

Virgin Mary sighting a glimpse of hope for Egypt Christians

By Mona Salem (AFP) – December 24 2009

CAIRO — Every night in the run-up to Christmas thousands of Egypt's Coptic Christians have been gathering in a Cairo suburb eager for a glimpse of a vision that has given hope to their marginalised community.

It is three hours past midnight in Al-Warrak, a poor working class neighbourhood of the Egyptian capital, and a 10,000-strong crowd is silently staring at the sky.

Then the appearance of a mysterious light over the church tower jolts the gathering into a frenzy of cries and ululations. It is the apparition of the Virgin Mary, they say.

Thousands have been coming nightly since the first sighting of the Virgin Mary on December 10, in the hope of being blessed by her light.

The prospect of benediction is a much needed morale boost for the Christian minority which complains of systematic discrimination and marginalisation in the Muslim majority Arab country.

Tea vendors and sweet sellers snake through the crowd where thousands of families have gathered with young children and babies.

"The first person to spot the sighting of the Virgin Mary was a Muslim neighbour. He took a video and pictures and distributed them to everyone," said Father Fishay, a priest at the Warrak church, describing how he first heard of the apparition.

Hassan, the Muslim neighbour, was sitting at his local coffee shop when at around 8:30 pm, he saw a strong light coming from the church.

Others on the street began to notice the light and saw a bird circling above the church. At around 2 am, a vision of the Virgin Mary in her white and blue robes appeared, Fishay said.

But Muslim residents of the area insist it is a hoax, with someone creating the image with laser beams.

News of the apparition quickly spread in the area, prompting hundreds to rush out of their homes armed with mobile phones to capture the momentous event.

"It's her, with her blue and white clothes, there is no doubt about it. It cannot be an illusion," said an excited Rami, 36, in response to sceptics.

"The church closes its doors in the evening, we were not there when the image appeared the first time, so we decided to come back the second night and we saw the bird circling the church then the light," Fishay said in his measured manner.

Kawkab Munir Shehata, 39, is convinced. The mother of two says the Virgin Mary even performed surgery on her, giving her back the sight she had lost in her left eye.

"It was about 3:40 am when she started performing the surgery on my left eye. I felt immense pain which lasted about quarter of an hour. Then I was ecstatic to find out that I could see clearly," said Kawkab.

"You see, my left eye is even better than my right one now," she said.

Nabil, 32, his wife Mariam, 28, and their three children came from Shubra al-Kheima, some 20 kilometres (12 miles) away on the other side of town, to receive the Virgin's blessings.

"Her appearance means she approves of us and if she blesses us, we will stay till morning," Mariam said.

Her husband said the sighting proves that Christianity is still alive. He is angry over the recent publication of an article in a periodical of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning, questioning the foundations of Christianity.

"The apparition of the Virgin Mary means that Christianity is real and the Bible is real," he said.

Raafat, 38, goes to Warrak every night but has to leave early to make it to his pre-dawn job. His wife Mariam however stays up with their four

children.

"Schools are closed due to swine flu, there's no reason not to stay up late and wait for the Virgin Mary," she said.

Egypt's Christians make up around 10 percent of the 80 million population but complain they are kept out of jobs in the army, judiciary and universities.

The apparition of the Virgin provides comfort for many of the Coptic faithful as they prepare to celebrate Christmas on January 7 in accordance with the ancient Julian calendar used by many Eastern Churches.

"It is not possible to know the reason for the Virgin's appearance, but it could be to push people towards faith, and help put an end to their problems," Fishay said.

"Maybe her appearance is to bring people closer together, maybe it will bring about the end of the state of tension between Muslims and Christians and an end to extremism," he said.

"Maybe it'll bring back forgiveness like there once used to be in Egypt."

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