "I asked her numerous pointed questions." We promise to pray for one another.

Saturday, May 12, 1990

In the morning, nearly an hour before leaving Damascus for Aleppo, I telephone Patriarch Zakka to say goodbye. He asks me to come without delay. Worried, I hurry to see him. He greets me with reassuring words. He wants to brief me on the recent visit paid to him by the Apostolic Nuncio in Damascus. Seeking to learn the Patriarch's opinion on Soufanieh, the Nuncio was asked this question in return: "What do you think of Christianity?"

Astonished, the Nuncio sought an explanation. The Patriarch replied: "All of Christianity rests upon miracles. The history of the Church teems with them. Why, then, should there not be any in Damascus or elsewhere?"

The Patriarch then reassured him that he sees in Soufanieh a true divine intervention, to which one must pay attention in order to listen to what the Lord wants to tell us. The Nuncio told him that he himself had seen the oil on Myrna's hands and that many people sent by him to Soufanieh had seen it with their own eyes. He also assured the Patriarch that he had perceived "the Holy Face" on the terrace.

The Patriarch, in turn, told him how oil had covered Myrna's hands during her visit to his vicar, Bishop Isaac Saka. Both concluded that it was necessary to form an investigative commission.

The Patriarch lays all of this out for me, saying: "I wanted to reassure you." I thank him warmly and leave immediately for Aleppo.

Friday, June 15, 1990

I visit the secretary of the Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Sérapion. I hand him the videocassette of Soufanieh and inform him of Patriarch Zakka's statement. I promise him the Arabic text and the French translation of it. Monsignor Sérapion's attitude toward Soufanieh remains very positive.

Friday, June 22, 1990

Telephone call from Sister Fiorina of the Italian Hospital to inform me that the Apostolic Nuncio celebrated Mass yesterday at the Nunciature. He had invited Myrna and Nicolas, along with several ambassadors and their wives. Oil covered Myrna's hands at the end of Mass.

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Thursday, September 13, 1990

I go to see Professor Adel Khoury, and together we draw up the schedule for his stay in Syria. Then we discuss numerous points concerning Soufanieh, primarily regarding the idea that occurred to him during his first stay in Syria of organizing an international symposium in Germany on Soufanieh. The project seems reasonable and entirely acceptable to me.

I telephone the Apostolic Nunciature to ask the Nuncio's secretary for an immediate appointment with Father Adel Khoury. The meeting lasts an hour. For my part, I content myself with listening to them express their opinions and impressions. I intervene only once, to suggest that the secretary recount to Professor Adel Khoury his first meeting with Myrna and the "pointed" questions he asked her. He agrees with a smile. He also welcomes the idea of an international symposium. He assures us that Rome is taking Soufanieh seriously and speaks of it in positive terms. One of the most important remarks he makes is that Myrna shows no affectation in what happens to her, but lives it in the most natural way in the world and without any pretension.

The Nuncio Celebrates His Silver Episcopal Jubilee in Damascus

Shortly before his departure from Damascus, the Nuncio made a point of celebrating his silver episcopal jubilee. He had 10,000 reproductions of the Icon of Our Lady of Soufanieh printed, a large number of which he personally handed out to all his guests during the reception held on that occasion at the Nunciature itself. On the back of these holy cards, he had the following two sentences printed in four languages (Italian, French, English, and Arabic):

> "Lord, grant to Your Church the gift of unity and peace, especially in the Middle East."
>
> Archbishop Luigi Accogli celebrates, in profound thanksgiving to the Lord, the 25th anniversary of his episcopate and of his Papal Nunciatures in China, Ecuador, Bangladesh, Burma, and Syria.
>
> Rome, November 26, 1967 – Damascus, November 26, 1992

Declaration at Soufanieh

A few days before his departure from Damascus, the Apostolic Nuncio celebrates Holy Mass at Soufanieh. Oil flows from Myrna's hands during Holy Communion. And at the end of Mass, the Nuncio announces his wish to build an ecumenical center in Rome named after Our Lady of Soufanieh. At that very instant, oil covers Myrna's hands. I point this out to him. Overjoyed, the Nuncio reiterates his intention to build this center.

Dedication of the Our Lady of Soufanieh and Padre Pio Center in Rome

On October 15, 1999, this center is inaugurated in Rome on the Via Aurelia, in the presence of several dignitaries, including Cardinal Opilio Rossi and Myrna. Oil did not fail to appear on her hands during the ceremony.

The Nuncio Carries a Letter from Myrna to John Paul II

It is the Nuncio who encourages Myrna to write to the Holy Father, promising to deliver it to him personally. Myrna wrote the following letter in Arabic, which I translate verbatim:

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Holy Father, John Paul,

I greet you in our Lord Jesus, wishing you to be in the grace of the Lord and in His Peace.

Your daughter Myrna, of Damascus, from the lands of the East, is the wife of a certain Nicolas, and mother of two small children, Myriam and Jean...

I do not know how to speak to the Holy Father, nor what I ought to say to him. For I no longer feel that I belong to myself. Rather, I belong to my family, to the family of Soufanieh, of the Church, and of all those who pray, of all communities and confessions.

I do not know whether my letter will fall into your pure hands. Yet I am assured that Monsignor Luigi will deliver my little letter to you. I am equally assured that you will read every word of it, O my Father, O our Father, O Father of the Church.

Here we pray every day. Every day we pray to our Mama the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Soufanieh, that she may bless all leaders and the Holy Church, so that they may work together, in humility and love, to fulfill the desire of our God and Savior Jesus Christ—glory be given to Him forever!—to see His children living in unity of faith, unity of love, in authentic holiness, thus realizing in this unity the witness of a true and sincere faith in Jesus Christ.

Our family in Soufanieh is small. Yet, as true children, we cry out, with all our courage and faith, to our Father in heaven, that He may unite everyone in faith and love... every day we pray and sing for this intention.

Most Holy Father,

We need you, we need your blessing. We have an urgent need to see you among us, in our country... you have visited the entire earth. Do not forget your children in Soufanieh, in Damascus in the Syria of the East.

Great is our faith in God. Very great is our faith in our Mother, the Virgin Our Lady of Soufanieh. We live the joy of unity; we live the happiness of God's children who pray together, with one heart, one spirit, and one love for our Father in heaven who tells us: "Let the children come to Me." We, like children, pray every day in our little house that gathers all of God's children. God cannot fail to hear this appeal faithful to His Will.

We await you in our hearts, in our country, in our faith. Come, O Holy Father, come and bless the Christians. Come so that together we may ask God and our Mama the Virgin that she unite her children in love, faith, and holiness.

From here, the family of Soufanieh implores your blessings and carries you every day in its prayer.

I, your daughter Myrna, kiss your pure hands. I join my small voice to those of my two babies, of my husband, and to the voices of all those who pray with me, as well as to the voices of all the children of the East, to say to you:

"Come to us, O Most Holy Father. We need you."

Your little daughter Myrna
February 18, 1993

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2. The Nuncio Writes from Rome

(1) On March 6, 1993, a letter in English, of which here is the translation:

> Dear Myrna and Nicolas,
>
> Greetings and Blessings from Rome.
>
> Today, I had a personal audience with Pope John Paul II. I presented him with an image of Our Lady of Soufanieh and the letter.
>
> You can see the photographs. I will send you identical photographs later.
>
> My journey from Damascus to Italy (by car!...) was a success. Our Lady of Soufanieh helped us day after day.
>
> Thank you for your prayers.
>
> Please remember me to the friends of Soufanieh, and to Fathers Zahlaoui and Malouli.
>
> With all affection.

(2) On May 5, 1994, a card from Rome in French, in which he wrote:

> With my best greetings, as well as to Father Élias Zahlaoui and Father Malouli.
>
> The Holy Father received me on March 6, and I handed him Myrna's letter and the beautiful image of Our Lady of Soufanieh.

3. Letter – Testimony

The Apostolic Nuncio Monsignor Luigi Accogli wrote extensively on Soufanieh. We have no shortage of letters or faxes from him. Yet there is one text that he wrote in English which constitutes a document in its own right. It is dated November 22, 1998.

It bears the title: "Letter to the Reader." It reads verbatim:

> I read with great joy the book by Mr. Christian Ravaz, "Apparitions of Soufanieh in Damascus," for which Father René Laurentin wrote the preface. I bless this book.
>
> I was Apostolic Nuncio in Syria from October 1988 to February 1993.
>
> At the beginning, I deliberately ignored "the phenomenon of Soufanieh" for several reasons, while nevertheless following attentively what was happening there. I knew that two high-ranking priests were guiding Myrna in her spiritual journey. After a period of reflection and prayer, I decided, without notifying anyone, to visit the house and the site of the apparitions. I was accompanied by the secretary of the Nunciature. We prayed for a moment before the Icon. We were led up to the terrace to see the spot where the Virgin appeared to Myrna, where the oil had left its mark on the ground on which the Virgin had set her feet. I bent down to look at the spot where the oil had left its trace. It was then that, seized with astonishment, I began to make out what resembled the face of the crucified Christ. I turned to the secretary and asked him what he saw. A moment passed. The features grew clearer. Those standing behind us, including Myrna and Nicolas, noticed the same thing and exclaimed: "The Apostolic Nuncio came incredulous and received a sign!"

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> Later, I invited Myrna to attend Mass at the Nunciature, along with a large number of friends including Sister Maria-Fiorina of the Italian Hospital, the Ambassador of Italy and his wife, and the staff and nuns of the Nunciature. At the end of Mass, while Myrna was singing a very beautiful Arabic hymn, pure oil flowed abundantly from her hands.
>
> This occurrence was repeated many times at the Nunciature.
>
> Shortly before I left Damascus, the last thing I did was to celebrate Holy Mass at midnight on the 10th anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin, in the presence of a large number of priests, nuns, and representatives of the Diplomatic Corps. During the homily, I announced to them my desire to establish in Rome an ecumenical center named "Our Lady of Soufanieh, for Unity and Peace." Suddenly, oil appeared once again on Myrna's hands. The priests saw in this a sign of the Blessed Virgin's approval of my project.
>
> When I arrived in Rome, and during the audience I had with the Holy Father, I offered him an enlarged image of Our Lady of Soufanieh and a letter from Myrna. His Holiness inquired about my opinion of Soufanieh. I expressed it to him favorably and with humility. I asked him to have an official study undertaken of this very important phenomenon.
>
> I thank God for this special and important gift that He has offered to Damascus, the land of Saint Paul.
>
> I encourage my readers to pray for Unity and Peace, according to the desire of Our Lady of Soufanieh.
>
> May the Holy Spirit, in this year dedicated to Him, enlighten our hearts and open them to Christ.
>
> *[Signature]*

— Father Élias Zahlaoui

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