

The Roman Catholic/Orthodox Christian Book Club

An opportunity for ecumenical encounter

By Father Kyrillos Ibrahim
St. Paul's American Coptic Orthodox Church

On Tuesday, December 10, 2019, members from three different apostolic churches gathered together to pray with one another and discuss *So Great a Salvation* by the blessed martyr Bishop Epiphanius, the late bishop and abbot of the great monastery of St. Macarius the Great in Wadi El-Natrun.

The three churches: St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church, St. John Neumann Roman Catholic Church, and St. Paul's Coptic Orthodox Church, are neighbors in South Orange County, California, and have been meeting together monthly for many years in fellowship and edifying discussions on books representing all three traditions. Originally, the Orthodox-Catholic Book Club included only Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic members. However, through contact and a growing friendship between Fr. Steven Tsihchlis (Greek Orthodox), the original founder of the Book Club, and Fr. Kyrillos Ibrahim (Coptic Orthodox), it was decided that the Coptic Orthodox presence was extremely valuable to the aim and goals of this important ecumenical work.



The Book Club is open to all members of the three communities and includes congregants of all ages and educational backgrounds. They meet monthly rotating between the three parishes and every year the selection of books represents the great spiritual traditions of all three churches. In the past several years, a special place in the hearts of those who attend is held for the great spiritual legacy of Fr. Matthew the Poor, a contemporary representative of the rich monastic heritage that began in Egypt and spread to the whole world. In the past few years, the Book Club has read a number of recent publications of Fr. Matthew the Poor in English: *The Communion of Love*, *Orthodox Prayer Life*, *Words for Our Lives* and *If You Love Me: Serving Christ and the Church in Spirit and Truth* by Fr. Matthew the Poor. It is difficult to describe the positive impact of Fr. Matthew the Poor's life and writings on members of the Book Club.

On this evening, members gathered at St. Paul Coptic Orthodox Church at 7pm. We met in the church and prayed the 11th Hour according to the Coptic Rite. After prayers, we proceeded to the fellowship hall where we spent time in a short Agape meal and casual conversation and fellowship. At 7:30pm, Fr. Kyrillos Ibrahim introduced a special guest, Fr. Mark Paul of the St. Paul Abbey. Fr. Mark Paul recently came back from a retreat at



St. Macarius Monastery and has a long history of spiritual affiliation with the monastery, including a personal relationship with the late Bishop Epiphanius. Fr. Mark gave an excellent and moving introduction to the spiritual significance of St. Macarius Monastery through the lens of two great recent figures: Fr. Matthew the Poor and

Bishop Epiphanius. Fr. Mark answered many questions about the martyrdom of Bishop Epiphanius and the monastic life, beautifully represented by the tradition of St. Macarius Monastery, and the significance of these two staples of the Christian life, martyrdom and monasticism, for all of Christianity.

At this point there was an open discussion about the book, *So Great a Salvation*, and everyone commented on how it was one of the most edifying books they read and its appropriateness for the season of Advent. Many chapters in the book were highlighted with members sharing some of their favorite quotes in the book. In the end, after 90 minutes of conversation, we all agreed that we wanted more from the writings of Bishop Epiphanius and that we were eager for more publications from the Monastery of St. Macarius for our future Book Club meetings. We give thanks and glory to Our Lord Jesus Christ who gathers His children from the North to the South, and from the East to the West, to sit at His Heavenly Banquet and to feast on the words of eternal life. And we ask and entreat Him for the day that we will gather around one Eucharistic table, as one Body, to partake together of His Holy Body and Precious Blood.