



Abba Macarius of Egypt

Μακάριος

Written by: Paul Salama

St Mary & St Mark Church, Indianapolis, IN

St **Macarius** was the only son of two pious parents. His father, Abraham, was a righteous priest and his mother, Sarah, was a God-fearing woman. Both much like Zacharias and Elizabeth “*were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless*” (Luke 1:6). They chose to live a life of chastity and were diligent in their prayers, fasting and acts of mercy. As a result they were loved by both God and man but were soon envied by the devil.

The evil one incited a group of his followers to ransack the couple’s house and steal their possessions, which deeply saddened the elderly couple, not because that they had lost worldly possessions but rather that evil had become rampant.

That night Abraham the priest saw a vision of

¹ Also called Shanshoor.

² **Macarii** or **Macarius** means blessed. Thus the saint was blessed even prior to his conception.

³ Literally reader.



The Three Saints Abba Macarii (of Egypt, of Alexandria, the Bishop of Edco).

Abraham the patriarch telling him to go and settle in a village called Shabsheer¹ and there God would grant them a son whose name would be great and would be known to the ends of the earth. The next day both Abraham and Sarah moved and settled in Shabsheer.

After a short while Abraham fell sick and remained sick for a long time. He asked to be taken to the church believing that he would be made well there. During the night an angel of the Lord appeared to him, healed him, and told him that God will grant them a son whose name shall be **Macarii** or **Macarius**². The next day the pious priest told his wife of his dream and soon she conceived and gave birth to

a son whom they named **Macarius**.

Macarius grew up to be chaste, humble, gentle, and obedient, and was dedicated to helping his elderly parents. Everyone in the village marveled at him and as a consequence the priests in the village took him to the Bishop and had him ordained “Anagonstos³”. When he came of age



his parents wanted him to get married, yet he did not wish so for he had purposed in his heart to dedicate his life to the Lord Jesus Christ. However, the priests in the village wanted to ordain him a deacon to aid them in their services so they forced him to marry. In spite of that **Macarius** and his wife kept their virginity and when the days of the wedding celebration had passed the priests had him ordained a “Diacon⁴”.

At that point in time people used to travel in groups out of fear from the Berber tribes which used to raid and attack small caravans. **Macarius** used to accompany such groups on numerous occasions, and on one day when he had accompanied a group who were going to Cairo to sell their goods they had to spend the night in Sheheet. That night **Macarius** saw in a vision a luminous person telling him that the Lord had given him the wilderness of Sheheet as an inheritance and that he will have many children who will be dedicated to the Lord. **Macarius** awoke the next day troubled and kept pondering about the vision.

Not long after that his wife died and reposed in the Lord having kept her virginity, as for **Macarius** he used to admonish himself saying, “O **Macarius** be careful that from now on you continually reap the fruits of your spirit, for you will be taken to the place where only the spiritual and pure dwell.” From then onwards, **Macarius**’ only care was serving the church. He was loving to all and dealt with all in great humility, which

made everyone love him and speak highly of him and of his purity, knowledge, wisdom, humility, virtue, and in general the grace that he had attained. Also, **Macarius** remained in the service of his parents, taking care of all their needs till they both reposed in the Lord.

On the occasion of one of the church’s feasts **Macarius** decided to hold a banquet for all the poor in the village in memory of his parents that they may find mercy in the sight of God. It happened that a monk had come to the village church to partake of the Holy Eucharist so **Macarius** invited him to the banquet. The next day **Macarius** went to the monk’s cell and disclosed to the monk his heart’s desire to live a solitary life of worship seeking his salvation. The monk gave the young **Macarius** some advice and kept him that night with him till the Lord revealed to him His Will regarding **Macarius**.

During the night when the monk woke up to pray, the Lord opened his eyes and he saw a crowd of luminous winged monks surrounding **Macarius**, and he heard them say to **Macarius** “Arise and perform the service that has been entrusted to you.” The monk was greatly surprised by this vision but held his silence.

In the morning when **Macarius** set out to return to his home the monk asked him if had seen anything during the night. **Macarius** said he had not, so the monk told him of the vision and advised him to dwell in a cell on the outskirts of his village. When **Macarius** returned home he gave away all his possessions to the poor and

⁴ Deacon or servant.



needy and lived in solitude in a cell outside the village.

When the people of the village witnessed his spiritual growth and the grace he had attained, they took him forcibly to the Bishop and had him ordained a priest. The honors of priesthood bestowed upon him only made **Macarius** strive further to grow spiritually. Many of the villagers were pleased with his ordination and used to seek him for spiritual advice. To support himself the saint used to braid palm leaves into baskets and sell them. He had a friend who would pick up the baskets, sell them, and return the proceeds to the saint.

While the saint was living on the outskirts of the village, a young man and woman committed fornication and the woman became pregnant. Being afraid of their parents and the rest of the villagers, the man told the woman that when they inquire who is the father of her child, the woman was to accuse the saint. When the parents and the villagers heard the lie they stormed into the saint's cell, dragged him out, insulted him, and beat him. They would have continued beating him had the Lord not sent an elder who told the mob to cease beating the saint for he had enough and was on the verge of dying.

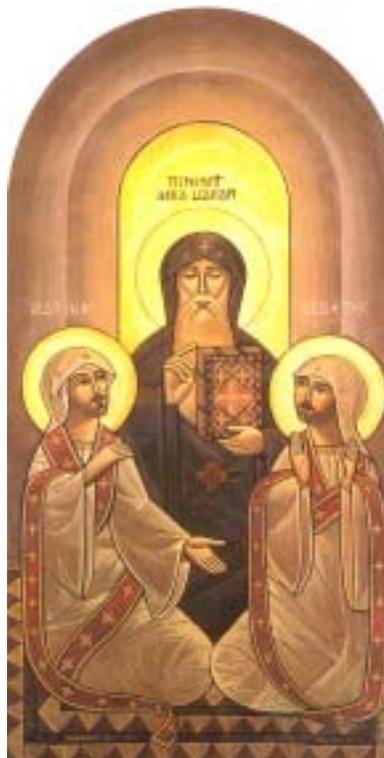
The parents would not release the

saint until he had promised to pay for all the pregnant woman's expenses. The saint asked his friend to vouch for him and promised to pay any expenses. On account of that the saint used to toil and would say to himself "Toil **Macarius** and work for now you have a woman and a child. You now have to work day and night."

This evil deed did not go unpunished however. When it was time for the woman to give birth she remained in excruciating pain for days, to the point of death, and the baby was not born until she had confessed the saint's innocence and divulged the true father's name. When the saint's

friend heard that the Lord had shown his innocence, he reprimanded the villagers for mistreating the saint and rushed off to deliver the good news to him. When the saint heard that his innocence was declared he glorified God, but when he learned that all the villagers were coming to apologize to him he decided to flee and settled in the wilderness of Sheheet near a place where there was a water spring.

After the saint had settled in Sheheet for a while, the devils arose in the shape of beasts and surrounded him intending to devour him, but the Lord did not permit them to harm him lest the saint be discouraged or dismayed. On another occasion the Lord gave



St Macarius (center), St Maximus & St Dometius



him to hear the devils plotting to drive him out of the wilderness so that they would prevent him or others from settling in the wilderness of Sheheet and dedicating their lives to God.

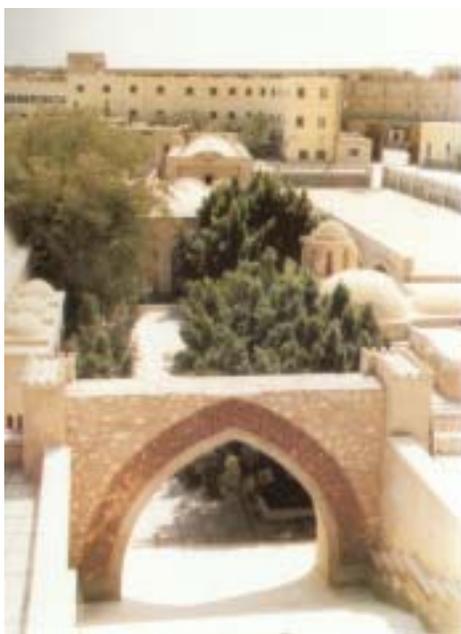
After three years the saint decided to go and visit St Anthony to benefit from him and to become his disciple. He had the intention of staying with St Anthony all the time but the saint would not let him and told him to remain in the place that the Lord had chosen for him. He also told him that he would be truly blessed by God. After a few days **St Macarius** returned to his abode in Sheheet.

Soon many started to come to him seeking advice and to become his disciples. He taught them the way of salvation and dressed them in the monastic garb. Of those who had come to be his disciples were the two brothers, Sts Maximus and Dometius.

News about him started to spread especially that the Lord had granted him the gift of healing and many came to be healed from their infirmities. When the devils saw this they gathered around him one time in the form of wild dogs, threw him to the ground, and attacked him to the point that his skin was removed and his bones were almost revealed. He remained that way for three

days without anybody knowing and the power of God healed him.

Of the many virtues with which St **Macarius** was adorned, humility was foremost. One time as the saint was walking carrying a bundle of palm leaves he was met by the devil who attempted to cut him in half using a sword but was incapable, so he said to the saint “You cast me down by a great power. Everything you do I can also do. You fast and I do not eat. You spend the night praying whereas I do not sleep. There is one thing though by which you overpower me. It is your humility. It is because of that, that I cannot overcome you.” The saint then lifted his hands in prayers and the devil disappeared.



Entrance to St Macarius Monastery

Also, one time the saint grew restless in his cell, so he decided to go out into the wilderness and ask who ever he would meet for a word of advice. On his way he met a young shepherd boy, so he asked him “What should I do for I am hungry?” The boy replied, “Eat.” The saint replied “I have eaten by I am still hungry.” The boy replied, “Eat once more.” The saint replied, “I have eaten many times and I am still hungry.” The boy then replied, “I have no doubt that you are a donkey because you like to eat a lot.” The saint did not reply and left



after having benefited from the boy.

It was also the saint's habit that once the Divine Liturgy was over he would run to his cell. When asked why he did that, he replied, "Flee brethren. Flee!" When the brethren asked, "Where can we flee beyond the wilderness?" He pointed towards his mouth and said, "Flee from this." So everyone went into his cell and was silent.

It was also known about the saint that he was very trusting. When asked why he acted so, he replied, "I have pleaded with God for twelve years that He may grant me this gift. Do you know He ask me to let go of it?" In fact, another of the saint's major virtues was his forgiveness and the fact that he did not judge others.

One time one of the monks committed sin, but the saint did not wish to rebuke him. The rest of the brethren were impatient however, and started to spy on the monk till they saw a woman enter his cell. They left a group standing guard and the rest ran to tell the saint. The saint said to them "Do not believe that such a thing would be done by our blessed brother." They asked him to come with them and see for himself. The saint agreed and went with them, when they neared the monk's cell he asked them to fall a short distance behind him.

When the monk heard that the saint had come to

visit him, he hid the woman under a table. When the saint came in he greeted the monk and sat on the table. He then asked the rest of the brethren to come in, who when they came in started to search the cell for the woman. They did not however, ask the saint to move. When they left, having found no one, the saint said to the monk, "My brother, judge yourself before someone judges you, for judgment is God's." As the saint was leaving he heard a voice saying "Blessed are you spiritual **Macarius**, you have become like your creator. You cover up peoples' faults." This was the cause of the monk's repentance.

Another time the saint saw one of the monks committing fornication with a woman. Rather than rebuking him the saint said to himself, "If God who created him, sees this and is patient with him, for He is capable of killing him, who am I to rebuke him." Also, when one of his disciples asked him for a word of advice he replied, "Do no evil to any one and never judge another person. Keep these two and you will be saved." He also used to advice his disciples saying, "If we remember the evil works of others we hurt our minds⁵, but if we remember that the devil is the perpetrator of evil we will remain unharmed."

As for his self-denial, it is written that he dug out a passage, half a mile long, from his cell to a small cave because many people came to be blessed by him. When large numbers of people came to him, he would escape by the secret passage to the cave where no one would find him and thus escape from vainglory. On his way to and from the cave he would pray the Psalms.

⁵ Literally memories.

⁶ Wine was used for medicinal purposes, especially for the saint who by then had grown old.



On another occasion a person brought the saint a bunch of grapes that had ripened before the season. When the saint saw this he thanked the Lord and asked that it be given to one of the brethren who was sick. The sick monk was happy to see the grapes but he overcame his desire to eat from them and asked that they be given to another monk who was also ill. The third monk likewise rejoiced to see the grapes, but asked that they be given to some one else who was more in need of them than him. In the end the bunch was circulated among all the brethren till it was returned to the saint intact. The saint glorified the Lord Jesus Christ for the brethren's ascetism.

Also one time the saint went to visit a sick monk, and asked him if he needed anything. The monk replied that he would like to have soft bread. Upon hearing that the saint walked to Alexandra, 60 miles away, and got him the bread. It was also known about the saint that if one of the brethren gave him some wine⁶ to drink, he would not refuse but would secretly fast from drinking water all day. When his disciple discovered that, he urged the brethren not to give him any wine because the saint would punish himself by abstaining from water.

One time while the saint was walking in the wilderness he saw an aged man carrying many vessels each with a feather in it. This man asked the saint what he was doing in the wilderness, the saint replied "I am seeking the Lord Christ's mercy, but I ask you in the name of the Lord who are you, for your appearance is very peculiar, and

⁷ This is according to Palladius.

what are these vessels that you are carrying and what is the feather in each." The man replied, "I am the devil whom they call the devious one, and I draw people to sin by means of these vessels. I deceive each member of the body as befits it, and I rejoice in the falling of those whom I overcome.



The relics of the three St Macarii

To deceive those who read God's commandments I anoint their heads with the feather in the vessel on my head. Those who attempt to spend the night in prayer I make drowsy and sleepy by anointing their eyes by the feather that is in the vessel on my forehead. The vessels at my ears are to be used to prevent people from being obedient. I draw those who are ascetic to food and people to profane language by those vessels at my mouth. Those who depend on their own might I make them arrogant by the weapons at my neck. I use those at my chest to sow my thoughts and prevent people from thinking about their salvation. As for those vessels below my waistline I use them to guide people into adultery and fornication. Those on my arms are ready for murder and the



ones on my feet I use to stumble the righteous.” After having said that he disappeared. As for the saint he fell on the ground and started offering supplications to God so that he may fight with His might on behalf of the weak.

One time the Lord decided to teach the saint a lesson, for the saint had asked Him who is equal to him or greater. He heard a voice saying, “You are not equal to two women in the city.” The saint then took his staff and headed towards the city seeking the two women. When he reached the house and knocked, one of them opened the door. As soon as she saw the saint she fell to the ground in obedience to him, though she did not know whom he was, for their husbands loved putting up strangers and taking care of them. When the other lady saw the saint she laid down the baby she was carrying and came and bowed in front of the saint.

They then brought water to wash his feet and prepared food for him to eat. The saint said to them, “I will not eat nor will I allow you to wash my feet until you have told me how you live your lives for I was sent by God.” The two ladies asked, “Who are you father?” He replied, “I am **Macarius** who’s living in the wilderness of Sheheet.” When they heard this they both fell on the ground in fear but the saint raised them up and said, “Do not withhold anything from me that may be beneficial to me.”

The two women then said to him, “We are originally two strangers who married two brothers. We asked them to permit us to go and

stay in an Abbey to serve God in prayer and fasting but they did not agree. So we decided to treat each other in Godly love. We protect ourselves by fasting daily till sunset and praying continuously. Each one of us has given birth to a son. If either of us sees the son of the other crying she takes him and feeds him just as if he were her own son. We have not permitted ourselves to utter any worldly words; rather our language is much like that of those who dwell in the wilderness. Our husbands are herdsmen. They return daily in the evening, and we accept them as two saintly brothers. They continuously give alms and host the poor and strangers.” When the saint heard this he left them pounding his chest, slapping his face and saying, “Woe to me for I love not the others like these two ladies,” and he greatly benefited from them.

When the saint’s body had grown weak because of old age and because of all his secret ascetic practices that nobody knew about, and while he was thinking one day about the day he would leave this world the two saints Abba Anthony and Abba Pachomious appeared to him at the seventh hour of the day telling him that he would repose in nine days. After nine days the angel of the Lord that had appeared to him earlier in his life, appeared surrounded with heavenly hosts and said to him “Come with us, for all of these are waiting for you.” The saint replied and said, “My master Lord Jesus Christ whom my soul loves, accept my spirit.” When he said that he gave up his spirit.

This was on the twenty-seventh day of the Coptic



month of Baramhat. As the Angel of the Lord was escorting his spirit to Heaven, some of the elders saw the devils come to hinder his ascent. They heard them saying to him “You are saved and have escaped from us.” The saint replied “Not yet.” When the saint set one foot inside the Heavenly gate they said to him, “You have entered,” he replied “Not yet.” When he had completely entered they said again to him weeping, “You have entered.” He then shouted back, “I have accepted the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I thank my Lord for His Heavenly grace and love to mankind.”

May his prayers be with us all. Amen.

Bibliography

1. “The Paradise of the Holy Fathers”, vol. I and II, Palladius, translated by E. A. Wallis Budge, New Sarov Press, Blanco, TX, 1994.
2. “The Paradise of Fathers of the Coptic Orthodox Church”, Diocese of Bani Swef Printing Press, Blance Press, 1968.
3. “The Biography of the Three Saints Abba Macarii,” H.G. Bishop Mitaous, 2nd Ed., 1998



This is the oldest Christian wooden altar found in Egypt. It has 12 columns and decorated with myrtle foliage. A shell on 2 columns forms the architectural facade, frequently seen on Coptic art. The cross and shell most probably symbolize the rebirth of the soul following Baptism. This altar dates back to the Fatimid Period, and was originally located at the Church of Al-Mo'allaqa.