

# FAITH

## A new beginning

MEMBERS OF ANCIENT FAITH PLAN TO CREATE 12-ACRE COPTIC VILLAGE IN MARKHAM

BY MIKE ADLER  
Staff Writer

When he arrived here in 1964, he was the only Coptic priest in North America.

He had been ordained that same year and given a new first name that exactly matched his last — Marcos.

Toronto was a long way from Suhag, the hot provincial capital in Southern Egypt where he was raised, but Fr. Marcos Marcos knew Copts lived here too.

They were scattered through this foreign continent, but he was going to find them, gather them together and establish new churches.

Starting with 19 families in Toronto.

"I came armed with a list of names all over North America.

But the numbers we were given were very few compared to what we found later on," recalled Fr. Marcos, chosen for his unique mission because he spoke English and knew the customs of North America, having studied on a scholarship in the United States.

"This one gives me the names of three friends and so on. Wherever I go, I was adding to the list."

For years, he travelled with a portable liturgy set to meet Copts (the word Copt is an English version of Arabic Gibt or Gypt, meaning Egyptian) in rented churches or their homes for counseling, confessions, baptisms, Sunday school lessons — anything that was needed.

"I was living out of a suitcase, practically."

Those Copts were encouraged to live near each other and Fr. Marcos saw the first churches founded: Toronto in 1964, Montreal in 1967, Los Angeles in 1970, Jersey City in 1971.

"But we have not forgotten the places where we have only two Copts."

### FAITH HAS BLOSSOMED

In just one generation, the Coptic faith has blossomed in Canada. In Southern Ontario alone, there are 12 Coptic churches, including one in rented premises in Richmond Hill, but the first, St. Mark's in Scarborough, is still North American headquarters for Copts.

Fr. Marcos, living in Markham and married with a son, daughter and three grandchildren, still leads its congregation of 1,000 families, most of whom also live in Markham.

"Our people feel more secure

when they find a church close by."

St. Mark's is crowded these days but local Copts are preparing to build a larger church — domed, as all Coptic churches are — plus a great cathedral capable of holding 2,000 to 2,500 worshippers inside a 12-acre Coptic village in Markham.

### SCHOOL PART OF VILLAGE

The village, designed by an international competition, will be just blocks away from the present St. Mark's on Steeles Avenue at Ferrier Street. It will encompass a school, a community centre, professional offices, seniors' apartments, a nursing home, a bishop's residence (although there is, as yet, no North American bishop) and a museum containing manuscripts, icons, ancient coins, work and folkloric paintings.

Like Fr. Marcos's family and ordination name, the name of the new Coptic village will honour St. Mark, who it is believed brought Christianity to Egypt around 49 to 54 A.D.

The Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate is one of the oldest sects of Christianity, one that has changed little over the long centuries. St. Mark's conducts all its services in Arabic and Coptic (ancient Egyptian spelled in an expanded Greek alphabet), as well as English.

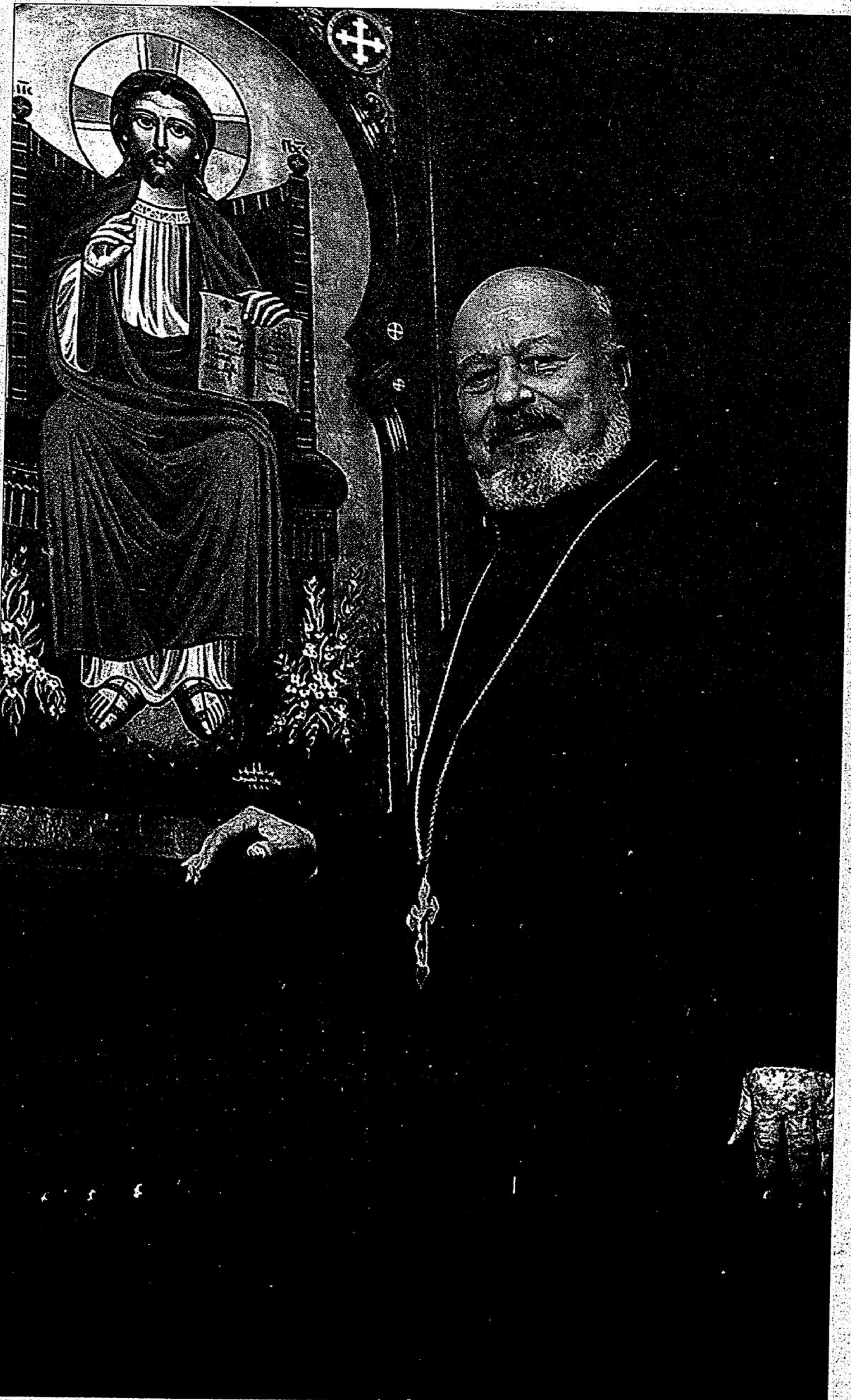
All three languages adorn a half-tonne granite box, the time capsule and village cornerstone blessed this month by the visiting Pope Shenouda III, patriarch of the See of St. Mark, as about 2,000 of the faithful gathered for a festival.

### PASSED THROUGH WAVES

Christianity flourished in Egypt until the 7th century — Suhag, on the Nile 470 kilometres south of Cairo, is the site of early Christian monasteries and churches — when it was conquered by Muslim Arabs. Coptic was banned in the 10th century and Copts in Egypt have endured periods of persecution.

"We passed through waves, according to the whim of the ruler," Fr. Marcos said. "When the ruler is tolerant, we have a more peaceful time."

More on the Copts and their history is available from the St. Mark's church website, [stmark.toronto.on.coptorthodox.ca](http://stmark.toronto.on.coptorthodox.ca).



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

In just one generation, the Coptic faith has blossomed in Canada. There are currently 12 Coptic churches, including one in Richmond Hill. Fr. Marcos Marcos and other York Region Copts are planning to create a Coptic village on a 12-acre property in Markham.