Life of Shenouda (Syriac version)

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[Translated by Francois Nau] We now write the remarkable actions of the holy father Shenouda, man of God. 1. My brothers, let us give glory to the Lord of all glory, to he who chose the holy vessels necessary for His service, and placed them in His church like torches to illuminate the creation, so that all those who ask to enter the kingdom of God shall imitate them in their conduct and receive the crown of victory. One of those whom the Lord chose himself is the elect and saint father Shenouda, whose story we propose to tell today before you, so that you may give glory to He who made his qualities shine in the world for the glory of God who chose him. I have heard, it is true, that God called to his disciples and also to me: "Do not reveal this vision that you saw, before my resurrection from among the dead, I will reveal (thus) the merits of the saint after his death". I again heard him say: "He who keeps observes my commands and observes them will do more things and wonders than me." And now we will begin, my brothers, and we will place the lamp, not under the bushel, but on the candlestick, so that it lights all those who are in the house of this world.

2. And first, let us speak, as is appropriate, of the country and the trade of the parents of this holy father Shenouda. He was from a village of Upper Egypt, which is the Thebaïd; his father was a farmer and had many ewes which he gave to a shepherd to look after. The number of the ewes increased and the shepherd could not keep them alone, but he asked the father of holy Shenouda to give him his son to help him to feed the herd, (in return) he would give up a small part of his pledges to them. The parents of this holy Shenouda agreed with him, that he would spend the day with him and would return every evening to sleep at home, because they did not have any other child, and the shepherd took Shenouda with him, every evening he sent him to sleep at his parents. The child then went over to a pond which was next to their village, he took off his clothes and hid them in a tree beside the pond, then he entered upright into the water up to his neck, and raised his hands above the water towards heaven while praying until the morning. When this had gone on for a certain time, his father was annoyed, and his mother found the shepherd and reproached him for not sending the child to sleep at home, according to their agreement, for fear that something in future might happen to him in the desert.

The shepherd swore that every evening he sent him to them. So, when evening came, the shepherd returned Shenouda to his parents and followed him from afar while hiding to see where he went. He saw him going to this pond, taking off his clothes, entering the water, raising his hands towards God while praying and he noticed that his fingers shone. When the shepherd had discovered this secret, he returned to his ewes full of admiration and praising God. In the morning, the parents came to the shepherd, he told them the story and gave their son Shenouda to them: ”I am not worthy, he said to them, to keep him with me, I who am only a sinful shepherd,” and he told them that he had seen his fingers shining like torches.

3. After these ten days, Shenouda was led by his father to a mortified and holy recluse so that he could lay hands on him and bless him. As he approached the cell, the hermit knew in spirit his approach and he said to some important men who had come to ask him for his blessing: ”Let us all go together to be blessed by the great saint who comes to us”; they did so, and when he saw the young Shenouda, he took his hand, placed it on his head, asked him to pray for him and led him to his cell with the men who were present; however one of those had a demon, and when Shenouda saw him, he took a stick and struck him; the demon exclaimed: ”I leave him, O Shenouda, because, since I saw you, I burn in fire”, and he went out in the sight of all the men who were present. This hermit proposed to the father of Shenouda to leave him with him for a few days, and he left him. However the mother of Shenouda was the sister of this holy man.

4. In the evening, Shenouda lay down at the side of the cell, and the holy man stayed upright in prayer on the other side; he saw an angel of the Lord who stayed by the child and guarded him, and this angel said to him: ”At dawn, take the dress which you will find beside his head and cover the young Shenouda, because it is the dress of the prophet Elijah which the Messiah sends to him, and knows that his name will quickly increase and grow, so that no-one will be found among the Christians of his importance, because he will found a large monastery and will gather there a great number of holy disciples.” In the morning, this recluse, the father Bgouli, his uncle, rose, and found the clothes placed next to his head, as the angel had said. He woke Shenouda, babbled the (accustomed) prayers, and he became a monk. The next day, he walked around the cell with another recluse, when they heard a voice from heaven which said: ”Shenouda is established as leader of all the monks.” They wondered whether they had understood this voice rightly and answered: ”In truth, we have heard a voice which said: Shenouda is established as leader of all the monks.” They questioned Shenouda and they said to him: ”Did you hear this voice?” And they were in admiration and said to each other: ”This child has arrived with his first step at the highest degree”, and they praised God for His infinite gifts to men.

5. When holy Shenouda had put on the clothes that God had sent to him,he set himself to the task and professed the cenobitic life alone in continual fasts and frequent prayers. For food, in the evening, he only ate bread and salt, so much so that his body decayed and he became only skin and bones. His cenobitic life resembled that of the prophet Elijah and

John the Baptist. He acquired a deep learning and composed some works of preaching and on the conduct of the monks. He instructed monks and seculars, old men and children, each according to justice and suitability, and they listened to his words and his precepts which were softer than honey to their palate. His writings were accepted by everyone, he gave rules to his monks which they always observed, and it is testified that he did not give these rules of himself, but that the Messiah fixed them and dictated them by his mouth. He advanced far with its disciples in the work of monasticism, every day they prayed twelve times, and during each prayer they made twenty-four genuflexions, and this saint did not sleep during the night, but granted only a rest of one hour to his eyes because of the weakness of his body. He fasted many weeks and did not eat, from Saturday to Saturday; during the forty days fast, he ate only a little cooked food.

It was only at this time that he ceased fasting, so much so that all his flesh was desiccated and his eyes were sunk very deeply in their sockets because of the abundance of his weeping and his tears, which were more pleasant to him than honey in the mouth. He lived as a recluse in his monastery and he received the revelation of all that occurred in the world, he revealed, to all those which came to him, their conduct and their thoughts. He reprimanded each according to his thought and measurement, and interceded for them with God so that He forgave them and had pity on them".

6. Again a very old man came to him, who sent to say that he wanted to come to see him, to be blessed by him and to ask him to remember him in his prayers, so that God would forgive him his sins. — Our father said to him by his messenger: "If you want to obey me, come, if you do not want to, you will not see my face. He answered: "I will do all that you order." — Then our father sent for him, and when he arrived, he prostrated himself on the ground before him. Our father said to him: "Confess your sin and make it known at this assembly if you want to live and to arrive where we go in the end. This man said to him: "One day I was sat next to my house when I saw a rider pass who carried obviously a purse on a shoulder-belt (a purse on a cord on his head or his back). I took a knife, rejoined him on the way, struck him there and he fell dead, I took the purse believing that I would find much money which would enrich me, but I found only a third of a dinar there, I made a pit and buried the dead there. See that I have told you everything, O our father, so that you can advise me what I must do, to be absolved." — Our holy father Shenouda said to him:

"Go now to the town of Akhmim, you will find its governor and his soldiers entering by the door of the city bringing back robbers that they took in the flight, intermingle with these men, and say that you are one of them. And if they question you, assure them that you are one of them and that you were with them, so that you may be killed at the same time; that the blood that you have shed you may be forgiven and that you may gain the life of the future world. This man obeyed the precept of our father, he went, was killed with them and obtained the kingdom of heaven. — Let us say all: Glory to the name of the only true God, to him be the praise.

7. Another time a disciple of Shenouda, named Visa, one of the first who was with him, came to see him. He understood that he was speaking with another, and when he had knocked and that one had called him to enter, he did not find anybody with to him, but only saw him; when he had greeted him, he asked him with authority: ”So who was with you, O our father, and to who did you speak?” And as I pressed him, he said to me: ”It was Our-Lord Jesus-Christ, and when you came and entered, He left me.” I said to him then: ”I want to see Him, O our father, and may He bless me.” The saint said to me: ”You cannot see Him, because you are weak.” I greeted him and asked him to pray for me, so that I was considered to be worthy of this blessing. And our father answered me: ”That depends on the Lord and not on me, go and return tomorrow at the sixth hour, because in his mercy He comes, speaks and commands me. Take guard to say nothing.” According to the command of our father, I went at six hours and knocked on his door according to custom, but as I tried to enter, the Messiah ascended. At this sight, I cried abundantly, and our father had pity on me and said to me: ”Do not be in pain, I will work with you and I will ask Him that you hear my conversation with Him.” After that I came near our father and I heard the Messiah speak with him and announce the future to him, therefore I praised Him and returned thanks to Him for his great kindness towards me, but I was not worthy to see Him corporally.

8. One day the father Shenouda was sat on a stone at the door of his monastery, when Our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him and spoke to him, and our father said to Him: ”I wish to see a ship sailing on this desert.” The Messiah went away, and an hour afterwards, all this place was a lake on which a ship sailed. The Messiah was the captain and a great number of angels were oarsmen and sailors. The ship advanced and they brought it to the place where the father Shenouda was in prayer. The Messiah called to Shenouda: ”Extend your hand and take the rope of the ship to support it.” He took the rope and could not restrain the ship and he approached the stone which was by him, bored it with his finger and attached the rope to it. And these holes have remained in the stone until this day.

9. Again a foreigner came to our father, and asked him to pray for him. The father Shenouda answered him: ”How can I pray for you, when you have on your head a great sin? The man answered him: ”I will not go back there any more, I am a Christian, I have worshipped the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit since I have been of the age of reason. Our father said to him: ”Allow me to recall to you the day when you ate, you drank and you lay down, then, during the night, you took your sword, you went out, you found a woman on your way, you struck her with your sword and you killed her? This man answered him: ”It is true, I did that, but is there is no forgiveness for he who returns and repents? Our father said to him: ”In truth, he who returns and repents receives forgiveness, provided that you listen to my counsel, I have confidence that you will be forgiven, because God does not want the death of the sinner, but that he repents. Then he advised him to be made a monk and obey him, and our father cut his hair and covered him with the clothes of monasticism.

After three days, our father took him by the hand, gave him a water jug, led him on a distant mountain and placed him in a cave which was of his size and had a window by

which light entered, there he made him sit and closed (the cave) on him. And week by week our father went to him and asked him whether it were well. And he said to him: ”Two days ago, something came in the night which disturbed me; my members and my hands were weakened at it, the hairs of my flesh bristled, I remained stupid and full of suffering. It seemed to to me that my spirit left me because of the anguish which oppressed me, it left on my hands a stink of corruption like a rotting dead body; then this stink assembled and formed a cloud, it left by cracks in the cave and disappeared. Then I fell on my face against the ground like a drunk man, until now on your arrival. Our father said to him: ”Take courage, my son, because today, God forgave you all your sins. And our father made him come out of this cave and brought him to us in the monastery. And when I saw him, I, Visa disciple of our father Shenouda, I asked him about it: ”Isn’t this the foreigner who came to you? Where has he been? Our father said to me:

”He had been afflicted with a deep and bad wound by the evil lion Satan, I led him to the doctor who bandaged it, and he was cured. After remaining with them a few days, he returned to his cave and was confirmed in the perfection and great work of justice until his death.

10. A rich man of Schamoun again came to our father, and told him that robbers had entered his house and took’¦. 11. Some monks of the monastery of the holy and illustrious father Macarius came to the father Shenouda to receive his blessing and some important men of the town of Akhmim had come to hear his precepts, and all asked him: ”O our father, is there at this time a monk like the great Antony!” The father Shenouda answered them: ”Even if all the monks of this time were brought together, they would not be comparable to the holy father Antony.” All were full of admiration, they believed his word, were blessed by him, and, carrying on their way, went home.

12. Our father Shenouda told us what follows: While the Messiah was with him, and talking with him, the bishop of the town of Akhmim came to his monastery and asked to confer with him and to go to the patriarch Cyril of Alexandria, and he sent to ask him to leave with him. The old man answered: ”I cannot.” And the bishop sent to say: ”Come to me, because it is for a pressing cause.” And the old man answered: ” I do not have time now.” The bishop in anger sent to shame him: ”I place you under the interdict, and there will be no remission if you do not obey me.” And when I heard that, I rejoiced in myself, saying: ”See this man who is flesh and blood, and asks me to go to him, when I have close to me the Master of all creatures.” Then the Messiah our Lord said to me: ”Arise and go to your bishop, so that he does not anathematise you, because I will not myself loosen an anathema, because of the powere that I gave to the disciple Peter, to all the apostles and also to the priests who they ordain: ”Those whom you condemn will be condemned, etc.” When I heard the Messiah speak to me thus, I worshipped Him and returned at once to the bishop. I greeted him and was blessed by him, I listened to his words and he blessed me and left for his voyage.

13. A hermit, a monk of the monastery of the father Pacomius, went to the imperial city to the emperor for a certain business, and when he approached the monastery of the father

Shenouda, he wanted to enter to be blessed by him. His disciple said to him: ”Let us carry on our way and leave him, he does not even know what he ate yesterday.” He did not listen to him, but came to the monastery of the father Shenouda, and our father went out to their meeting, and our holy father said to them: Which of you is John, the secretary of this holy old man? The disciple answered; ”Me” and our father said to him: ”You said true, my son, Shenouda does not know what he ate yesterday, look at my withered and desiccated body. I hope that the Lord will give me a place with the apostles at the day of the judgement, so that you may have faith in the servants of the Messiah, even when they are weak.” He prostrated himself then before our father so that he prayed for him, forgave him and had pity on him. His Master also asked him to pray for them, so that they could continue their journey.

14. God did all this by the hands of our holy father, he made other wonders greater than we have written. We wrote of them some for the glory of the saint and the glory of his Master. For us, let us praise and exalt He who strengthened him and let us all say: Glory to His name, may the prayer of our father Shenouda be with us. Amen.

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