

The Urban Rural Mission - Annual Spiritual Retreat

“The Urban-Rural Mission, to me, corresponds to such an essential priority – in the Gospel, in our Christian life – that I consider it one of the most important aspects of Christian mission altogether.”

– Father Paulo Dall’oglio, Mar Musa monastery.

Social workers, clergymen, journalists and activists from different organizations and churches came together in February to reflect on the things that bound them together: their shared commitment to the poor and the marginalized, and their common Christian faith.

The organizations in attendance at the Urban-Rural Mission’s annual spiritual retreat included large professional relief programs with budgets in the millions of dollars, and outreaches of local churches with budgets in the thousands. There were wide-ranging programs reaching out to whole societies, and narrowly-focused groups helping the poorest of the poor, such as the street children of Beirut or the *zabalin* – the so-called “garbage people” – of Cairo. The 31 members attended from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, and came from all the different indigenous branches of Christianity.



The place they gathered was the retreat center of Anafora, a place created, in the words of its founder, Bishop Thomas of the Coptic Orthodox Church, “to take the spirit of the monastic life to people in a modern world... we here are serving the marginalized – women, children, the spiritually demolished ... there are many people who are spiritually demolished, who no longer see themselves as having value. We help them to see that God values them.”

Much of the time the group spent together was devoted to sharing their experiences in helping the poor and marginalized. Members hearing these reports were engaged, discussing examples, seeking clarification, and offering comment, advice, and occasionally criticism.

Bishop Mousa, the Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Youth, shared his church’s work with the marginalized. He traced the modern history of Coptic Orthodox work among the poor to the example of St.



Bishop Thomas shows his visitors around Anafora



Two Coptic Bishops: Moussa (left) and Thomas

Abraham of Hayoum in the 19th and early 20th centuries. “St. Abraham loved the poor, and he highlighted all over the church that caring for the poor is like caring for the Lord Himself. He said, ‘these are my masters, because they are the brothers of Jesus Christ, my master.’”

Moussa was encouraged to be able to report a trend within the Church of people from rich areas going to work in service to the poor. He highlighted the work of a group of young people who spend four days a month away from their homes in the rich parts of Cairo working with the poorest of the poor in Upper Egypt. “They visit the people and enter their homes, if there is no roof, they start to make a roof - if there is no WC they start to dig one.”

And this was only one example of work being done throughout the country: in the slums of Cairo, in Minya, among university students looking out for their poorer colleagues, and in many other places. And the service has helped also to strengthen the faith among the richer community as well - “when people come to do this work, their friends also come, and many people come back into the church by this door.”

The group also engaged their mutual issues at a more theoretical level. Dr.

Nabil Marcos discussed the definition of poverty. According to him, “the conventional understanding of poverty as a lack of resources requiring philanthropic intervention to mitigate its symptoms, from the privileged to the underprivileged, is not valid any more. Poverty reflects a relation of hegemony by the dominant entities over the underprivileged entities. If the power dynamics do not change, poverty will reproduce itself, at the local, national and international levels. Unless we work for



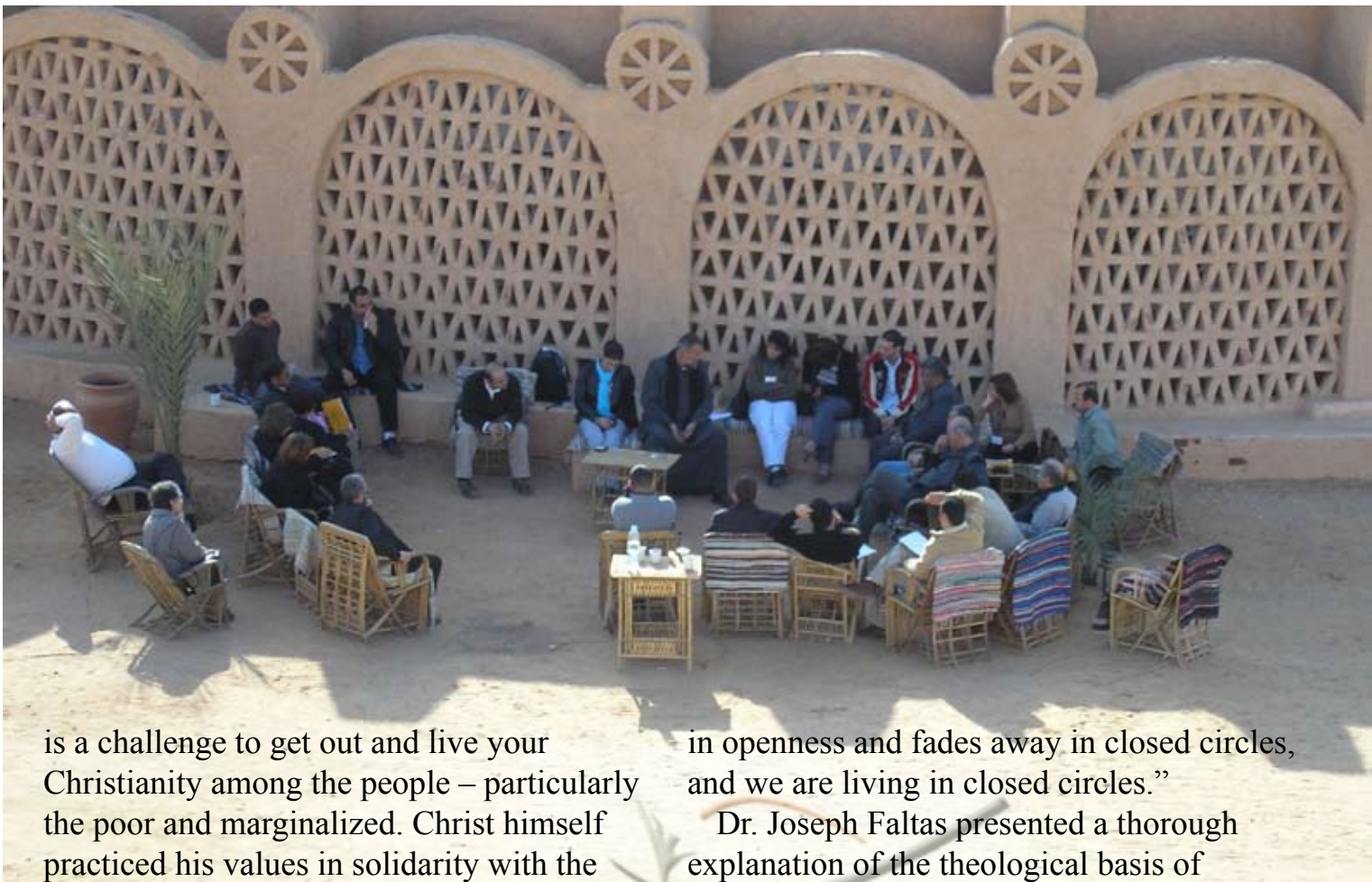
Mr. Nabil Marcos

change, we are just beautifying the status quo in our work.”

He also challenged the Christian organizations there to reach out beyond sectarian boundaries. “In many places in the Arab world, Christians find it easy to practice Christianity within the borders and walls of the church organizations. But Christianity



Reports and discussions continued late into the night.



is a challenge to get out and live your Christianity among the people – particularly the poor and marginalized. Christ himself practiced his values in solidarity with the poor and marginalized outside any fences or borders... Bringing down the walls between the “righteous” and the “ordinary people”, particularly the poor and marginalized, is part of being a Christian.”

He felt both that Christians need to be involved in secular organizations, and that organizations need to “build alliances and coalitions, branching out, even opening their premises. A meeting like this, why not invite Muslims or seculars? Christianity flourishes

in openness and fades away in closed circles, and we are living in closed circles.”

Dr. Joseph Faltas presented a thorough explanation of the theological basis of

service to the marginalized. His presentation outlined 3 elements on which respect for the marginalized is based. The anthropological perspective involves seeing



Dr. Joseph Faltas

other people as all children of God, helping all equally because God loved all people. The Christological aspect holds up the trinity as a model for relationships between people – we can deal with other people as individual persons, respecting their uniqueness but also their connection to others, just as Christians believe that the persons of the Trinity are distinct but also one. Furthermore, Christ’s assumption of a human nature implies that all humans share in a divine nature. Finally, there is the soteriological aspect. Humans were created by God for a special goal: to glorify God and take part in his kingdom. We need to help people not just financially





Fr. Paulo Dall'oglio

or socially, but to achieve this goal.”

Asked how he thought this theological discussion could be of help to people

working on a very practical level with the poor and marginalized, Faltas said, “we cannot separate theology from action. If we want to speak about God, we must speak about man, and if we want to speak about man, we must speak about God... we cannot draw a line between creed and action in our daily lives.”

The final major presentation, by Father Paulo Dall'oglio, melded a practical and theological perspective. “I do think that charity is not enough – that Christ's love can be better structured than just a pious charity. This is a consequence of using vision and intelligence together with love.”

He concentrated on the transition facing the Middle East, and especially its Christians: “We have a background in this

Middle East because there were attempts at socialism, and in fact this has done a lot for the promotion of many people in these Countries. When socialism was based on a kind of lay nationalism in which Christians could find somehow their place. Now we are going into a more Islamic society with less socialism and this will not be very easy for Christians.

“This means we need to look forward and to be able to conceive a Christian-Islamic cooperation in terms of something like theology of liberation; theology of social justice; theology of solidarity... it is very important to rebuild a social sense – otherwise charity is just one more activity within a liberal capitalistic society – one more means of self promotion, one more way to turn a profit.”

Report by Tom Scudder, FDCCD

The URM Annual Spiritual Retreat was coordinated by the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue. Contact them at samrizk@cyberia.net.lb, or see their webpage at <http://www.fdc.org/>

