



*St Mary and Archangel Michael Coptic Orthodox Church*  
Houston, Texas

***THE DREAM COMES TRUE***

*By: Samy Ghattas and Marise Sawirous*



*H*istory is not made only by the number of years, but rather by the number of accomplishments made in those years. Many civilizations vanished and were forgotten through out human history because of a lack of real accomplishments.

Our young church, St. Mary and Archangel Michael in Houston, has made real history and great accomplishments during the few years it has been in existence. No one can claim or take credit for this progress but the Lord, His pure mother and the Archangel Michael. We have witnessed their presence with us every step of the way. It is as if the Lord was saying very strongly, "I want a house in this place". He said it and it was done.

The beginning takes us back to 1994 when a group of people convened, each one with his own reason, all seeking to start a new church.

*T*o begin our story, let us start this phase from

our church's history by letting one brother from this group tell us his own story and how he encountered his dream for a new church.

"The little boy was wearing his brand new shoes and decided that such an occasion deserves attention... Lots of it... He kept leaping from the pew to the floor back to the pew and uttering joyful noises... I was standing behind the boy and watching the action with growing annoyance... I struggled to concentrate on the Sunday Liturgy and to join in the prayers but the little boy's action drew my attention elsewhere... He even considered changing his seat but even that proved to be an impossible challenge since the church was packed with the congregation and finding another seat was quite impossible....

*I*t was September 1992 and the church was St Mark Coptic Orthodox Church.... After the Liturgy, I proceeded to the hall and met with a group of friends... I commented on the incident



and mentioned that a second church is needed soon.... Together we reminiscend about the time when St Mark was built and how with God's blessings, the congregation grew and how in a very short time, a second church will be very much needed. We all decided to take a positive step to turn the dream into a reality.

The whole group met at a restaurant the following Thursday to draw a plan for the new church... They started by voting on the name and all seven agreed on St Mary.

Since the very first meeting the goal was very clear: God's will be done and immediately they went about their business to plan for the future... One of the agreed upon decisions was to offer the needy 10% of the money collected and to visit the sick in the hospitals... They would meet weekly to discuss the progress of the plan...

His Holiness Pope Shenouda was visiting Dallas and they decided to go and meet with him as a group... He blessed their efforts and advised them to proceed.

## One day in July 1994

This day started with much excitement to each member of the group... Today they would attend an auction to purchase a site for the new church and anticipation was high... They would have to be very alert and the decision would have to be made fast... With a motto like "You snooze, you lose", the atmosphere was filled with electrifying tension.... Except for one member of the group.... Before he left for the auction, his wife gave him a black plastic bag and insisted that he take it with him... "What's in the bag?" he asked. "The decision maker," she answered with confidence... He glanced at the prized possession and found a framed picture of the Virgin Mary inside the bag... He nodded and promised her that he will make sure

he does not part from the bag...

The auction started and as usual the rattling of the auctioneer filled the room... Hands were raised, nods were noticed and a deal was sealed with a bang!!! Warming up to the game, the group decided on a promising 3.5 acres in Copperfield... Clutching the bag tightly, the member whispered to the picture "St Mary, please take over! It's your place and you decide... Please give us a sign..."

The auctioneer announced the beginning of the bid on the land and somebody started with a number... The members jumped on the bidding game and countered with a very low price in anticipation that the bidding will go back and forth till they decide on the final price... Surprisingly, no one joined in and to their amazement the word "Sold" was announced loud and clear... The group remained speechless in amazement.... A land worth every bit of \$300,000 was just sold to them for \$67,500.... "Aren't you going to ask me what is in this bag?" The astonished group looked at the mysterious bag and wondered about the contents... "The decision maker!" he said while ceremoniously taking the picture of the Virgin Mary out of the bag....

From that day on, the Virgin Mary never left the sight of the new Church!!!!!!!!!!

## September 1994:

The group went to meet with His Holiness Pope Shenouda in New Jersey to sign the deed for the newly purchased land.

## December 1994:

Father Isaac and Father Bishoy held a prayer in a tent on the new land



## September 1995

His Grace Bishop Youssef headed the ceremony for the ground breaking of the new church and he suggested that the name of this church be St Mary and Archangel Michael.

## November 1997

With the blessed efforts of Father Isaac, phase one of the new church is completed: The Sunday School building. Temporarily, the second floor would serve as the church until phase II would be completed....

The door opened at 7:00 PM and one by one the members of the new church walked toward the future.... The blessed future...

About the little boy with the new shoes who started it all? He became a deacon and most recently he was accepted to a very prominent college...

## November 2001

A few years later, the idea of building a new sanctuary worthy of the names of St. Mary and the Archangel Michael began and was pioneered by Fr. Isaac who gathered the people and announced the intention of building a new church. Everyone felt strongly that a traditional Orthodox building with domes was the way to proceed. Once that was decided upon the big question of financing the project challenged everyone. Initially, no one knew how much the project might cost, but the preliminary estimates indicated \$1.3 million. None of this amount was in the church treasury which meant the church would have to seek other options namely obtaining a loan from a financial institution.

Once again, Fr. Isaac offered his encouragement to the people and the board of deacons assuring every one that the Lord would provide in due time. Based on these preliminary estimations, the church approached banks in Houston seeking loans. The Lord was present every step of the way helping in the negotiations with all the banks. Even though it is a very well known fact that banks do not easily loan to churches, the Lord was glorified in seven of the eight banks the church dealt with and they all miraculously offered her a loan. The church decided on the one with the best offer and rates.

As progress began to develop and the church started to receive bids for the new building, "Satan" attempted to slow or even stop this progress entirely. He presented us with a new materialistic surprise that was, the bid itself, the best and most economical bid to build the church was \$2.3 million, \$1 million more than the anticipated cost. How can we proceed with a shortage of this magnitude, and once again the Lord spoke to the hearts of our bankers and convinced them to increase the funding by another one half million dollars to a total of \$1.8 million. Truly, this was another miracle.

## August 2002

On Wednesday August 21<sup>st</sup>, the church board, headed by both Fr. Isaac and Fr. Younan, signed the historic title deed, construction plans, and the church loan with Comerica Bank.

On Sunday







August 26<sup>th</sup>, HG Bishop Youssef blessed the ground of the new church building by sprinkling water and offering the Prayer of Thanksgiving. The celebration started by a deacons' procession from the old church to the new ground.



*H. G. Bishop Youssef Blessing the Ground of the New Church*

## March 2003

As plans for the construction were completed, His Grace Bishop Youssef blessed and broke the ground for the new church building. Fr. Isaac, Fr. Younan and the overjoyed people of the church surrounded his Grace.



*H. G. Bishop Youssef Breaking the New Church Ground*

## May, 2003

The construction of the new church building began.



## July, 2004

On Saturday July 24, 2004, the great and long awaited day finally arrived. His Grace Bishop Youssef officially began the services in the newest and most beautiful Coptic Orthodox building ever built in Houston, Texas. The services started with the prayers of the 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>,



and 12<sup>th</sup> hour prayers of the Agpia, followed by the Vesper Praises.

The great celebration started once H.G. Bishop Youssef arrived and was greeted at the door by the church priests and deacons who escorted him to the old church to remove with great honor the relics of the saints. After circling the church three times, the procession headed towards the new church building where the relics were placed in their new home inside the church. The celebration that night was attended by a great number of priests and people from all over the diocese of Southern United States. H. G. Bishop Youssef began the Vesper service followed by a sermon and concluded with the Midnight Praises.

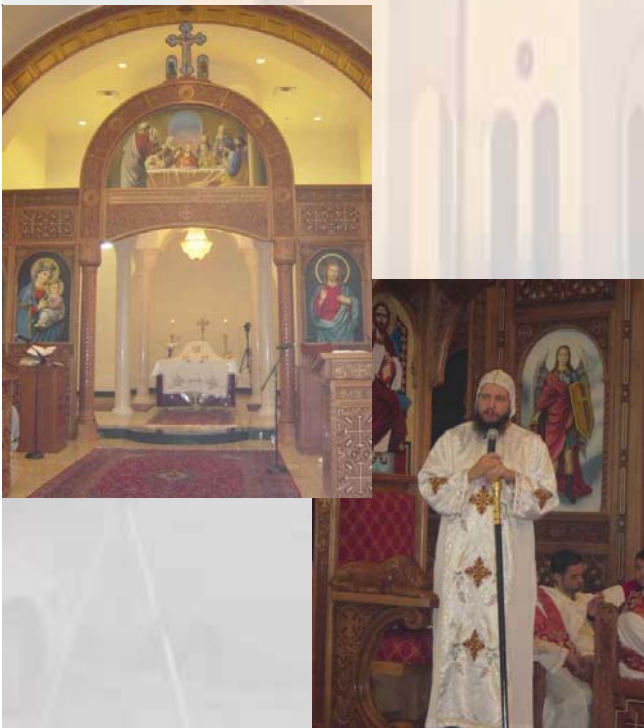
On Sunday July 25, 2004, the first and historical Liturgy in the new church began. The service was officiated by H. G. Bishop Youssef accompanied by the church priests. H. G. Bishop Youssef prayed the Divine Liturgy, consecrated the new baptismal font, performed

the first baptism and ordained many deacons.

## August 20-22, 2004

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III blessed the city of Houston with a visit and consecrated the new church building. His Holiness was accompanied by H.G. Bishop Antony of Ireland, H.G. Bishop Antoniuos Marcos of Africa, and H.G. Bishop Sarabamon the abbot of the monastery of St. Bishoy

On Friday August 20, 2004, His Holiness arrived at the church in the evening, where he met with the church youth of all ages and delivered to them words of great wisdom and benefit, before answering some of their questions.







On the morning of Saturday August 21, 2004, His Holiness Pope Shenouda met in St. Mary church with all the priests of the diocese of the Southern U.S. The number of priests in attendance was 21. In the evening of the same day, His Holiness met with all the people of the church and was greeted by the church choirs from both Houston and Dallas, Texas.



As the history of our blessed church and all of the other churches in the diocese are being written at the present time, it is the hope and suggestion of this writer that a historian from each church be appointed to write and record events in the church as they occur. Many of the other Christian denominations follow this practice. Such a historian should have the following functions.

- Gathering data of the church's history as it occurs.
- Maintaining statistical records of the church, names of priests, deacons, servants, boards, baptisms, marriages, and death records.
- Writing a narrative about the church history, especially focusing on telling the stories of how God has been working in the church.
- Keeping photographs of all former and present priests and possibly the servants and the deacons.
- Conducting oral history interviews with older members of the congregation and with the priests.
- Submitting all records to His Grace the Bishop at the end of every year for his review prior to storing them in a safe place year by year for future generations.

On the morning Sunday August 22, 2004, His Holiness consecrated the altar and the Icons of St. Mary and Archangel Michael Church. His Holiness also baptized three children and officiated the Liturgy prayers. More than 1,200 people attended the Liturgy.

