

Coptic Orthodox Leader Visits Local Congregation

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For many members of St. Mina and St. Abanoub Church in Miamisburg, Pope Shenouda III has always been a name mentioned in prayers or a face glimpsed in a photograph.

On Saturday he became much more: a smiling man who had come to bless their church and their children and urge them to be strong in their faith. It was the first time Pope Shenouda, leader of the Cairo-based Coptic Orthodox Church, had visited Southwest Ohio, and more than 200 people were on hand to greet him.

"The new generation, our kids, they see (the pope) only in pictures and talking about him, but it's a great honor for them to see him in person," said Wagih Neirouz, 58, a Finneytown accountant. "I never dreamed one day we'd have our own church, our own priest, and Pope Shenouda would come all the way from Egypt to consecrate our altar and icons."

Finally in March 1993 members of St. Mina and St. Abanoub bought their current building in Miamisburg. Originally a plain Protestant church, they have added brass chandeliers and icons painted in Egypt. An iconostasis, or wall of icons separating the main body of the church from the sanctuary, is made of intricately carved wood, inlaid ivory and icons of Jesus, the apostles and Mary.

It was those icons, and the new marble altar in the sanctuary, that Pope Shenouda had come to bless. During a two-hour service filled with chanting, song and incense, he consecrated each icon. The pope is on a 15-city tour of the States that will take him to Cleveland today. Like his Roman Catholic counterpart John Paul II, the 76-year-old Coptic pope spends much of his time traveling. He has added dozens of churches, a monastery and two seminaries in North America alone since becoming pope in 1971.

"We've learned a lot about him and what he does," said Michelle Migally, 16, from Centerville. "He's very conservative but he's cheerful and happy, even though he's old. He seems very nice."