

Tamav (Mother) Irene: A Contemporary Model of Obedience



Tamav Irene, born Fawzia in the town of Gerga, Upper Egypt, was truly set apart by God, just as the Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah, “...before you were born, I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5). From the moment of her birth, her life was marked by a divine calling. As her mother labored in birth pains, the Virgin Mary appeared and said, “She is not yours, she is ours; but take good care of her and raise her up properly.”

Fawzia grew up in a home filled with prayer and religious pictures; she had Jesus’ and St. Mary’s picture in her room. She reminisces, “My mother taught me how to pray and prostrate (metanoia)... I learned to pray with a contrite heart and pour my soul in prostrations, which molded me deep inside.” Even as a child, she would sneak into her mother’s room to watch her pray the midnight prayers with tears running down

her cheeks.

Her desire for the monastic life started early. “I longed very much to join an orthodox convent, but I knew none so I asked the Catholic nuns of my school if I could join them on condition that I take communion and make my confessions in my orthodox church, but they refused”. Later, when the martyr Abu Seifein¹ (St. Philopater Mercurius) appeared to her in a vision and said, “Why are you crying? What belongs to you in all this house except those two pictures! Go to my convent,” she understood it as a clear call. In a third vision, he said again: “I want you in my convent in Cairo... My God will arrange for it.”

She entered the convent of St. Philopater on April 16, 1953. Her early days were marked by extreme hardship; she had no food, water, or even a candle in her dark cell. And yet, she later said, “To say the truth, I was very happy.” But spiritual warfare came quickly. One night, the devil appeared to her, tall, with horns and blood-red eyes, saying, “So, you have come, and moreover, you have a cell!! I will not leave you; I have all the time!” She cried out, “O power of God, save me! O power of God, protect me!” Tamav Kyria, the mother superior at the time, offered her simple, yet powerful advice: “The devil is like straw, just make the sign of the cross and he will vanish.”

¹ Arabic for “the holder of two swords” (أبو سيفين), a title associated with Philopater Mercurius, who is traditionally depicted carrying two swords, one of which was bestowed upon him by Archangel Michael.

When she later began seeing snakes and scorpions during her prayers, her confessor, Fr. Makar El-Makary, told her boldly: “Touch them with your head!” And she obeyed. She later recalled, “My forehead truly touched their bodies [the bodies of the snakes & scorpions], and when I prostrated myself carrying a cross in my hand, they disappeared because prayer is a powerful weapon which scares the devil, and it is with patience and perseverance that we defeat him.”

At one point, she was tempted to return home, thinking: “I came here [the convent] to pray, not only to work (serve)... I will go back home and live there as a nun.” But again, the martyr Abu Seifein appeared and said, “What will you do at home after your parents depart this world? A nun who leaves her convent is like a fish taken out of water.” He added, “Recite the Psalms at all times, and if any verse from scripture consoles you, learn it by heart.” From that day forward, she carried her Agpeya (book of hours) with her everywhere.

Evidently, whether she was following the wisdom of Tamav Kyria, the instruction of Fr. Makar, or the encouragement of St. Philopater himself, obedience was central for Tamav Irene. Living the “angelic” life meant obeying in simplicity. For Tamav Irene, obedience was “the gem of monastic life”. She believed that “God listens to those who obey”, and recalls, “when I obeyed, I had a clear conscience, and my heart was filled with peace.”

Tamav Irene is a model of obedience for us and a contemporary saint who reminds us of our fathers and mothers of the desert, who lived with Christ through their unceasing love for scripture and prayer. She served as the abbess of her convent for 44 years until her heavenly departure on October 31st, 2006. To this day, many continue to witness miracles through her intercessions.

May God instill in us her spirit of obedience and prayer, and may she intercede on our behalf before the throne of God.

Source

- Bible, ESV
- Tamav Irene Home. <http://www.tamavirenehome.com/>