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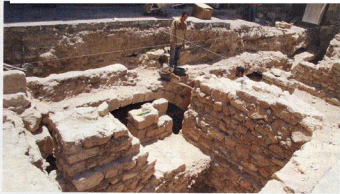
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One Syrian woman who appears to have overcome all earthly trials and tribulations is Mary al-Akhras, better known as Myrna, a Christian mystic who bleeds from stigmata, heals the sick and says God speaks to her in visions, urging spiritual defiance in the face of modern materialism and sensuality. Could Our Lady of Soufianeih convince our team of sceptical hacks to reform their worldly ways? Turn to page 22 to find out.

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DIVINE PRESENCE

been miraculously cured after visiting her.

What sets Myrma apart from the host of believers who claim to have seen or experienced visions from God is the regularity of the experience and the number of witnesses. A swift browse through the internet brings hundreds of pages of information about Myrma: not just histories, but testimonies, photographs and videos. It is hard to judge exactly how many people have witnessed her visions but she claims to have had them as far a field as Belgium, Lebanon and the US. The morning we meet she has just returned from Canada, where she told believers about her experiences. Although known to some around Syria, Myrma's fame in the wider Christian world is exceptional. Even among those who follow believers said to have received signs from God, Myrma is considered something out of the ordinary, a woman who has regularly been touched by the spiritual.

The inner courtyard of the house is hushed like a church. In one corner is a mural of the Virgin Mary and the child Christ. A small framed picture of the same, that used to ooze oil, is now covered in a glass bowl. Candles are lit and flicker away,

although the sun is beating bright outside. In the opposite corner, a man is mopping the floor, occasionally knocking a small dog that scampers about.

We wait for Myrma, unsure whether to expect a sombre priest-like figure, or someone with an overwhelming hands-on, how-are-you-my-son holiness. We get neither. Myrma strides into the room, for all the world like any other attractive forty-something Syrian woman, and offers her hand. She is wearing a white shirt with a black pullover, an elegant watch and surprisingly fashionable slippers.

She says many people are surprised by how ordinary she is. "I won't say I haven't asked myself, Why me? It's the biggest question I ask myself. There are people much better than me, more religious than me." Has she found an answer? She shrugs. "God wanted to choose someone married, and for sure there is a message." She says the word 'God' lightly, as if he is someone we all know, someone we might meet on the street. "Life is beautiful, but because it's beautiful you don't have to live in the mountains. Life with God is very normal." She still leads a normal life: her husband of twenty-four years still works, now in computing, though he is

Leads into Bab Touma teems with all the life of Damascus; crowds of men and women pouring into and out of the old city; taxis and cars and traders and tourists. It is one of the focal points of the city and a place busy with the pursuit of the things of this world.

Yet as so often in Syria, the spiritual and the worldly exist side by side. In a city where Christian icons sit feet away from nightclubs, and people still pour cold water on the bathroom floor to ward the invisible jinn of their presence, the supernatural is never far away. Down a small side street near Bab Touma, past a trio of boys kicking a ball around, lies the house of Our Lady of Soufaniéh, a place where miracles are said to have been occurring, quietly, for the last twenty years.

The story runs that in November of 1982, an eighteen-year old Christian girl was praying by the bedside of her seriously ill sister-in-law. Mary

began shivering and a Muslim friend praying beside her noticed a light radiating from Myrma's hands and what appeared to be oil flowing from her skin. Despite the confusion, Myrma placed her hands on her sister-in-law and the woman was soon cured. A few days later, the same phenomenon occurred.

Since then a whole host of supernatural phenomena have occurred to Myrma: oil has exuded from her hands and face and from a small picture of the Virgin Mary in her house; she has received the stigmata, wounds on her hands, feet, side and forehead said to correspond to the wounds inflicted on Jesus Christ when he was crucified, which spontaneously appear and bleed, and then heal themselves; she says she has received regular visions from the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ; and people claim to have





nearing retirement. She cooks and cleans for her family.

Myrna the scenage girl is now a woman: she has two children, a girl and a boy, who are entering their twenties. She acknowledges it can be a difficult age, when they want their freedom and privacy, especially difficult living in a house whose door is always open for visitors. "Whenever they come, I have to sit with them, sometimes I pray with them." But Myrna says it is a blessing that her children can still be normal, that they accept the situation, although neither are excessively religious. She worries about imposing her views on her children. In that way, she's like any other mother.

Except she isn't. While it is easy to mistake the pictures of Christ and the Virgin Mary in the living room as mementoes of a devout woman, the enormous painting of the Virgin on her veranda and the pure white statue upstairs tell a different story. This is a woman who claims to have heard Jesus Christ speak to her in perfect Arabic.

She says she has never had anyone tell her they do not believe her to her face: "If they don't believe, they don't come here in the first place." And it is hard to remain sceptical because scepticism is misplaced: Myrna believes she has heard Christ speak; many hundreds, maybe thousands, of people around the world believe it too; there is video footage of her bleeding and apparently shimmering oil

in the presence of others. One either believes it or walks away, leaving her to continue believing.

Myrna recognises this: "If someone doesn't believe that I've seen Mary or Jesus, I don't feel offended, because if I was in their situation and someone came and told me that, maybe I wouldn't believe." Does she ever feel unworthy of talking to Christ? She replies immediately: "Everybody is worthy. I am a child of the Church so I deserve it. Every person deserves it."

And there are those who believe she has healed them. In a smart flat in the upmarket Koussour part of Damascus sits Shams Al-Halabi, a 74-year old woman who says she was cured in Myrna's house twenty-four years ago. Al-Halabi had fallen on her shoulder in 1981, causing a fracture and a build up of calcium in her joints. "For a whole year I couldn't use my arm," she recalls, "It was immobile. The only remedy was painkillers and cortisone injections." She says her doctors told her the shoulder could not be healed.

By the end of 1982, Myrna had begun having visions and word had spread that people were being cured at her house. Halabi's daughter told her mother that miracles were occurring in Damascus and she decided to go and see for herself, despite telling her daughter,

"In our time nobody deserves to see the Virgin and therefore she won't appear to anyone."

Halabi went to the house of Myrna: "I asked a young woman sitting next to the miraculous icon of Soufaniyah for a piece of the cotton wool they usually keep under the icon to absorb the holy oil and then give to the believers." The woman, who was 18-year old Myrna, said the icon hadn't produced any oil that day. Halabi insisted and Myrna made the sign of the cross with the cotton wool and offered it to her; she swallowed it, a ritual some Christians use. "During the night, I tasted oil coming up to my mouth and in the morning my shoulder was totally healed."

Halabi says her doctors were astonished when they x-rayed her shoulder and found it was healed. She herself says she was not surprised, believing in the power of the Virgin Mary to heal. "I have always believed in the Virgin," she says, remembering the loss of both a son and a daughter in separate accidents. "She has helped me overcome difficulties." Her arm remains in good health, although Halabi is quick to point out "this is not my arm; it is the Virgin's arm."

The language of the visions

are themselves strange. In the Arabic transcriptions of the words Myrna says Christ and the Virgin Mary said to her, Christ speaks seriously, in classical Arabic, whereas the Virgin Mary sounds more gentle and maternal, using colloquial phrases. In her third vision, Myrna says Mary reached out to her and used the colloquial word "Ma'alesh", meaning, "It's all right," a small humanising touch. The speeches of Christ are strewn with references to the unification of the Christian Churches and even some politics: in her last vision two years ago, which Myrna says Christ told her would be the last, she says he warned the East about being seduced by "materialism, sensuality and fame", "Hold on to your Eastern identity," runs the message. "Do not allow your will, your freedom and your faith in this Orient to be taken away from you."

The world is not listening. A few hundred feet from Myrna's door, brightly lit stores sell the latest expensive fashions and intricately designed hijabs. Within minutes, the air of calm and quiet that pervades the house of Our Lady of Soufaniyah is forgotten.

Reporting by Yazan Neme



Spiritual messages to the weary world

"The Church that Jesus adopted is One Church, because Jesus is One. The Church is the kingdom of Heaven on earth. He who has divided it has sinned. And he who has rejoiced from its division has also sinned. ... You, yourselves, will teach the generations the Word of unity, love and faith."

Vision of the Virgin Mary, March 1983

"Do not fear, My daughter, if I tell you that you are seeing Me for the last time until the feast (of Easter) is unified. Therefore, tell My children: Do they want or not to see and remember the wounds of My Son in you?"

Vision of the Virgin Mary, November 1990

"Difficult days are coming. Turmoil within the Church. He, who does not enjoy true peace, will be in danger due to division. Do not

surrender to failure, do not worry about the judgment of others on you, do not defend yourselves and seek only what I have prepared for you."

Vision of Jesus Christ, November 2001

"This is my last commandment to you: Each one of you, return back home, however, hold the East in your hearts. From here a light emerged anew. You are its radiance in a world seduced by materialism, sensuality and fame, so much as to have almost lost its values. As for you, hold on to your Eastern identity. Do not allow your will, your freedom and your faith in this Orient to be taken away from you."

Final vision of Jesus Christ, April 2004