



## ***An Interview With One of Our beloved Priests: Fr. Isaac Soliman A Hegumen of Seasoned Service***

***Questions prepared by: Simon Gad, St. Mary Church, Houston TX***

*In the midst of the American South, a veil of evil threatens to engulf humanity. Servants of the fallen angel Lucifer are paving the way for the destruction of man. One man stands in their way, a servant who has dedicated his life to the salvation of others. Armed with the Holy Spirit, he teaches and guides in his pilgrimage for his children's redemption.*

*He has been a priest for forty years; one who has met many of the present-day saints. He is a priest and a father of a priest. One who is known by the smile that gives comfort to anyone who sees him; whose words and sermons are treasured by anyone who hears him; a humble archpriest who does not like to talk about himself.*

*He is our beloved Father, the most reverend, Fr. Isaac Soliman, priest of St. Mary and Archangel Michael Church in Houston, Texas.*

### ***How were you chosen for the priesthood service?***

*"And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was." (Heb 5:4) Everyone is called to be a servant of God; we are all called to be a sanctified chosen congregation (1 Peter 2:9). God directs a special calling for some people to the office of the priesthood through the*



*patriarch or bishop or confession father. If the call is from God, one must not refuse it.*

*The Lord called me to this service full of mysteries on the tongue of His Grace the late bishop Anba Samuel, Bishop of General Services. The ordination was performed on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1964 by the hands of His Grace the late bishop Anba Mina, Metropolitan of Gerga. I felt that God called me for this service when everything was*

*ready – in "due time". I was invited to the service before that in a different place, but God blocked the way, and I felt that He had not called me to serve at that place. God is the one who specifies the place and time when the calling is according to His good will.*

### ***What was the toughest situation you faced in your service?***

*Service is not a road decorated with flowers, as some may think. Service is the carrying of the cross, following the Lord Jesus, and denying oneself. When the Lord called His disciples He told them, "Behold I send you out as lambs among wolves." (Lk 10:3) He told us that the road of service is the road of suffering and difficulties; "Without Me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5) "Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Mt 28:20)*



*If it was not for God's love and support, and His timely response to solve our problems, all our days would be difficult and without any solutions. The Lord is the One who supports us. I experienced the work of God in my life and my service all these years. It is very difficult to define the most difficult situation in my service. I completely believe that if a priest relies only on himself and abandons God's support, all the situations will be difficult. If the priest delivers his life to the Lord Jesus and allows Him to lead him by His Holy Spirit, all his difficult situations will become painless and solvable.*

***What situations have you faced in your service where you felt the most blessing?***

*The blessings of the service are innumerable. They are new every morning. (Lam 3:23) His blessings at every moment fulfill the body, soul and spirit.*

*There are many situations in which we experience God's many blessings. The priest prefers labor rather than rest, for the sake of the service. He finds God's support, and His help to withstand the sufferings. Sometimes the priest prefers the service even above his own family and spouse. God rewards the family through His love because of the love of the priest to the service. "We are God's fellow workers," (1Cor 3:9), therefore He is the One who cares for us, thus the blessings of the service are numerous, as are the difficulties of*



*the service are also numerous. It is difficult to enumerate the many blessings of God during the forty years of my service.*

***How do you feel the presence of God in the service?***

*A priest must feel the presence of God in the service with every breath that he takes. Without God, a priest is like a tree without water, which will be cut down, and cast out. "Abide in Me, and I in you," (Jn 15:5), how much more is it for the servant who labors for God? He must feel His presence at all times. He feels His presence in his personal prayers, family prayers, personal services, when he teaches and preaches, and when he raises prayers on behalf of his children. He must feel the presence of God because God is with us all the time.*

***What was your experience in your service in Houston?***

*I have served in the priesthood for forty years, and I may say with confidence "until here God has supported us", unless He has other plans for my service. I served in Egypt for nineteen years (May 1964 to Oct 1983) and in Houston for twenty-one years (Oct 1983 to present). The service is a service in any place - whether in Egypt or outside. We serve with God who is everywhere, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (Heb 13:8) The beginning of the service in Houston was very difficult, but the hand of God worked in my weakness. I do not deserve the fruits of the service*



*in Houston. When I moved to Houston, I did not know anything about the English language, but I spoke the language of love to the children who did not know the Arabic language, and God supported me in the service. Houston's congregation is a very kind congregation. I will never forget their noble feelings, which are engraved in my heart, whether during the weddings of my children, Fr. Timothy (Miami, FL), and Marie; or at the departure of my precious wife, Victoria, to the bosom of Christ. The truth is to be said: the revival of the service in Houston is due to the service of our beloved bishop, Anba Youssef who transformed Houston to a service hive. Before the ordination of our Bishop Anba Youssef, there was only one priest and one church in Houston. Then Fr. Bishoy George was ordained, and I cannot forget the great help and support he provided to the revival of St. Mark Church. Now there are three churches and four priests in Houston. This is due to the great work and support of our beloved father Anba Youssef, for whom I feel great compassion from the depth of my heart, because of his great labor in the service.*



***What is your philosophy in the service?***

*There is not a specific philosophy in the service, but there is love. If the priest offers authority instead of fatherhood, the congregation will deal with him with great caution, which may lead to rebellion. If the priest offers fatherhood rather than authority, everyone will feel his love and compassion as a father to them. They will accept every word from him. That is what we learn from our Lord's relationship with His disciples.*

***Whom did you meet of the present-day saints?***

*"God did not leave Himself without witness." (Act 14:7) The present-day saints are many, some are known while there are others who are not well-known. It is for the sake of the saints in the church and their prayers that God has mercy and compassion upon us.*

*I met Fr. Abdel-Messih El-Makary (El-Manahry), Fr. Andrawes El-Samuefy, Fr. Yostos El-Antony, Fr. Bishoy Kamel, and Fr. Mikhael Ibrahim; these are the ones who are known by many. There are also many of the unknown saints who departed from this world, whom I had the blessing of meeting. Foremost, I had the great blessing of serving with His Holiness Pope Kyrillos VI in many liturgies; I had many meetings and personal conferences with him.*

***What was your relationship with Fr. Abdel-Messih El-Makary and Pope Kyrillos?***

*I met Fr. Abdel-Messih El-Makary before I was ordained as a priest. I was born in Menia and Fr. Abdel-Messih El-Makary was serving in Manahra, which is in Menia. I used to always to*



go to Manahra and receive his blessings. One day, I visited El-Manahra and the late Bishop Anba Mina the Bishop of Gerga was there. I went to greet Anba Mina and receive his blessings. I was surprised to hear Fr. Abdel-Messih El-Makary saying to him, "this deacon will serve with you in Gerga". At that time Anba Mina did not know me, and when I was called to the priesthood Anba Mina remembered what Fr. Abdel-Messih said.

My relationship with Holiness Pope Kyrollos started when I was a student in the theological seminary. Three students were scheduled to serve as deacons with His Holiness everyday, so I had the blessing of serving with him many times. When I was married, I took my wife to His Holiness to receive His blessing. When I was called for the priesthood, I went to receive his blessing. He informed me about some things that I will encounter in my service, and I found them exactly as he told me. Every year I used to visit Cairo to receive his blessings.

**What would be your advice to someone who is considering service in priesthood?**

I wish all youth would have this idea. I would like to see all the priest in America from the new generation because of their ability to easily understand the youth and deal with them. If the person did not live as a servant before the priesthood it will be difficult to serve as a priest. If he did not practice the mysteries of grace as a youth he will not be able to practice them after the priesthood. The youth who desire priesthood desire a good thing (1Tim 3:1). The youth must live the life of service before priesthood and have spiritual guidance and a confession father who

would guide them to accept God's calling with all obedience.

**How do you see the church in the next 100 years?**

I see the church living with Christ, for that is much better. I do not think that people who are living today will still be here in a hundred years. (isn't this rather obvious? What was meant here?) I hope that all the children of my Church congregation will be with me in paradise, so I can present them to God saying, "Here I am and the children whom God has given Me." (Heb 2:13) If Christ delays and has not come in the next one hundred years, I see that the service in the Church will be more effective due to the advancement in service that I see every year.

May God bless the service through the prayers of His Holiness Pope Shenouda and our beloved Bishop Anba Youssef. Amen.

