

Arabic Families In America - An interview of Father Louis Mahshie

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Father Louis Mahshie (far left)

It was a Saturday morning at Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Church. But the doors were open, the parking lot held a number of cars, and children of varying sizes ran and shouted around the church yard.

And that isn't unusual at Saint George's. After the usual Saturday morning Arabic class, about eight people sat around with coffee and donuts and discussed some of the values they gained from their Middle East heritage.

"Historically, family life has been the key factor to maintain sanity in society," began the rector, Father Louis Mahshie, who directed the discussion. "I'm not talking about America, I'm talking about world societies. We are talking about something which is the bread and the water of the social life. We are talking about the very fundamental impetus of society. If there is no family, there is no reasonable society-you have chaos."

A legal system is built on the fundamental principle that most of the people will obey the law, otherwise the law couldn't be formulated to begin with. The police can enforce laws, but they cannot maintain the sanity of society. This comes from the family.

Father Mahshie explained that this is demonstrated not only in America, but in the Middle East, where (at least in the cities) many pattern their personal and family life styles after the Americans. Americans set the pace for the British, Europeans, Middle Easterners, Japanese, etc. Although one might see the kids listening to American music, smoking marijuana, and doing other things Americans do on a very prevalent basis, they are generally only going through the external motions. But still the basic fiber of the family remains.

The fiber of the family life is still present in the Middle East. Parents have a lot to say-the father is still the patriarch of the family. But oddly enough, the Arabic life in America is quite the opposite. It isn't patriarchal; it's more matriarchal, since in America the woman usually controls the children. Although the father may decide policies, the mother carries them out, because she's home with the children while he's not.

There are a lot of factors involved, which pertain not only to the Middle East or to the United States, but to the entire world. But the Middle East does have the tradition of a strong father's influence. This is not due to Christianity, however, but to Islam. Islam has maintained the strong patriarch image found in earliest Christianity. Even today the Mormons maintain that in their life, and in books printed in 1973, one still sees the father sitting down and the mother standing up.

Father Mahshie laughed, "I think back to my father. In Middle Eastern photographs, the father is always sitting down, the mother on his right side, and the children around -- the strong patriarchal tradition.

The family without a mother-father composite is very difficult-it's not a real family. It's making the best with what you have."

In the Middle East, parents push their children harder to achieve than in America. In traditional European society, children were pushed to at least take up a trade, if not a profession. But in America people ask children, "What do you want to be?" And they say, "I don't know." The parents say, "Go to college, and after four years decide." But this is unheard of in the Middle East. Children know what they are going to

be, although after they take up that line and later decide to change, that's fine. The Middle East life style calls people to set goals early in life.

Among immigrants to the United States there is a phenomenon of the search for identity. Children of the third generation ask, "Mommy, who are you?" or "Daddy, who are you?" But sociologists note that the second generation "mommy and daddy" grew up being ashamed of their identity as foreigners. By the third generation, however, they regained interest in their heritage and with the last Arab-Israeli war, people who were ashamed to say they were Arabs are now proud.

The Orthodox Church is very ethnic in its orientation-Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc. In the Washington area are two Arabic Roman Catholic and one Baptist Churches, in addition to the Antiochian Orthodox. For a long time, however, the first three were ashamed to identify with the Arabs, but with the last war that has changed. "This is a good thing," Father Mahshie commented. "Then all will become whole and complete again. As long as someone says, 'I am a Frenchman' or 'I am a Canadian,' or whatever, he can overcome the hang-up.

But first and second generation immigrants cannot understand this. Two things may, happen to immigrants: they either absorb an American frame of mind and lose themselves in their new environment or they come to terms with their heritage. What the church does is to help people find their identity. When they re-find their identity they get along better with their families, their wives, and their children. Everything comes together a little bit better. They have a better relationship with themselves and with others."

In the Near East tradition, children are really taught to love and respect their parents, Father Mahshie continued. "In our church, the families that don't teach this to their children are those who have come into a lot of money. The world takes their children away from them then." His real problem children in the parish are those of families who came to America with nothing and made tremendous amounts of money. But they went into another social world and inevitably lost contact with their children. Families who are really struggling to make a living have problems, but their children are not the deviants.

Father Mahshie is always called in at the end of the game, "when there's no one else to talk to. But by then it's too late. If they would call me in the beginning, I could do something. But basically, discipline is the key." There is an Arabic proverb, "When you raise your children, discipline must come from without; when they grow up, the discipline will be from within."

One thing Father Mahshie tries to do in his parish is to adapt the best of the old world heritage. He feels that for many newcomers, the old world has disintegrated in terms of relevance to them. But some aspects are very good, although others aren't. "We've combined the organization of American Protestantism," Father Mahshie said, "with our Arabic Christianity. We have J residents, vice presidents, secretaries, etc., of activities, and a very active Sunday school system. But for our clergy we maintain a hierarchical system much like that of the Roman Catholic church."

One of the members, Dr. Hakim, places great stress on the Sunday school. In the Middle East, the educational systems were run by religious groups, but in America, there are no religious teachings or values in the public schools. So she drives 45 minutes one way to bring her children to Sunday school. For Father Mahshie, the role of the Sunday school is to try to make up for the breakdown of family life.

"The church must be prophetic and give a moral direction to society," Father Mahshie concluded. "Otherwise there is no reason for our being."