

Myrna

Like a veiled Arab lady, the church was hidden from the eyes of the curious. Within her secluded enclave, she stood in all her beauty. This quality, of the Orient, cast a spell on the passerby. St. Anne's parish was Melchite Catholic. It served the Arab community of greater Paterson. There was something about its ambiance that made a visitor feel welcome. Entering inside, one entered into silence. Candles and icons commingled with mosaic windows giving the inside an other world character. There was a touch of Byzantium but it was humanized by Syriac harmonics. People inside behaved as family. This was not a church of stones but of people. The priests, in the front, were hearing confessions but not in the usual style. Penitents walked up and stood next to the priest and confessed their sins. This gave confession an immediacy and made the penitent aware of being rejoined to the community of his brothers and sisters. God was behind the iconostasis but he was reachable. Reverence required forms that sprang naturally from the human heart.

It was my first Melchite Mass. I listened to the mellifluous voices of the choir. Each hymn weaved together the strands of individuals and conjoined them in a community preparing for the Lord's banquet. The sounds were unfamiliar but yet they nestled comfortably in inner space and brought me closer to the holy mystery. Above the altar, the image, of the Blessed Virgin Orante, hovered on the dome's inner surface. Her extended uplifted hands gave majesty to her supplication. We, the community, were united with Our Mother. The Mass became a living encounter and centered the spirit on the presence of the ineffable in our midst.

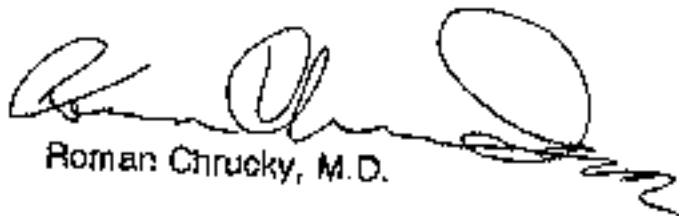
After Mass, Myrna, from Damascus, spoke to the congregation. There was no artifice to her person. Her essence was palpable to the hearts of those who gathered around her. She spoke as messenger of Our Lady of Soufanieh. She spoke in Arabic but her presence was the message. Somehow, the transcendent passed through her as light does through a transparent window. It was not so much the words as the warm notes that were touching the inner chords. She had an English translator but there really was no need to hear words. Her lips made speech alive but not by sound but by the workings of the Holy Spirit. Almost as if confirming her earthly daughter, the Blessed Virgin poured out oil through the hands of Myrna. I was close by as a witness. Myrna's hands, spontaneously, began to glisten and drip with oil. People gathered around Myrna, as chicks around their mother. Gently, she anointed close to a thousand people and the oil never stopped flowing from the human fountain.

I am a physician and I have witnessed, in my life, many unusual human physiological and pathological events. Being privy to the phenomena of oil, my mind was in a state of consternation. There was no physical explanation that made any sense. There were other physicians present and all of us were confounded by the mysterious event.

In retrospect, what lingers in my heart is not the oil but Myrna, the human flower, through whom flowed oil from heaven. It is she, in all her simplicity, that made the invisible palpable. As she departed the church, the lubricated cupula above the tabernacle began to exude oil. A priest brought a ladder and began to touch it. His actions added a touch of humor. St. Thomas was alive and well in all of our hearts. We were flesh and blood and our senses constantly sought proofs. The certainties of the moment became like clouds that evanesced in the moment of touching. But the oil did not go away.

It was dripping from the blue segments as if reminding those present that nothing was impossible to God. It was all so inexplicable and far from the sensory realm. There was a hint of the magic of fairy tales and a touch of wonder that could not be put into words. And yet it was there; oil. Its provenance seemed to articulate all the nuances of blue that petaled our hearts. The fruit of the oil was gladness. It could be seen in the eyes of all who stood and watched as Mary spoke through her signs.

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