The open road to baptism.

How I was shown & entered into the Coptic Orthodox Church.

I live in Sarasota Florida. Two years ago I was working in a restaurant there. I was, at the time, reading, and searching thru spiritual readings. I was blessed to be working with a man named Mina. He told me that he was from Egypt. I had never met anyone named Mina before, or from Egypt for that matter. Our conversation was turned to Church’s and America one evening. I told him how disillusioned I was with Church’s here in America. Many people go for one hour each week and feel better. They feel that they are living a better life and feel good about themselves. I did not see any struggle, any daily practice, any work in accepting Christ. I did not think of these people as bad, or judge them, for in a way they were just like me, searching for meaning in this life, yearning not to be alone, even as we are surrounded by people, and families. They found their “meaning”, thru something greater than themselves. God Bless them. I was told by a close friend that the ancient form of Christianity came from a tradition that is still around. It is one where the actual Liturgy is as a “practice of the work of the people”. I should study it if I had an interest in where Christ’s teaching came from.

Mina told me that there was a Coptic Church in Sarasota. He told me that the services tended to be somewhat longer than most church’s, and more often. A few weeks later Mina left the job. He went to work in a place less stressful. I thought good for him. I had no contact with him for about four months. I one day found on the internet the Church that he spoke to me about, St Simons in Sarasota. I not only found the Church, but a huge amount of information on the Coptic Church. It was said that the Coptic Church has not changed since the beginning, and this beginning goes back to the Apostles. I found out later, that this is called The One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church of God. Was this a Church that was not another social institution? Could there be a Church that truly is the spiritual body of Christ, one where the never ending mutual love of God and man is declared and practiced? I did not feel worthy to go there, but I was going. I made a phone call in April of 2009. No answer, a fax machine, then, another call the next night, again a fax machine answered. I thought maybe the third time would be the “charm”. I called the next night. It was a Friday evening early, and thanks God the phone was answered. A man named Matthew answered the phone. He gave me directions to the church and told me a little about the service. He said turn on Sawyer Road, go to a four way stop sign. Then look left, you know, towards the East. There is a road there called Meadow Creek Circle. There is no sign for this road on the west, just the East side of the road. The first Meadow Creek Circle has a dead end sign there. You do not need to turn there. The next turn on the East says Meadow Creek Circle, but there is no dead end sign. Two roads with the same name, that do not connect, one says dead end, and the other you can see the Church at the end of the street. Knowing my memory, I wrote it down. Each time that I drive or speak about the location, I cannot help but remember Psalm 23, Meadow Creek, how fitting, Thanks God. I found out what time the service started. Raising of Incense at 8:15 in the morning. I had no clue what that was. He told me that sometimes there could be a lot of Incense. He asked if that would bother me, some people it does he said. I told him that I did not think so. I did not know, as I was never around much Incense. He told me how long the service would be. He said that bothers some people, but it is really worth it. I thought to myself that Christ spent hours on the Cross, I could at least spend a couple in His Church to see what was there. Sounded like a fair exchange to me. At that time, I really did not know what an exchange that would be. How really unfair I can be.

Okey, I was now set. I made the decision, have the directions, the time, and one more thing. Matthew, when I get there, how will I know who you are? I do want to talk to you, and have your help, as this will be all new to me. He said that will be easy. “I am the only one with red hair and I am about a foot taller than most of the people there.” He said that he will be up in the front, so I should sit in the third row, if I did not mind, so that he can help me. He said that there is a screen up front that shows the service, and also a book. He would get me one to follow, as there are different books there. He said that most of the people in the Church are Egyptian, or Copts, and the Service is in three languages. He speaks English, (as I knew because we were having a conversation), and was from the USA, I was looking forward to his help. He told me that the books and the Audio Visual screen were in all three languages all at once, so that I could follow in English if I did not know the language spoken. I was ready, a little excited and a little anxiously anticipating. The following Saturday evening, I set my alarm to go to Church. I was, I thought, prepared. I followed his directions, and arrived early. I was not prepared to enter into His presence, with the presence of all the Saints that were there. I felt the Spirit within those walls. It was so strong that I had to bow before I entered into the sanctuary of the church. I felt as if I stepped in naked of my worldly cares, desires and constant buzzing of thoughts, into the bosom of the Church. There was a lightening of a load for me at that time. I saw Matthew, as he was the only one there. I was met with a greeting that I would not get anywhere else. We were friends immediately in that strong caring greeting. He told me that he had work to do preparing the Sanctuary for the service, and if I did not mind, could I sit and wait for the service to begin.

I sat in the second row, already forgetting my instructions. I was lovingly told that the first and second row was reserved for the deacons, and why. I was also asked to remove my shoes. This made sense to me, as I did feel and had a sense of knowing as if I was on Holy ground, and almost did not belong there. I sat in the fourth row, and watched. It wasn’t long before Matthew said that he had to start. He stood in the front row with a book and began to sing and chant in a language I did not know. Well here I am, on Holy Ground, no shoes on, hearing a language that I did not understand. I saw how my thoughts kept telling me you don’t understand, you don’t need to be here, this isn’t for you, this is strange, you’re tired, go rest. The one way to shut these devils up was to pray, keep the mind busy, “Lord Have Mercy”. I decided that if I did not understand, I would pray, so that there was not any waste of time here in the Church. I did not want to sit, or stand and listen to that constant buzzing of thoughts in my head. This came in very handy, and allowed me to pay attention to the surroundings of the Church, and not my useless thoughts. It came in handy, very handy as I would find out later.

As Matthew kept the Morning Psalmody going, the priest entered in. I did not say came in, because he did not. He followed a precise path and ritual as he entered. I watched in awe and respect for Him and what was happening. Truly, to use an American expression, “there is much more here than meets the eye”. I kept hearing Matthew reciting. I kept reciting, as I thought to myself, at that time, and watching.

Matthew greeted the Priest, and I followed in the same manner hesitantly. I knew that there were things that I was supposed to do, that I was not aware of, things that I would do that I was not supposed to and also things that I did that I did not know the meaning of. I would however attempt to keep going. I found much mystery in this Church and also in all done within these walls. How much I now know, I will never know, that is why they are called mysteries and miracles. I found out that the priests name is Abouna Ashiya. Two names again that I never heard before. In many ways this was a new world for me.

The service started, more people arrived and more and more that I did not understand. I look back now and think how arrogant I was to think that I could come in and understand or know what was happening. Of course I was not going to understand. But as some understanding came in small stages through the coming weeks, months, and now year, it has more meaning and value to me. Many people there were very helpful in this. I also received a book, called The Creed, By His Holiness Pope Shenouda the Third. It the book was a hand written quote from James 4:8. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. I had a lot to learn, and much to be Thankful for.

I spoke with Matthew about the Agpya, how this little book was used. I knew that I had to use it. I was out of work at the time, and full of worry and concern of many material concerns as one is when one is not working. I decided to ask for one. This I found to be a treasure that is immeasurable. That day, I read the introduction, and learned what it was about. It did not take long for me to put this to use. Life changed drastically in using the Agpya. I shared this, and was told that I needed also to read the Bible each day. I did not argue. I knew that I should. I was asked what Bible I had, I was then told, I will get you an Orthodox Bible. The next week there was someone waiting for me outside Church. She gave me The Orthodox Study Bible, and said that Matthew had two and only needed one so here take this. I did with tears in my eyes. I did not know if they were seen, but they were there. What a Blessing. Thanks to God. How indebted I was to Him. When I started reading when I got home, I kept on reading almost the whole day. So much to ingest, even before the Bible, and notes to help in understanding when meaning was lacking for me. It showed me how little I knew, and how much there was for me. I asked, knowing that I owed a debt, what I could do to help in the Church. I was told that I could help and do any work that needs to be done, except on the Alter, this would assist the Deacons who set up the Alter, as there are times when they do not have a lot of time, and I could be of a help. This is a rich experience, and helps to learn the order of the service, and of the Lirurgy, along with the relationship to it. I met other Priests, to whom I owe much also, Abouna Theopolis for one, who helped me on the path towards a Deacon. St Simons does not have a full time priest yet. We are on a rotating schedule.

At this point, I did not take part in the Eucharist, as I was not Orthodox at that time. I felt left out and somewhat of a spectator, and not a participant in that most important part of the Liturgy. He showed me that He was living, but not in me. It wasn’t long before I was asked why I did not take part in the Sacrament. Obviously, I wasn’t Orthodox. Plain and simple, why not, I had not been Baptized in the Faith. This could be done! I was speaking after the service, with a man named Moses, (a name that I heard of before), Fikary and Victor Beshir. Some of the things that were said went right to my heart. This was in July of the same year. By not taking the Body and Blood of Christ, I was rejecting Him each Sunday. This was bad for me and good for that devil. I knew that Baptism was a full immersion, from reading on the Coptic Church, and I never saw a place at St. Simons that that could be done. As I received the Blessing after each service, I was very thankful, and wanted to be part of more. I needed to have Him live in me also. I decided at that time to get baptized. I did not know how, but those questions were quickly answered. Abouna Ashya came over, and after a short talk he said, “ We will go to Tampa, and I will see that this gets done.” He gave me a book to study on Baptism, and I was on the way. I expressed my concern on how I was going to get to Tampa, and when and was told not to worry about the details. It will all be arranged, he would arrange it all. He just asked me to choose a date. I choose late August, knowing that the date of my physical birth was then. I asked Moses what will happen two weeks after that, as I did not know how I was going to get there, what time, what to wear, and other concerns. The answer was, what did Abouna say? Yes, true, “He will take care of it”. A few weeks later, all was planned. I would go to St. George’s in Tampa, and Abouna Ashaya would preside over the Baptism.

This was great news, but I did not know how I was going to get there. My car could not go that far. Moses said that he would take me. Again, this was another Blessing. This was becoming very rich on many levels. I was going to be Baptized, and Moses was going to take me there. How fitting this was. How indebted I am to all in the Church for this. I always received the same answer, from everyone, no don’t thank me, Thanks God. I had questions that I could not find the answer to. I asked a few people in the Church, and I was told to email the His Grace, The Bishop’s Office. In two days I received an email, with just the answer that I needed, even without His knowing me, the answer spoke directly to a deep place in me. It was on Psalm 50. I had been reading it over and over and still did not know the meaning.

I, with much help, decided to cleave to Christ, to entreat to His goodness. This is a constant struggle, but the only good war it is. Not the end, but a new beginning. There was a place for me in The Coptic Orthodox Church. I prayed, read, studied on the Holy Sacrament of the first step, and on the date of my physical birth. I was taken to Tampa to be baptized in the Spirit thru the waters of Baptism, and confirmed with the Holy Oil to be sealed with the Holy Spirit.

During this time, I prayed “Lord Have Mercy”, so as not to allow myself to be taken away from this Sacred sacrament. I had an experience that I could not now forget. It shook the walls of my aloneness, my being, and tied me to something greater. There was a small chapel to the side of the Church where the service after Baptism was. I was there before, over twenty-five years ago. It was the same chapel, the same Icons, the same people. I knew the Icons, the Symbols, the rugs, the wood, the pews. All was with me once before. I even knew the meanings of them. The rug on the floor, Simon on the Lectern, it was all explained to me once before. This was not a dream, not an intellectual journey, but a true fact that this was experienced before. My first Communion and I had been there before. This was an impression that took full hold of my mind, my body and my heart, my true emotions. It is rare that I speak about this, since it is hard to put into words. When asked the only thing that I spoke is that I was there before, over twenty-five years ago. Even the same people from the Church were there before. I had not known them previously.

To put this all in perspective, I spoke to Abouna and Victor after the service, and found out that that chapel was not built until about five years ago. How could I have been there over twenty five years ago?

This was a vision that I was blessed to have. He prepared this place for me, and was waiting twenty-five years for me to come. How patient He is, and how caught up in my own self I am. He knew that I was coming, I did not, He waited for me as I turned away from Him. I was blessed to have an experience of time, not as I see it, but as He sees it. His hands were outstretched waiting for me to come back to His bosom. Such a Love he has for me I have a difficult time to repay. The path of repayment is clear, and difficult. I need to give to him what was sealed on that day. He yearns for me. He has already taken my sins away. I need to long constantly for Him and have patience as he did with me for 25 years. How can I repay this Love?

 I was shown this vision, not that the vision was important. What is important is that this experience showed me how much he loves me, this is what I need to constantly remember. The importance is not the vision, but what is behind the vision, His love for me. The same as His love for us all, as He said, for God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son. It is right that this was shown to me at Baptism. It is a struggle to remember Him always. I pray that He will know me in the end, and not send me away then.

Thanks God for His Church. We would not be here without her. Thanks God for all of you, and all the help that I received. I pray to keep this help always in motion, and always working.

