The Apostolic Nuncio Giacomo Pier De Nicolo

He arrived in Damascus on February 11, 1993. However, it was on October 25, 1993, that we met him.

Suffice it for me to reproduce what I jotted down at the time:

> **"October 25, 1993**
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> *First visit to the new Apostolic Nuncio in Damascus. I was with Myrna, Nicolas, and Father Elias Salloum. Fathers Joseph Malouli and Boulos Fadel sent their apologies.*
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> *The visit lasted an hour. We ended it with a prayer in the chapel—a decade of the Rosary. Myrna sang 'Venez vers Marie' ('Come to Mary'). Then the Nuncio sang to the Virgin in a voice that astonished me—an uncommon operatic voice.*
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> *The visit went peacefully and gently. The Nuncio was visibly relaxed. He spoke a phrase in French that seemed to me to carry great weight in favor of Soufanieh: 'I have come to assure myself of the credibility of Soufanieh.' Then he expressed the desire to learn more about Soufanieh. He also expressed the wish that we have dinner with him one day, and afterward watch the film on Soufanieh.*
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> *As he was stepping through the outer door, he said to us in farewell: 'There is no doubt that this comes from God.'*
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> *Praise be to God.*
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> *In the car, Myrna reminded us of the description his predecessor had given of him when she asked his opinion about him. He had said: 'If you compare me to St. John the Baptist, my successor is Jesus.'*
>
> *What a beautiful testimony, which elevates both the witness and the one in whose favor he testifies!"*

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Now, it was on October 30, 1993, that the Nuncio paid his first visit to Soufanieh.

I met him several times thereafter. He came to tell me in complete confidence that certain people in Rome had warned him against Soufanieh.

In fact, he visited Soufanieh several times, and invited Myrna and Nicolas several times to the Nunciature to pray with them.

During the anniversary ceremonies, he was regularly present either in person or through his representative.

During the anniversary celebrations in 1998, he himself presided over the Holy Mass celebrated at the Franciscan Fathers in Bab-Touma, and delivered in French the following address, which I reproduce verbatim:

“Address delivered at the end of Mass by His Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio, Msgr. Pier Giacomo de Nicolo, in the Latin Church of Bab-Touma – Damascus, November 27, 1998

Your Excellencies,
My dear Brothers and Sisters,

We have just lived together an intense hour of prayer during which divine grace has overwhelmed us, through the intercession of Our Lady, and true joy, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, has flooded our hearts.

It is an all the greater joy that three Bishops of this capital—Their Excellencies Msgr. Antoine Hamid Mourany, Archbishop of the Maronites; Msgr. Joseph Arnaouti, Bishop of the Armenian Catholics; and Msgr. Isidore Battikha, Greek Catholic Patriarchal Vicar—in addition to Msgr. Georges Riachi, Melkite Catholic Bishop of Tripoli (Lebanon), concelebrated this Divine Liturgy, giving once again proof of their pastoral zeal. To each of them goes the gratitude of us all.

Is this not a most beautiful manifestation of the unity in Christ to which we have been called for sixteen years by Our Lady of Soufanieh?

In this regard—that is, concerning all the phenomena that have taken place around Soufanieh—we do not wish in any way, as must be clearly stated above all, to anticipate the definitive judgment of the Church, to which we submit here and now; rather, we simply call for a prudent Christian discernment, sustained by faith and by the teachings of that same Church.

Are we not, therefore, today responding to this maternal call, having lived, in the prayer par excellence—the Holy Mass—what the Arabic proverb says so profoundly: 'Al-Oum bitlim' ('The Mother gathers')?

Let us thank the Lord Jesus for having sent us His Mother, the Theotokos, to bring us all back to the single home of Our Father in Heaven, in prayer, penance, love, and forgiveness.

Let us thank Him for having used so small an Icon of His so great and humble Mother to remind us all, without exception, that we are the children of Our Father in Heaven, and not uprooted beings without a future.

Let us thank Him for having chosen Damascus to manifest the power of His Mercy, as He did two thousand years ago when He struck down and filled with His Light the one who was to become the great Apostle and missionary, Saint Paul.

Let us thank Him for having also chosen a young couple, barely six months after the celebration of their wedding, to remind us that Christian marriage is and always remains a Divine Sacrament—that is, a state of life willed from the very beginning by

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God the Father and consecrated by the grace of His Son Jesus Christ, the Savior—in an age when powers, both known and hidden, seek by every means to destroy it.

Let us thank Him for having reminded us, through the voice of His All-Holy Mother, that the child within marriage is a true 'gift from Heaven,' and this at a time when, in millions of cases, life is extinguished at its beginning, in a manner either criminal or unjustly legalized.

Let us also thank Him for having blessed, through an exceptional presence of the Virgin Mary in Damascus, the entire Arab World, thus reminding us that the Mystery of Redemption concerns all people, regardless of their origin or their social and religious affiliation.

Let us thank Him as well for the vast network of friendship, faith, and prayer that His Holy Mother is weaving throughout the world from the modest house of Soufanieh—always open to prayer, in the most evident transparency, simplicity, and gratuity—to remind the world that humanity's true wealth is God alone, and that the Family cannot flourish in balance and joy without seeking, above all else, God in prayer.

Blessed are You, Lord Jesus, for having willed thus to work in the Church of Damascus and of Syria, through the protective solicitude of Your Mother, who fills our hearts with joy and peace. Amen."

A few days before leaving Damascus, he celebrated the Holy Liturgy with his Secretary at Soufanieh itself. A large crowd was present. Yet on that day we did not have the presence of mind to film the Mass and record the very important address he improvised...

He left Damascus on January 21, 1999.

— Father Elias Zahlaoui

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