

Fr. Matthew the Poor (Matta El-Meskeen) **A Witness to the Life of Prayer**

As we continue to reflect on monasticism, it is fitting to remember Fr Matthew the Poor (Matta El-Meskeen), one of the most influential Coptic ascetics and theologians of the twentieth century. Through his life, discipleship, and writings, Fr. Matthew inspired generations of Christians to pursue a deeper relationship with God. His works, especially his book *Orthodox Prayer Life*, have been translated into numerous languages and continue to nourish believers around the world. Beyond his writings, he served as the spiritual father of 120 monks in the Monastery of St Macarius the Great in Wadi El Natrun, Egypt.

Born Youssef Iskandar in 1919, Fr Matthew studied pharmacy and became a successful businessman, owning multiple pharmacies, villas, and cars. Yet despite his wealth and success, he found that earthly possessions could not satisfy the deeper longing he had in his heart. Seeking something greater, he left everything behind and entered the Monastery of Saint Samuel the Confessor in 1948. What drove him was not a rejection of the world for its own sake, but a desire for a deeper union with God.

This longing for God became the defining characteristic of his life. After being ordained a priest in 1951, Father Matthew spent years living as a hermit in Wadi El Rayan, dedicating himself to prayer, repentance, and contemplation. In 1969, Pope Kyrillos VI called him to help revive the Monastery of Saint Macarius the Great, where he remained until his departure in 2006. Whether living in solitude or guiding a monastic community, Father Matta remained focused on one thing and that is knowing Christ more deeply and planting the seed of Christ's love in others.

There are many lessons we can learn from Father Matthew's life, but perhaps the most important is that holiness flows from a genuine relationship with Christ. Pope Shenouda III, Father Bishoy Kamel, and countless others sought his spiritual counsel because they recognized the depth of his communion with God. His influence did not come from titles, education, or accomplishments, but from the life of Christ that shone through him.

The fruits of this relationship can be seen not only in the lives he touched but also in the vast body of spiritual writings he left behind. Father Matthew authored approximately 180 books and booklets that continue to guide believers toward a deeper life of prayer, repentance, and communion with God. His impact on modern Coptic thought was so profound that His Grace Anba Mikhail wrote:

“But for the truth and history, I say that the hegumen, Father Matta El-Meskeen, was an enlightened scholar, a point of separation and the beginning of a new phase in writing. This phase was bound to the era of his monasticism and extended far beyond it. He struggled greatly and wrestled as a knight, quickly pursuing his proclaimed goal while being carried in the eternal arms, leaving behind his message, one for which he expended

all his efforts, and placing it in the hands of Christ the Savior, who judges the living and the dead and searches the depths of every person.”

What made Father Matthew’s writings so powerful was that they were not merely academic reflections. They were born from a life of prayer and personal experience with God. Throughout his works, he continually emphasized that our knowledge of God is inseparable from our growth in holiness. He writes:

“...vision of God is always based on man’s inward potentials. Such potentials qualify man for the unveiling of God in proportion to man’s holiness: ‘The holiness without which no one will see the Lord’ (Heb 12:14). So long as man is not perfect in holiness, he shall never see God as he is. He who is not perfect in his chastity, love, and humility will remain unable to see God in his perfect simplicity. He will see God sometimes cruel, at other times merciful. He will sometimes confide in God’s extreme love, but at other times remain in fear of his justice. He will sometimes realize the depth of God’s wisdom and his transcendent care for his creation, but at other times he will suspect God’s care or condemn it. Man will thus remain, in his relationship with God, unable to form a perfect vision of him as he is. This will go on until he reaches the holiness that qualifies him for perfect vision.”

This passage captures the heart of Father Matthew’s spirituality. For him, the Christian life was not simply about learning truths about God, but about becoming transformed by Him. The more a person grows in humility, purity, love, and holiness, the more clearly he or she comes to know God. Father Matthew’s own life stands as a testimony to this reality.

May we all continue to deepen our relationship with Christ, pursue holiness, and allow God’s grace to transform us into His likeness.

Source

- [Autobiography of Father Matthew the Poor – Introduction, Treasures of the Coptic Orthodox Church in English](#)
- [Father Matta al-Miskīn, Wagdy Samir](#)
- [Matta El Meskeen, Citydesert](#)
- Orthodox Prayer Life, Fr Matthew the Poor