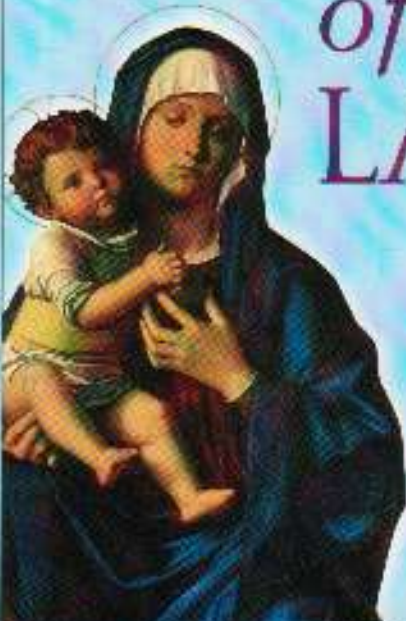


SHRINES *of* OUR LADY



*A guide to
fifty of the world's
most famous
Marian shrines*



PETER MULLEN

— SYRIA —

OUR LADY OF DAMASCUS



God saves me.

Jesus enlightens me.

The Holy Spirit is my life.

Therefore I shall not fear.

PRAYER TAUGHT BY OUR LADY TO MYRNA NAZZOUR, 18 DECEMBER 1982

OUR LADY DOES not always appear only to people who have a well-developed religious sense. Nicholas and Maria Nazzour, for example, were nominal Greek Orthodox Christians living in Damascus. They were married when Maria, known as Myrna, was only eighteen and, like most young couples, they enjoyed the night-life of the city.

In November 1982, Nicholas's sister Layla fell seriously ill. Myrna felt a strong desire to pray for her, and her hands suddenly began to ooze oil. She was astonished, but two other women praying with her said, 'It's oil for healing. Place your hands on Layla!' She did so, and Layla instantly recovered. A few days later, a small statue of the Madonna and Child in Myrna's bedroom also began to ooze oil.

Nicholas gathered his whole family and they knelt in prayer, asking God to explain these strange events. As they prayed, oil oozed from a household icon — enough to fill several small dishes. Although the family were praying aloud, Myrna could not hear them. It

was as if she had fallen into a trance and was temporarily deaf. Later she testified to hearing an inner voice saying, 'Myrna, don't be afraid. I am with you. Open the doors and do not inhibit anyone from seeing me. Light a candle.' Myrna's hearing was then restored.

✦ THE AROMA OF MYRRH

The icon oozed oil for four days. Priests came and asked searching questions to see if it was a hoax. The priests sent for local officials and medical experts. The oil continued to flow from the icon and from Myrna's hands. When the clergy questioned Myrna they were astounded to learn that she said few prayers and attended Mass only on Wednesdays.

One day in early December, Myrna was praying in the company of a priest and a bishop. Suddenly she exclaimed, 'The Blessed Virgin has entered my soul!' Oil began to flow profusely from her palms and the bishop recognized the aroma as that of myrrh, used in

anointing for sacramental healing. Soon crowds began to descend on the house and many cures were reported.

On 15 December, Myrna was praying in front of the icon with a huge crowd in attendance when suddenly she felt as if someone was pulling her towards the roof garden. There she knelt and, as she reported later, 'I looked up and saw the Blessed Virgin standing before me. She was shining all over, as if with jewels and gems. I was frightened and I ran away from there, screaming.' The whole family were afraid. Nicholas summoned a priest who was an expert in mystical theology and he taught Myrna to ask the Virgin directly what she would have her do.

✠ A WHITE BALL FILLED WITH LIGHT

Three days later, in the late evening, Myrna again felt drawn to the roof garden. Nicholas and some of his family and friends went with her. Myrna knelt in prayer and saw 'across the road, in a treetop, a white ball filled with light. It divided into two hemispheres and then vanished. I then saw the Lady standing, as it were, on a branch of the tree. She wore a blue cape and a white veil and she held a rosary.'

The vision drew close and said, 'Think of God, for God is here. I beseech you to do good to the wicked and do not ill-treat anyone. I have given you oil, but I also bring you something stronger than oil. Repent and proclaim my Son Jesus and you will be saved. Love one another.' The Virgin then requested a shrine, commanded all the people to pray

for unity among the Christian Churches and taught Myrna a new prayer:

God saves me.
Jesus enlightens me.
The Holy Spirit is my life.
Therefore I shall not fear.

The following day a father brought his paralysed son. As they prayed, oil flowed from the icon and again from Myrna's hands. She anointed the legs of the little boy, who began to walk for the first time in his life.

✠ A BLIND WOMAN HEALED

On 30 December the Patriarch Ignatius IV Hazim, having studied the events and questioned Myrna and Nicholas thoroughly, proclaimed the phenomena to be of supernatural origin. On 5 January 1983, a blind Muslim woman received her sight as she knelt in prayer before the icon. More than 120,000 people have witnessed the apparition of the miraculous oil, while a further million have seen it on video and many pilgrims have been healed.

The Blessed Virgin appeared frequently to Myrna and repeated her message of Christian unity. The family and some local priests set up an organization dedicated to carrying out Our Lady's wishes. They called themselves the Messengers of Unity and swore allegiance to the Catholic Bishop of Damascus, to emphasize the legitimate character of their group. They were anxious that the world should not regard them as a freakish sect. Their obedience has been wonderfully



Orthodox priests standing by an example of Byzantine iconography in a Syrian shrine

attested: when crowds turn up at Myrna's house and begin to spread tales of apparitions which do not have the Church's official backing, the oil does not flow either from the icon or from her palms.

✦ THE MARKS OF THE WOUNDS OF CHRIST

Remarkable results have arisen from the prayers for unity. On 18 June 1990, the Catholic Archbishop of Damascus testified that he had witnessed the oil flowing from

Myrna's hands. In 1987 Catholics and Orthodox set aside historical differences and celebrated Easter on the same day. They have promised to do so again in the year 2000.

On Good Friday 1987 Myrna received the stigmata, the marks of the wounds of Christ, in her palms. There is a film of the wounds and the marks made, as if by a crown of thorns, on her head. Myrna regularly suffers the Passion of Christ for three hours at a time – the period of our Lord's suffering on the Cross. She received visions of Jesus, who said, 'I am alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.'

The miraculous apparitions at Damascus are a sign of the unity which the Holy Mother desires for the whole Church – the same unity for which our Lord prayed shortly before his arrest. The wonder is that not only members of Christian denominations but also Jews and Muslims kneel to pray together at the house of Myrna and Nicholas Nazzour.

Information for Visitors



Location: The apparitions occurred at the home of Myrna Nazzour, in the Christian neighbourhood of Soufaniéh. **Contact number:** TEL (963) 21-210 204 FAX (963) 21 219 031 **Times of Services:** Every 26 November, the anniversary of the first apparition, Masses are celebrated in churches all over Damascus followed in the evening by a prayer service and festivities at the house in Soufaniéh.