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## A place of pilgrimage

The church of Virgin Mary in Zeitoun, a focus of interest since the reported apparition of the Virgin Mary on the dome in late 1960s, has recently undergone restoration. **Rehab Saad** visited the church and learned its history

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The Church of Virgin Mary in Zeitoun was built in 1924 and consecrated by Athanasious, bishop of Beni Suef, in 1925. It does not, consequently, fall into the category of buildings more than 100 years old and protected by law. Owing, however, to its fine architecture and its being the site of an acclaimed miracle, it has become a popular attraction for pilgrims.



**The church of Zeitoun after restoration by the Italian team under the supervision of Father Maximus Al-Anthony**

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People from all walks of life visit the church day and night, the church fathers say, so restoration was considered appropriate and, indeed, necessary. A great deal of time and effort has gone into its restoration, which has been going on since January 2000.

This is the church where, on 2 April 1968, just after sunset, the faithful claimed to have seen the strongest of many apparitions of Holy Virgin to appear on the dome of the church. The incident resulted in such widespread press coverage that Pope Shenouda III asked a Coptic businessman to

sponsor a massive project to restore and renovate the church, to which he generously agreed. The LE750,000 project included a complete face-lift, restoration of the icons and stencil decorations, the renovation of the wooden doors and the iron bars on the windows and the installation of new electrical and ventilation systems.

The fathers called on the experience and expertise of Father Maximus Al-Anthony, himself a restorer and member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). He saw to it that restoration of the interior of the church was carried out by the team of six Italian experts who had restored Queen Nefertari's tomb in the Valley of the Queens. They had also restored the 13th-century wall paintings in the ancient church of St Anthony in the Monastery bearing his name near the Red Sea coast.

Father Maximus acquired his diploma in icon conservation from the Viniir Institute of Conservation in Moscow, and subsequently continued his studies of Christian art at the Faculty of Art at Leiden University. "The church of the Virgin Mary in Zeitoun is one of the most beautiful, both as regards its elegant Italian-style architecture and its (neo-Coptic) paintings. For that reason it deserved the best treatment possible," he says. As project supervisor, Father Maximus ensured that the best materials and state-of-the-art techniques were used. "We restored the five domes of the church and the wall paintings. We removed the old oil paint from the doors and repainted them, and the arches and columns were redone in imitation marble. We gave the church a coat of paint from the outside. Only the best quality paint, wood, marble and iron were used, and we installed an automatic electric network."

A resident of Tumanbay Street in Zeitoun described his recollection of the miracle in 1968. "There used to be a big garage for public buses opposite the church, and on 2 April, an hour and a half after sunset, the mechanics and drivers of the garage were alarmed by a disturbance in the street. They ran outside and looked in the direction of the raised faces of the people. A young woman dressed in white had appeared on the church dome. They saw her moving on it and thought that she was about to throw herself off. 'Be careful, take care, you may fall! Wait!' they cried, before they realised that the dome was curved and that no human being could walk on it. Then some of the people watching cried out, 'The Virgin Mary, the Virgin Mary!' The traffic in Tumanbay Street stopped and the crowd grew bigger and bigger. The whole street was closed and public buses were not allowed to pass through. People would come to Zeitoun and spend the night in the garage opposite the church."

Father Maximus said the apparitions were seen by millions, and all gave the same description. "When the late President Gamal Abdel Nasser saw that people were sleeping in the garage awaiting the apparition night after night, he decided to give the church the land of the garage and turn it into a cathedral," he said. He added that 1968 apparition was not unique. It had happened before.

The church was built by a man called Tawfik Bek Khalil, the son of Khalil Ibrahim Pasha, who was born in Assiut where he became a prosperous lawyer. Having made his fortune, he decided to go to Cairo's *Ezbet El-Zeitoun* (now the Zeitoun district), and there he purchased land and built many villas. When he died, his son Tawfik built a mausoleum for his father which would also serve as a family church. According to popular legend, the Virgin Mary appeared to Tawfik and asked him to build a church in her name on that particular spot.

A renowned Italian architect residing in Cairo, Domenico Limongelli, was commissioned to build the church. Among famous buildings of his design in the capital were the villa of Sinot Hanna in Giza (now the French Embassy residence), the twin Naguib Ghali buildings in Giza, the Sobhani villa (later replaced by Cairo Sheraton) and the Sacred Heart Church on Abdel-Khaleq Sarwat Street. Limongelli built in an elegant Italian style.

"This church is different from other Coptic churches in that it does not have many icons," Father Maximus said. "It is instead characterised by the use of four different decorative stencil paintings which cover all the walls. There are paintings of the four evangelists, St Mark, St Paul, St Matthew and St John on the pendentives of the dome of the church, and four of martyrs and saints on the walls. The painter did not identify them because he knew neither Arabic nor Coptic," Father Maximus went on, "but it seems that one is St Mark, a second St George, the third the archangel Raphael and the fourth an unidentifiable saint."

In 1971, after the "miracle of Zeitoun." the Egyptian artist Yacoub Fanous painted some additional icons on the walls of the church. He adorned the apse with a painting of Jesus Christ Pantocrator and, on the dome that was hitherto adorned with stars on a blue background, he painted the Virgin Mary with outspread arms. "I believe these additions were done in conformity with the style of the church," Father Maximus said.

Seventy-five years have passed since its construction. "You won't believe the number of candles that have been lit by people asking for blessing from the Holy Virgin. The walls were completely blackened. Restoration has now

been going on for a whole year, and we have already installed a new marble dome over the candles to help dispel the smoke."

The restored church is a landmark in Zeitoun. "Its importance is manifold," Father Maximus says. "It is a beautiful example of Italian-inspired architecture; it is characterised by distinctive interior decoration; but most of all it is a church of great religious significance."

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