



Coptic Orthodox Church Centre
Stevenage, U.K.

The Altar In The Midst Of Egypt

A Brief Introduction To The Coptic Orthodox Church



Bishop Angaelos



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2000

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First Edition September 1997

ISBN 1 871 646 15 4



His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

117th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark

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Introduction To This Second Issue

We are told in the Book of Isaiah that there would be an altar to the Lord in the midst of Egypt, and this altar came with the birth of the Coptic Church at the hands of the great evangelist Saint Mark, in the first century, and as we enter the 21st Century, we re-release this book.

The first release in September 1997 was on the occasion of the inauguration of the Saint Athanasius Coptic Theological College in Stevenage, England. The book you now hold is an updated version, though in essence much of the text has remained unchanged.

We could not have imagined the interest shown in this book at the time of its initial collation, but have found that it has been sought by Copts and non-Copts, young and old because of its easy-to-read and easy-to-follow presentation.

I do hope that this work will continue to be of assistance to all who read it, and that more than intellectual knowledge, it provides a springboard for experiencing God through a very ancient, steadfast and faithful vessel which is the Coptic Orthodox Church.

I thank all those who have worked with me in preparing, editing and publishing both issues of this book, but first and foremost, I thank my beloved father His Holiness Pope Shenouda III for the inspiration which he has been, and continues to be, for the whole Church all over the world.

Bishop Angaelos

Tut 1717 A.M. / September 2000 A.D.

Introduction

The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the most ancient Churches of the world, having been founded by Saint Mark the Apostle. A conservative Church, it has carefully preserved the orthodox Christian Faith in its earliest and purest form, handing it down from generation to generation, unaltered and true to the Apostolic doctrines and patterns of worship.

The Coptic Church is a deeply spiritual Church, emphasising holiness and the Divine Mysteries, at the same time also being a strongly doctrinal Church, holding faithfully to the canons of the Holy Scriptures, the Apostolic and Orthodox creeds, and the teachings of the Church Fathers of the first three ecumenical councils. The Coptic Church has stood firm and remained faithful to the Apostolic Traditions and Orthodox Faith, despite waves of the most fearful persecutions under pagan Roman Emperors, Byzantine and Arab rulers, and in the face of serious heresies which attacked the very essence of the Christian Faith and threatened to split the Church and all of Christendom.

The Copts are the native Christians of Egypt and the direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians, a people with perhaps the longest recorded history. The word '*Copt*' is derived from '*gypt*' which stems from the Greek word '*Aigyptus*' meaning '*Egyptian*.'

In the Holy Bible, Egypt was a land of refuge, especially in times of famine. Abraham visited Egypt, so did Joseph, who became Pharaoh's deputy. Jacob and his twelve sons came and dwelt in Egypt, where they became a nation; Jeremiah the Prophet also visited Egypt.

The crown of these visits however, was that of the Holy Family during the childhood of our Lord, who travelled from

Sinai in the East to the valley of *Nitria* in the West, and southwards to *Assyut*, the heart of Upper Egypt.

Many miracles took place in Egypt during the visit of the Holy Family. Many places were blessed, and on the places where the Holy Family lived, churches were later built, and are visited by pilgrims from all over the world. Thus, the land of Egypt was blessed by the visit of our Lord, being the only country other than His birthland to be visited by Him, in fulfillment of the prophecy: "*Behold the Lord rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst*" (Isaiah 19:1).

Saint Cyril the Great interpreted this prophesy, saying, 'The "swift cloud" which carried the Child Jesus to Egypt, was His mother, the Virgin Saint Mary, who surpassed the cloud in purity. The "altar" which was established in the midst of the land of Egypt is the Christian Church which replaced the pagan temples as the idols collapsed and the temples became deserted in the presence of the Lord Jesus.'

During the twentieth century, the Coptic Church has been blessed by the apparition of the Virgin Saint Mary in her Church at *Zeitoun*, Cairo in 1968, in the Church of Saint Demiana in the Cairo suburb of *Shoubra* in 1986, and in various other places, thus fulfilling the words of the Scriptures:

"Blessed is Egypt My people" (Isaiah 19:25)

Presentation

Egypt is a land rich with great history, but more importantly, it is a land that was blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

In His infancy, our Lord visited Egypt with His mother, the Virgin Saint Mary, and Saint Joseph during their flight from Israel at the instruction of the angel, and thus it became their second home- a place of refuge at a time of trouble.

When we read the Book of Isaiah, we find many important things mentioned about the land of Egypt, the most important of these being that its people were the Lord's people. It was also written that there would be an altar in the midst of this land to the Lord Himself. The altar spoken of was established with the birth of the Coptic Church at the hands of the great evangelist Saint Mark in the first century.

This book by no means aims or claims to be an in-depth detailed study of such an ancient Church, but rather, it is an appetiser which leads the reader to a deeper study of the area of his or her interest.

We release this book on a very special occasion, one which portrays the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church in its teaching and theology- extending from the invaluable School of Alexandria which taught the whole world for so long.

On this historic day, we celebrate the inauguration of our newest Coptic theological college, the first such college in Europe. Further honour and blessing is given to this event through the coming of our holy father, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III especially for this historic occasion

We thank His Holiness's love, and note that this is merely another manifestation of his fatherhood and love for teaching, which has brought forward a whole generation of

those led by his example, and sincerely dedicated to learning and teaching.

We therefore present this book to all those who wish to learn, Copts and non-Copts alike, and hope that in pursuing their studies, that they ultimately fulfil their main objective of coming closer to God.

We ask the Lord to overshadow this work, through the intercession of our Lady, the Virgin Theotokos Saint Mary, and the holy Archangel Michael, and the prayers of the great Saint Anthony and Saint Athanasius the Apostolic, and the prayers of our blessed father Pope Shenouda III, for to our Lord is due glory for ever. Amen.

Fr. Angelos Anba-Bishoy

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2 Tute, 1714 A.M. / 12 September, 1997 A.D.

CHAPTER ONE

Saint Mark & the Establishment of the See of Alexandria

Saint Mark

Saint Mark the Evangelist, one of the seventy apostles, and the writer of one of the four gospels, was born in Libya three years after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was of Jewish parents, who later moved to Palestine. Saint Mark's house was where the Lord met with His disciples, and where He celebrated the Passover and Last Supper with them. The Apostles were also gathered in his house when the Holy Spirit descended upon them on the Day of Pentecost. The house of Saint Mark is therefore well known in all Apostolic Churches as the first church in the world.

His First Mission to Egypt

When Saint Mark entered and walked through the streets of Alexandria, the most famous city in Egypt at this time, his sandals were torn, and thus he sought to have them mended, but while Ananias the cobbler was mending the shoes, his finger was cut by the awl, and he cried out saying, 'O the one god!' After healing the cobbler's finger, Saint Mark spoke to him about who the 'One God' really was. Ananias invited Saint Mark to his home, after which he and his household were baptised after having professed their belief in the Christian Faith. Soon afterwards, many others believed, and Ananias' house became the meeting place for the faithful.

In 62 AD, Saint Mark decided to leave Egypt to visit the new believers he had preached in the Pentapolis, but before leaving, he ordained Ananias bishop, and founded a church in the Crypt where the Holy Family had taken refuge, thus fulfilling the prophesy of Isaiah, "*In that day there will be an*

altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border... Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day" (Isaiah 19:19,21).

His Second Mission and Martyrdom

When Saint Mark returned to Egypt, after the martyrdom of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, he found that the Church there had grown so much that he ordained a further three priests and seven deacons to assist Ananias. Saint Mark preached for another seven years against the local pagan gods with such vigour that the feeling of hatred from non-believers against him became intense.

At that time, three races were dwelling in Egypt: the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Jews, in addition to a few Romans. Serapis was the god of the Greeks in Egypt; he was the god of Alexandria. On Easter Day in 68 AD, Saint Mark was administering the Holy Liturgy, and on the same day, the pagans were celebrating the feast of Serapis. Encouraged by the Roman prefect, the pagans rushed and attacked the church where Saint Mark and the faithful were praying. They captured Saint Mark, tied a rope around him and dragged him through the streets of the city. At night he was thrown into prison where an angel appeared to him, strengthening and encouraging him. On the following day he was dragged again through the streets and eventually died a martyr for the sake of the God whom he had so faithfully served from a young age.

Saint Mark is considered the first of the unbroken line of Patriarchs of the Coptic Church, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, the current patriarch, being Saint Mark's 116th successor- the 117th Pope of Alexandria.

The full official title of the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church is '*Pope of Alexandria, and Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark.*'

CHAPTER TWO

History

By the end of the second century, Christianity was well established in Egypt, although pockets of paganism continued to co-exist with the new Faith. By 190 AD, the Church of Alexandria was exchanging Paschal epistles with the Churches of Jerusalem and Antioch concerning the date of Easter, and there were about forty dioceses under the Patriarch of Alexandria in the North of the country, in the Delta area.

By 202 AD, there were also Christians in the whole Thebaid, in Upper Egypt, 800 km up the Nile Valley. In his Festal letters, Saint Athanasius mentioned that there were also Christians in the small and large oases in the heart of the desert.

Church of Martyrs

Historians have named the Coptic Church the 'Church of the Martyrs,' not only because of their great number, but also because of their desire for martyrdom. When prevented from worship, they did not hide in the catacombs, but worshipped openly, and many went from place to place, seeking the crown of martyrdom, not considering it death, but rather, as entry into the new life.

Waves of Persecution

The first wave of persecution took place in the first century, when Saint Mark the Apostle was martyred in Alexandria by the pagan Egyptians.

Commencing from 202 AD and continuing for seven years, the Church of Alexandria also suffered persecution under the reign of Septimus Severus, who, when he visited Egypt

and found that Christianity had spread, ordered the ruler to increase the persecution and prevent preaching at any cost. Consequently, the School of Alexandria was closed and its dean, Saint Clement, was compelled to flee.

During the reign of the Roman Emperor Decus, an edict was issued to re-establish the state religion by any means. In 257 and 258 AD, Emperor Valerian issued edicts to destroy the Church, leading to the arrest and exile of Pope Dionysius of Alexandria.

In 302 AD, the Roman Emperor Diocletian began his persecution of Christians by dismissing from the army every soldier who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. On 23 February of the following year, he issued his famous edict against the Christians. It was his belief that if he could crush Christianity in Egypt, it would be easier to eliminate it from the rest of the world. Hence the persecution of the Christians in Egypt was more intense than in any other country- about 800,000 men, women and children were martyred in Egypt.

In constant commemoration of these great heroes of Faith, the Coptic Church commences its calendar from 248 AD, the year of Diocletian's ascent to the throne, calling the year '*Anno Martyrii*' meaning, '*Year of the Martyrs.*'

Throughout these waves of persecution, many spiritual leaders devoted themselves to strengthening the martyrs and confessors, visiting them in prisons and accompanying them in their trials- even to the place of execution. Some of them cared for and buried the saints' bodies, and having been eye-witnesses of their trials and sufferings, wrote their biographies.

Among the most well known of these martyrs were: Saint Mena the Wonder worker, Saint Rebecca ('Refka') and her five children, Saint Catherine, and the Thebean Legion (numbering almost seven thousand soldiers) who, led by

Saint Maurice, refused to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods, and were all martyred in Switzerland. The list of the martyrs of the Coptic Orthodox Church is endless.

The Schism

In the fifth century, an archmandrite of a monastery near Constantinople named Eutyches began to spread a new heresy, denying the human nature of our Lord, saying that His body was but an ethereal body which passed through the womb of the Virgin Saint Mary.

Subsequently, a local Council was convened by seven bishops, led by Flavianus, Bishop of Constantinople, and supported by the Tome (exposition of the Dogma) of Leo I, Bishop of Rome, which condemned Eutyches as a heretic. Eutyches appealed to all the bishops of Christendom, as well as to Emperor Theodosius the Younger, with the result that a second council was convened in Ephesus in 449 AD, attended by 130 bishops, under the presidency of Pope Dioscorus of Alexandria, together with Juvenal of Jerusalem and Domnus of Antioch. Eutyches submitted a full written confession, affirming the Nicene Creed, and was thus acquitted. The bishops who had passed a verdict on Eutyches, based on Leo's Tome, were excommunicated. Later however, Eutyches proclaimed his heresy once again, and this time he was condemned and excommunicated by a local Coptic council.

Two years after the council of Ephesus, in AD 451, another Council was convened by Emperor Marcianus at Chalcedon. This Council was characterised by political factors, leading to prejudices and conspiracies against the Church of Alexandria and against its patriarch, Pope Dioscorus.

Politically, Alexandria was only a city under the rule of the Eastern Roman Empire whose capital was Constantinople, Rome being the capital of the Western Roman Empire.

Theologically and ecumenically however, the patriarchs and popes of Alexandria played a leading role in the first centuries of Christianity, and thus others envied them and began to create trouble, saying that the Church of Alexandria had nothing to do but to collect bishops for ecumenical councils and preside over these councils. By the time of the convening of the council of Chalcedon there was much prejudice against the Coptic Church.

At the Council of Chalcedon, the Coptic Church was misquoted and its teachings were wrongly deemed as being Eutychean. The Patriarch of Alexandria was accused of being Eutychean because he had presided over the second Council of Ephesus which had absolved Eutyches, despite the fact that it was a Coptic council which had later condemned the heretical teachings of Eutyches once he had returned to them. Furthermore, it was Pope Dioscorus who, in defending his Orthodox Faith, gave his famous analogy:

'If a piece of iron, heated to white heat, be struck on an anvil, and although the iron and the heat form an indivisible whole, it is the iron which receives the blows and not the white heat. This unity of the iron and the white heat is symbolic of our Saviour's Incarnation, whose Divinity never parted from His Humanity, not even for a moment, nor the twinkling of an eye. Yet though His Divinity parted not from His Humanity, their union was without mixing or fusion, or change, like unto the union of the iron and white heat. This unity is defined as "the One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate" and is synonymous with Saint John's saying, "*The Word became flesh.*" As for me, I steadfastly uphold the Faith of the Orthodox Church, the one, holy, Universal and Apostolic Church. Neither Eutyches, nor any other person, can make me swerve from this holy Faith.'

When Pope Dioscorus' Orthodoxy could not be questioned, other accusations were raised, focusing on political issues

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such as the question of preventing Egyptian corn from being sent to other parts of the Empire. Neither Pope Dioscorus nor the civil judges were present when the council handed down the verdict deposing him, mainly for having excommunicated the bishop of Rome. The verdict was passed down in his absence because he did not appear at the Council session after being summoned three times, although he was under house arrest at the time. Regardless of all this however, Pope Dioscorus could neither be stripped of Ecclesiastical honour nor excommunicated because of his proclaimed Orthodoxy.

In a later session of the Council, at which the Egyptian delegation was not present, the supremacy of the Church of Constantinople and Rome was granted over the Church of Alexandria. The Egyptian Church was labelled as 'monophysite,' because of its emphasis upon the 'One Nature of Christ' (although this title was misinterpreted as covering either one of the Human or Divine natures of our Lord and ignoring the other), being based on the false assumption that the Coptic Fathers accepted the Eutychean view.

Historical facts, and the liturgy and doctrines of the Coptic Church prove the true Orthodoxy of the Coptic Church, until this day. Furthermore, it is now admitted by those who once accused the Coptic Church of being '*monophysite*,' that is, believing in only one nature of our Lord Jesus Christ, that it was a misunderstanding arising from a problem of semantics, and the Coptic Church now being referred to as '*miaphysite*,' that is, recognising both natures of our Lord, being joined inseparably in the '*One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate*.'

In the absence of the representation of the Church of Alexandria, the Council of Chalcedon passed statements concerning the two natures of Christ, and other ecclesiastic laws, which are not accepted by the Coptic Orthodox Church and the other Oriental Churches, such as the Syrian

Orthodox, the Armenian Apostolic, the Ethiopian Orthodox, the Indian Orthodox, and the Eritrean Orthodox Churches. Therefore, the Council of Chalcedon resulted in the first major 'schism,' or split, of the undivided Christian Church. Today, however, most scholars have agreed that the unfortunate events and decisions at the Council of Chalcedon were based upon misunderstandings and a misinterpretation of terms and words, rather than a question of Orthodoxy, and agreement has now been reached regarding the Nature of Christ between the Oriental family of Churches and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and also the Catholic Church.

Unfortunately however, the events of the Council of Chalcedon, were to have long-standing and far-reaching effects upon the Coptic Church, which suffered greatly at the hands of the Chalcedonian rulers, and from that time, it remained isolated from the rest of the Christian World, until the 20th Century.

Pope Dioscorus was exiled to the island of Gangra, off the coast of Asia Minor, where he died. During his exile, he led many to the Christian Faith, and returned numerous heretics to Orthodoxy. In his See in Alexandria, a Melkite (Greek) Patriarch was imposed, but was not accepted by the people of Alexandria, who preferred to remain loyal to their exiled Patriarch. At this time, a wave of persecution arose in Alexandria, during which an estimated 30,000 people lost their lives. The 'non-Chalcedonian' Coptic Church continued to suffer persecution at the hands of the Byzantine rulers, and the rift within the Apostolic Churches widened.

For a period of almost 150 years under the rule of nine Byzantine emperors, Egypt experienced periods of fluctuating peace and oppression. After the death of Emperor Anastasius however, an era of Byzantine persecution and oppression began, lasting for almost 120 years. During this period, patriarchs were banished, others were placed on the Patriarchal See, churches were

destroyed, and people lost both their lives and possessions. Emperor Justinian closed all the churches, placing guards on them, and persecution against the Coptic Church continued. As a result, Egypt was reduced to an impoverished state, while the rest of the Byzantine world enjoyed luxury, freedom and wealth.

The Arab Conquest

When Islam entered Egypt in the seventh Century, Pope Benjamin I, the 38th Patriarch, had been away from his throne for 13 years, another patriarch having been uncanonically ordained in his place and given authority over all the Coptic churches, with a view to destroy the Copts, the so-called '*Monophysites*.'

For the four centuries that followed the Arab conquest of Egypt, the Coptic Church generally flourished, and Egypt remained basically Christian. This was due to a great extent to the fortunate position that the Copts enjoyed, for the Prophet of Islam preached a special kindness towards Copts, saying 'When you conquer Egypt, be kind to the Copts for they are your proteges and kith and kin.' The Copts were therefore allowed to freely practice Christianity, provided they continued to pay a special tax, called '*Gezya*,' that would qualify them as '*Ahl Zemma*' proteges (protected). Individuals who could not afford to pay the levy however, were faced with the choice of either converting to Islam or losing their civil right to be 'protected', which in some instances meant being killed. Despite additional costly laws that were imposed upon Egyptian Christians between 868 AD and 935 AD, under the Abbasid Dynasties, they prospered, and the Coptic Church enjoyed one of its most peaceful eras.

Throughout that period, the Coptic language remained the language of Egypt, and it was not until the second half of the eleventh century that the first bilingual Coptic-Arabic liturgical manuscripts began to appear. The adoption of the

Arabic language as the language used by Egyptians in their everyday life was so slow that even in the 15th century the Coptic language was still largely in use. Up to this day, the Coptic language continues to be the liturgical language of the Church, and is still used as a living language by a small, but very dedicated number of individuals and families.

The Christian face of Egypt started to change by the beginning of the second millennium AD when the Copts, in addition to the 'Gezya' levy, suffered from specific limitations, some of which were serious and interfered with their freedom of worship. For example, there were restrictions on the reparation old churches and the building of new ones, as well as other matters such as: testifying in court, public conduct, adoption, inheritance, public religious activities, and dress codes. Slowly but steadily, by the end of the 12th century, the face of Egypt changed from being a predominantly Christian, to a predominantly Muslim country. The Coptic community occupied an inferior position and lived in some expectation of Muslim hostility, which periodically flared into violence.

The position of the Copts began to improve early in the 19th century under the stability and tolerance of the Mohammed Ali dynasty. The Coptic community ceased to be regarded by the state as an administrative unit. In 1855 AD, the main mark of the Copt's inferiority, namely the 'Gezya' tax, was lifted. Shortly thereafter, the Copts started to serve in the Egyptian army. The 1919 AD revolution in Egypt witnesses to the harmony of Egypt's modern society. Today, it is this harmony which keeps the Egyptian society united against the religious intolerance of extremist groups, who inflict upon the Copts persecution, terror and violence.

Throughout its persecution, the Coptic Church has never been controlled, or allowed itself to control, the governments of Egypt. This position of the Church concerning the separation between State and Religion stems from the words of our Lord Himself, Who says, "*Render*

therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Regardless of all the centuries of persecution which the Coptic Church has lived however, it has never forcefully resisted authorities or invaders and was never allied with any power, for the words of our Lord are clear "*Put your sword in its place, for all who take by the sword will perish by the sword*" (Matthew 26:52), while at the same time we are taught that our strength and success lie in our spiritual lives in this world, which will lead us to an everlasting life in the kingdom of God.

CHAPTER THREE

Faith And Practice

Dogma

'Dogma' is what is believed, taught, confessed and practised. Dogma, to the Coptic Orthodox Church, is not merely theological a concept concerning God, man, the Church, eternal life, heavenly creatures, demons, and other such matters, which are to be discussed among clergymen, scholars and laymen, but rather, it is, in essence, daily experiences which each member of the Church should live. In other words, dogma represents our faith in God, and bears one message, namely, our communion with God the Father in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, by His Holy Spirit.

The Sacraments

Church Sacraments, or 'Mysteries', are sacred actions by which believers receive 'an invisible grace, through visible means.' The Coptic Church observes seven sacraments:

- Baptism
- Chrismation
- Repentance and Confession
- The Eucharist
- Matrimony
- Priesthood
- Unction of the Sick.

Three of the sacraments give permanent seals and thus are not to be repeated, namely, Baptism, Chrismation and Priesthood. The minister of the sacraments, whether a bishop or priest, administers them in the name of Christ, and must be canonically ordained, that is, according to the canons (rules) of the Church.

● **Baptism**

Baptism is the holy sacrament in which the person is reborn by emersion in water three times, in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It is a means by which one is washed from one's inherited sin and lives a new life in the Lord Jesus Christ; for this reason, Baptism has been given various names by the Early Fathers of the Church, including the 'new birth', 'sanctification', 'washing', 'seal' and 'illumination'.

Baptism is a sacrament established by our Lord Himself (Matthew 28:18 & 19), and is essential for salvation (John 3:5). The Coptic Church continues the Apostolic Tradition of infant baptism (*Paedobaptism*), which is implied from the Scriptures through the rite of circumcision, which was a *type* of Baptism in the Old Testament. Infant Baptism was also mentioned by many of the early Church Fathers.

The grace received in Baptism includes new spiritual creation (John 3:3-8), forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38), adoption as God's sons (Galatians 3:26-29) and inheritance of eternal life (Titus3:5-7).

● **Chrismation**

In the Sacrament of Chrismation, the faithful receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This sacrament was established by our Lord Jesus Christ (John 7:37-39) and is administered directly after Baptism (Acts 8:14-17). The Holy Bible (1 John 2:20) and the Church Fathers describe Chrismation as anointment.

The grace received in Chrismation includes spiritual power (Romans 8:13) and the consecration of the soul to God.

● **The Eucharist**

The Eucharist is the sacrament of all sacraments, in which the faithful receive the Body and Blood of our Lord.

The Coptic Orthodox Church believes that the bread and wine change into the Body and Blood of Christ by the descent of the Holy Spirit through the prayers of the Divine Liturgy. The Church continues to teach the Biblical and Apostolic Tradition of the actual presence of Christ in this sacrament (John 6:5). Saint Justine, a martyr of the second century, writes,

'...We have been taught that the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic Prayer set down by Him, and which through its change nourishes our flesh and blood, is both the Flesh and Blood of the Incarnate Christ.'

Saint John Chrysostom writes,

'How many now say, "I wish to see His form, His clothes, His feet?" Lo! You see Him, you touch Him, you eat Him... He gives Himself to you not only to see, but also to touch and eat and receive within you... He mixed Himself with us, not by faith only, but also indeed makes us His Body... That which the angels tremble when they behold, and dare not so much as look up at without awe on account of the brightness that comes thence, with this we are fed, with this we are commingled, and we are made one body and one flesh with Christ.' (*Homilies on Saint Matthew*)

Besides being a sacrament, the Eucharist is also a sacrifice. It is the same Sacrifice of the Cross, present continually on the altar of the Church, as an intercession for all the living and the departed, and for all creation (1 Corinthians 10:18-21). The Eucharist was described as a 'Sacrifice' by the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea, and by many Church Fathers. In one of the fractions of the Coptic Liturgy we read, 'Today, on this table is present with us Emmanuel our God, the Lamb of God Who carries the sins of the whole world.'

The Coptic Church has never departed from the tradition of administering both the Body and Blood of our Lord to all the

faithful (John 6:53). Children of all ages share in the Eucharist. The Coptic Church also uses ordinary (that is, leavened) bread, for the offering. The Church has always taught, what most scholars now acknowledge, that the Last Supper took place one day before the Passover, and thus Christ used leavened bread in it- the leaven itself symbolising the sin which our Lord bore on the cross for us.

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Regardless of the number of communicants in any liturgy, whether tens, hundreds, or even thousands, only one 'Lamb' (loaf) is used as the Body of our Lord, being a practical application of the 'One Body of Christ.'

● **Repentance and Confession**

A Christian whose sins have separated him from the life in Christ is reconciled with Him in the Sacrament of Repentance and Confession. Through the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, this sacrament renews the baptismal graces of adoption, salvation, and renew our hope of eternal life. The Church Fathers have also called it 'reconciliation,' 'absolution,' and 'second baptism.'

- Penance consists of a feeling of sorrow for sin, with a will to repent; it also needs faith in Christ, verbal confession to a priest, and the priest's absolution.
- Verbal confession has been practised since the time of the Apostles (Acts 19:18).
- Priests have received from Christ the authority to absolve sins (Matthew 18:18).
- The priest may ask the repentant to observe certain disciplines, such as fasting, prayer, or delay of communion.
- These are remedies for the soul and aid in its struggle for the spiritual life, they are in no way considered punishments or atonement for sins.
- Christ is the propitiation for all sins (1 John 2:2).

● **Unction of the Sick**

If spiritual healing is obtained through penance, the sacrament of Unction the Sick was established in the Church for the healing of both spiritual and physical ailments. Many of the Church Fathers mentioned it and referred to its biblical origin in the words of Saint James, who wrote, *"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the priests of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven"* (James 5:14 & 15).

● **Matrimony**

Marriage is a natural and sacred law established since the creation of mankind (Genesis 1:27 & 28 & 2:18-24). The Lord Jesus Christ attended the marriage at *Cana* where He performed His first miracle.

Marriage is considered a 'mystery' by Saint Paul (Ephesus 5:32); it is the sacrament through which man and woman are united through the grace of the Holy Spirit, and which is symbolic of the profound union of our Lord and His Church.

Christian marriage is characterised by its unity (Matthew 19:4) and indissolubility except by death. Divorce, for any reason other than adultery, has been forbidden by our Lord through the Scriptures, stating, *"So, then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate... Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery"* (Matthew 19:6,9). The Church has followed these rules from the beginning, and continues to do so, always promoting the importance of the family unit and its spiritual and social stability.

● **Holy Orders**

The sacrament of Holy Orders is the sacred action in which ministers of the Church obtain the gifts of the Holy Spirit

and the authority to act in one of the three clerical degrees, bishop, priest or deacon. This sacrament was established by our Lord when He sent the Holy Spirit to the Apostles (Matthew 28:18-20). Those called to the priesthood are ordained by the laying of hands and prayers of bishops (Acts 6:6).

By their Apostolic Succession, bishops have the endowment to guide, teach and celebrate the sacraments, the three acts which our Lord Himself bestowed upon the Church. As auxiliaries to the bishops, priests can also guide the Church, teach and administer all sacraments, except for ordination (Acts 14:22). Deacons are consecrated to assist in the liturgy, serve the poor, teach, and perform various social deaconical services.

The Holy Bible and Church canons warn against the hasty ordination of Church ministers. They must be qualified in every aspect of their lives; obtain good theological training and lead a virtuous life. Most importantly, they should be chosen by the people whom they are going to serve; a principal which the Coptic Church observes to this day.

Liturgies

There are three main Divine Liturgies used in the Coptic Church, namely:

1. The Liturgy of Saint Basil, Bishop of *Caesaria*
2. The Liturgy of Saint Gregory of *Nazianzus*, Bishop of *Constantinople*
3. The Liturgy of Saint Cyril I, the 24th Patriarch of the Coptic Church

The bulk of Saint Cyril's liturgy is based on that used by Saint Mark in the first century. It was memorised by the bishops and priests of the Church, until it was translated into the Coptic language from the Greek. Today, these three liturgies, with some additions, are still in use, the Liturgy of Saint Basil being the most commonly used.

The liturgy is a time when the faithful gather to be in union with the Lord, both by attending the service itself and by partaking of the Eucharist which is His true Body and Blood.

Although the liturgical prayers concentrate on the re-enactment on the Last Supper, as our Lord has instructed, and the calling upon the Holy Spirit to descend upon, bless and transform the oblations, it is also seen as an opportunity, once our Lord is present on the altar, that we pray and ask for: the Church; the pope, bishops, priests and deacons; the whole congregation; the seasons, the crops, and even the animals- in short, everything which touches our lives in any possible way

Fasts

The Coptic Church has seasons of fasting matched by no other Christian Church in their length, depth and rate of practice by the faithful. Out of the 365 days of the year, Copts fast for over 210 days.

Fasting is abstaining from food and drink for a certain period of time, after which only foods void of animal products may be eaten. These strict fasting rules may be relaxed on an individual basis by the father confessor to accommodate for illness, weakness, or other personal reasons.

All fasting seasons are seen as periods of preparation, preceding a particular feast; for example: Lent precedes the feast of the Resurrection (Easter), Advent precedes Christmas, and so on. This ensures that the faithful always remain focused on the actual sacred event at hand, and that these do not become matters of mere cultural or social habit, as has become the case for Easter and Christmas for many.

Lent, known as the 'Great Fast,' is largely observed by all Copts. It starts with a pre-Lent fast for one week, followed by a 40-day fast commemorating our Lord's fast in the wilderness, followed by the Holy (Passion) Week, the most solemn and holy week of the Coptic Calendar.

Other fasts include:

- Advent (leading to Christmas)
- the Fast of the Apostles
- the Fast of the Virgin Saint Mary
- the Fast of the people of *Ninevah*
- Wednesdays (commemorating the betrayal of our Lord by Judas)
- Fridays (commemorating His crucifixion)

(Wednesdays and Fridays are fasted throughout the year, except for the 50 joyful days following the feast of the Resurrection.)

The Veneration of the Saints

The worship of saints is expressly forbidden by the Church, but asking for their intercessions however, is central in any Coptic services.

- Throughout the year, the *Synaxarion* (daily register of saints feasts and other events worthy of commemoration) is read in the liturgy, and the saints of that day are commemorated.
- There is a fixed section of the liturgy which commemorates the saints.
- Coptic churches are named after saints.
- The faithful are given saints' names at their Baptism.
- Among all saints, the Virgin Saint Mary, the *Theotokos*, occupies a special place in the heart of all Copts.

Feasts

There are seven major and seven minor feasts of our Lord, and they are:

Major Feasts of our Lord:

1. The Annunciation
2. The Nativity
3. Epiphany
4. Palm Sunday
5. Feast of the Resurrection
6. The Ascension
7. Pentecost

Minor Feasts of our Lord:

1. The Circumcision of our Lord
2. His Presentation to the Temple
3. The Entry of the Holy Family into Egypt
4. The First Miracle at *Cana* of Galilee
5. The Transfiguration
6. Maundy Thursday
7. Thomas Sunday (first Sunday after Easter)

Monthly Feasts:

- The 29th day of every Coptic month commemorates the feasts of: the Annunciation, Nativity and Resurrection.
- 4 . The 21st day of every Coptic month commemorates the dormition of the Virgin Mary the Theotokos
- The 12th day of every Coptic month commemorates the feast of the Archangel Michael

Weekly Feasts:

- Every Sunday stands as a true Sabbath rest, in which we find our rest in the Resurrection of Christ.

The Feasts of the Saints:

- Almost every day is a feast day of one or more of the saints who joined the Victorious Church.
- The Feast of the Apostles, commemorating the martyrdom of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, is celebrated on 12th July (5th *Abib*)
- *El-Nayrouz*, the beginning of the Coptic calendar, which commemorates all the martyrs of the Church, is celebrated on 1st *Tut*.

The Feasts of Saint Mary:

There are several feasts related to the Virgin Saint Mary throughout the year, and they are:

- The annunciation of her birth
- Her birth
- Her presentation into the Temple
- Her dormition
- The assumption of her body
- The apparition of her body to the Apostles
- Her apparition in her church in *Zeitoun*, Cairo

Feasts Relating to the Cross:

There are two annual feasts of the holy Cross:

1. The discovery of the holy Cross by Queen Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine.
2. The dedication of the Church of the Holy Cross, which was built by Queen Helena.

Prayers

The Coptic Orthodox prayer book of the hours, the '*Agpeya*' (Coptic for 'Hours') contains seven daily prayers to be said

at various times throughout the day and night, and which commemorate various events:

- The First Hour (*Matins*)
- The Third Hour (*Terce*)
- The Sixth Hour (*Sext*)
- The Ninth Hour (*None*)
- The Eleventh Hour (*Vespers*)
- The Twelfth Hour (*Compline*)
- Midnight: 1st, 2nd and 3rd services

(There is an eighth prayer named the '*Veil*', which is specifically prayed by those in monastic orders. This is situated between the Twelfth hour and Midnight prayers)

The outlines of these prayers are as follows:

- The **First Hour** commemorates the hour in which the Lord arose from the dead.
- The **Third Hour** commemorates the hour in which the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost. It is also the hour in which the Lord was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate on Good Friday.
- The **Sixth Hour** commemorates the hour in which the Lord was nailed to the cross at *Golgotha*.
- The **Ninth Hour** commemorates the hour in which the Lord died for our redemption, and in which He accepted the penitent thief into Paradise.
- The **Eleventh Hour** commemorates the hour in which the Lord's body was taken down from the Cross, wrapped in linen and anointed with spices.
- The **Twelfth Hour** commemorates the laying down of the Lord's body in the tomb.

- The **Midnight Prayer** commemorates the three prayers of our Lord in *Gathsemane* during Holy Week.

The Church Building

The Exterior

The Church building is usually in one of the three following shapes:

- The Cross, as a symbol of Salvation
- A ship, as a symbol of Noah's Ark, outside of which no one was saved
- A Circle, as a symbol of eternal life with God, that is, without end.

The Interior

The church was originally divided into three sections: the *narthex*, the *nave* and the *sanctuary*. The reason for this was that the people who participated in the public services of the church were separated into three distinctive groups:

- **Firstly**, the clergy (bishops, priests, and deacons), who officiated at the services.
- **Secondly**, the laymen, the Christian faithful who attended the services.
- **Thirdly**, the catechumens, the people who wanted to become Christians, who were being taught the Christian faith, but who had not been baptised.

Each part of the church was designated for one of the groups of participants in the divine Liturgy and other church services: the nave for the Christian faithful, the *narthex* for the catechumens, and the sanctuary for the clergy.

A fourth section was at the rear of the church, and this was designated for those who had sinned and were in a

transitional penitent stage, but who still desired to attend parts of the liturgy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Contributions to Christendom

Ancient Texts

Since its establishment, the Coptic Church has played an important role in Christian Theology. It has been a source of thousands of texts, as well as biblical and theological studies.

The Holy Bible was translated into the Coptic language in the second Century, and hundreds of scribes made copies of the Bible and of the many other liturgical and theological books. Today libraries, museums and universities throughout the world possess hundreds and thousands of Coptic manuscripts. In the monastery of Saint Pishoi alone, in the *Natrun* Valley of the Western desert of Egypt, there were approximately 400 scribes.

The School of Alexandria

Long before the establishment of Christianity in Egypt, Alexandria was famous for its various schools, among which was the '*Museum*,' the greatest philosophical school in the East, containing in its library between two hundred thousand and half a million books and manuscripts. It was a unique centre of a brilliant intellectual life where Egyptian, Greek and Jewish cultures were taught.

As recorded by Saint Jerome, Saint Mark himself founded the School of Alexandria. He established the School for the teaching of Christianity in order to provide it as a firm foundation for the city. In time, the School became very famous; it was the oldest centre of sacred sciences in the history of Christianity. Many prominent bishops from different parts of the world were instructed there, and it

introduced into the world many scholars and saints, such as: Athenagoras, Clement, Saint Dionysius, Saint Peter the Seal of Martyrs, Saint Didymus the Blind, and the great scholar Origen, who was active in the field of commentary and the comparative study of the Bible.

The metaphorical way of commentary, with its deep spiritual meanings, began in Egypt. Origen composed over 6,000 commentaries of the Bible in addition to his famous *Hexapla*. In this context, the historian Rees states,

'The most renowned intellectual institution in the early Christian world was undoubtedly the *Cataphetical School of Alexandria*, and its primary concern was the study of the Bible. The preoccupation of this school was to discover everywhere the spiritual sense underlying the written word of the Scripture.'

The *School* rivalled the *Museum*, and attracted and converted some of its philosophers who later became Church leaders.

Many scholars, such as Saint Jerome, visited the School of Alexandria to communicate directly with its scholars. Saint Didymus the Blind was dean at the time, and of their meeting, Saint Jerome said that he learnt much from Saint Didymus and wished he could spend more time with him.

Deans of the Cataphetical School of Alexandria

Saint Dionysius of Alexandria, also called the 'Teacher of the Universal Church,' was a disciple of Origen. He was head of the School for about sixteen years. He was ordained deacon by Pope Demetrius, and priest by Pope Heracles. In 247 AD, he was chosen as Pope of Alexandria, and had the difficult task of preserving the Church amidst persecution.

Saint Peter, the Last Martyr was ordained Pope of Alexandria in 302 AD, during the Diocletian persecution.

When he was imprisoned, he warned his disciples against Arius for he had seen our Lord in a vision with His garments torn, and when he asked Him about the cause, He answered that it was Arius. In 311 AD, when the crowds surrounded the prison to save their Pope, Saint Peter, he secretly sent to the commander to plan for his martyrdom, in order to avoid the bloodshed.

Saint Didymus the Blind lost his eyesight at the age of four, but due to his ardent desire for learning, invented the method of engraved writing for reading with his fingers, fifteen centuries before Braille. By this method, he learned the Holy Bible and the Church doctrines. He became dean of the School of Alexandria, and among his disciples were Saint Gregory of *Nazienza*, Saint Jerome, Rufinus and Palladius. In his dispute with the Arians, he conquered them. Saint Anthony said to Saint Didymus, 'Do not be sad that you have no eyesight with which the animals, and even the insects, share, but remember that you have divine insight with which you can see the light of divinity.'

Saint Athanasius the Apostolic, in defending the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, wrote his famous series of four books *Contra Arianus*. Saint Jerome said that at one time, the whole world would have fallen into Arianism had it not been for Saint Athanasius. He was enthroned as Patriarch of Alexandria in 328 AD, and shepherded the Church for forty-six years, seventeen of which he spent in exile on account of his vigorous opposition to the spreading of Arianism, which had the support of certain emperors. He was exiled five times, during which he went from country to country and continent to continent, forming holy synods, maintaining the Faith, and explaining the Divinity of our Lord.

Its Growth

The Christian School began as a Catachetical School, where candidates were admitted to learn the Christian Faith, along

with some Biblical studies to qualify for baptism. Admittance was open to everyone, regardless of their culture, age or background. By the second century, the School had become quite influential in the life of the Church, as can be seen from the following:

- It was able to quench the thirst of the Alexandrian Christians for religious knowledge, encourage higher studies, and creating research fields in various areas.
- It gave rise to numerous spiritual leaders over the years, many of whom were to sit on the throne of Saint Mark.
- Through its missionary zeal, it was able to win souls to Christianity from within Egypt and abroad.
- It attracted students from other nations, many of whom became spiritual leaders and bishops in their respective Churches.
- It used philosophy as a weapon against pagan philosophers, thus beating them at their own game.

Its Program

At the time of Saint Clement of Alexandria, three courses were taught:

- A special course for non-Christians, introducing the candidate to the principles of Christianity.
- A course on Christian morals.
- An advanced course on Divine wisdom, and sufficient knowledge for the spiritual Christian.

The subjects of the School of Alexandria were not limited to theology, but also covered science, mathematics and the humanities. Worship went alongside study. Teachers and their students practised prayer, fasting and various forms of asceticism. In purity and integrity their lives were exemplary. Celibacy was a recommended example, followed by many.

The Ecumenical Councils

In the first ecumenical councils, the Alexandrian theologians were leaders and pioneers of the Christian Faith, their strength lying in their deep, spiritual, pious, theological and biblical thought and knowledge. Due to their adherence to the Orthodox Faith since early Christianity, the Copts played a positive role in solving many theological problems in both East and West. They did not interfere in other Churches' problems, but because of their spirit of love and unity, were consulted by them.

While Christianity and the monastic movement were spreading in Egypt, heresies within the Universal Church began to arise, threatening to undermine the very essence of Orthodox Christianity, and destroy the basic fibre of the Church. Battles for the Holy Orthodox and Apostolic Faith were being waged in Alexandria and in ecclesiastical centres throughout the Christian world. The end of the era of persecutions had not only brought growth and expansion within the Church, but had also provided an ideal climate for fostering dissension and heresy. As a result of heresies, the Christian Church saw the need to define its doctrines more clearly and to formulate its creed of Faith.

The Coptic Orthodox Church played an important part in the first three Ecumenical Councils, which convened to put a stop to heresies, to formulate the Orthodox and Apostolic creed and doctrines, and to document the Apostolic canons of the Church.

The First Ecumenical Council

This council was convened in Nicea, in AD 325, because of the heretical teaching of Arius, a priest from Libya, who denied the Divinity of Christ and taught that our Lord had been created within time. It was attended by 318 bishops, including Pope Alexandros, the 19th Patriarch of Alexandria, twenty Coptic bishops and Saint Athanasius, at the time a twenty year-old deacon. Saint Athanasius skilfully defended the Orthodox Faith, and the Council refuted Arius' heresy, affirmed the Divinity of Christ, and formulated the Nicene, or Athanasian, Creed of Faith, which is still faithfully adhered to by the Coptic Orthodox Church, and used in part or in whole by almost all Churches of the East and West, till this day.

The Creed was worded by Pope Alexandros, deacon Athanasius, and Leontius, Bishop of *Caeserea* in *Cappadocia*, and was approved and signed by the members of the Council. Other issues, such as the date of the celebration of Easter, the question of re-baptism of apostates, the question of celibacy or non-celibacy of the clergy, as well as a number of other questions, were considered. The Patriarch of Alexandria was given the responsibility of writing a Paschal letter to all the other patriarchs and bishops, advising them of the date of Easter. The outcome of all these issues and debates was the formulation of twenty canons regulating Church matters.

The Second Ecumenical Council

Held in Constantinople in 381 AD, and attended by 150 bishops, this Council convened to refute a new heresy being proclaimed by Macedonius, bishop of Constantinople, who denied the Divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Council, including the Alexandrian delegation led by Pope Timotheus, 22nd Patriarch, affirmed the Divinity of the Holy Spirit and added the last clause to the Nicene creed, concerning the Holy

Spirit, affirming faith in the Universal Church, the oneness of Baptism, and the awaiting of the resurrection of the dead and eternal life.

The Third Ecumenical Council

In Ephesus, in 431 AD, this Council convened to refute the heresy of Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, who stated that Christ had two separate natures, and that the Human Christ alone suffered and died on the Cross, apart from the Divine Christ, and accordingly, also denied the title of '*Theotokos*' or 'Mother / Birthgiver of God' given to the Virgin Saint Mary.

The Council was attended by 200 bishops, among whom was Pope Cyril I of Alexandria, also known as 'Pillar of the Faith,' 24th Patriarch of the Church, who had previously convened two local councils of the bishops and heads of the See of Alexandria, and circulated many letters concerning the Nestorian heresy. It was Saint Cyril who worded the Introduction to the Creed, which was affirmed and accepted by the first Council of Alexandria, and which is still recited in the Coptic Church as a prefix to the Athanasian, or Nicene, Creed. Among the Egyptian delegation to the Council also were Saint Shenouda of *Akhmim* and Saint Dioscorus. Under the presidency of Pope Cyril I of Alexandria, the council condemned the teaching of Nestorius, excommunicated him, reaffirmed the perfect union of Christ's Divinity with His Humanity, and acknowledged the Virgin Saint Mary as the '*Theotokos*' or 'Mother / Birthgiver of God.'

Monasticism

Monasticism began in the Coptic Church towards the end of the third Century, and flourished in the fourth. There were hundreds of monasteries and thousands of caves in the mountains of Egypt. Saint John Cassian said that the traveller from Alexandria in the North, to *Luxor* in the

South, would have in his ears along the whole journey, the sounds of prayers and hymns of the monks, scattered in the desert, from the monasteries and from the caves, from monks, hermits and anchorites.

For the monks, monasticism was the life of prayer, contemplation, solitude, worship and purity of heart. They had nothing in their minds, hearts and feelings except God. They lived the calm and quiet life abiding in the Lord, detaching themselves from everything and everyone, in order to be attached to Him alone.

Forms of Monasticism

Monasticism took three main forms, all of which are still to be found in the Church today.

(a) Monarchism

The anchorites or hermits lived in complete seclusion, only visiting the abbot when they needed counsel. Each hermit organised his own prayer, clothing, food and work.

The first anchorite in the world was Saint Paul of *Thebes*. He lived for eighty years in the Egyptian desert without seeing a single person. Other hermits also went to the inner deserts and settled there for tens of years, seeing no-one. Saint Mary of Egypt was one of these, and is also considered as one of the hermits who are referred to as 'pilgrims,' who had no specific cell, but lived wandering in the wilderness.

(b) The Cenobitic Order

Under this system, founded by Saint Pachomius in Upper Egypt, the monks lived in a community inside the walls of the monastery, in association with each other, governed by an abbot and by rules.

(c) The *Communal System* or *Semi-Eremitic Life*

This form of monasticism is mid-way between *monarchism* and the *cenobitic* system. The mode of Saint Anthony's life, as described by Saint Athanasius, was actually *semi-eremitic* in essence, for the monks lived in separate caves, or cells, and assembled occasionally for the Divine Liturgy, or spiritual meetings. Thus Saint Anthony prepared the way for the communal order.

In the wildernesses of *Nitria* and *Scetis* the communal order was established by Saint Amoun and Saint Macarius the Great. There, the ascetics lived not in absolute isolation, but in cells built at such a distance that they could neither see nor hear one another. They gathered for communal prayer on Saturdays and Sundays.

Famous Personalities of the Monastic Movement

Saint Paul, of the lower Thebaid in Egypt, was the first hermit. In 250 AD, upon the death of his parents when he was 16 years old, he inherited great wealth. He fled to the desert where he lived over ninety years. Each day, a raven would bring him one half of a loaf of bread for his sustenance. His biography was written by Saint Jerome in 374 AD.

Saint Anthony was born in Middle Egypt. He was eighteen years of age when he entered a church and heard the words of the Gospel, "*If you want to be perfect, go, sell all you have and give to the poor; and come, follow Me*" (Matthew 19:21). In obedience, he sold his land, entrusted his sister to a community of virgins, and lived in a hut under the guidance of a recluse. He visited Alexandria in 316 AD to

assist the martyrs, and in 352 AD to help Saint Athanasius in his fight against Arianism.

Saint Anthony was a great leader of thousands of monks in Egypt in the fourth Century, and many of his disciples also came from the West, after hearing of his inspirational life; for this reason he is considered all over the world, until today, as the 'father of monasticism.'

Saint Pachomius was born in Upper Egypt and was an officer in the army. He was converted to Christianity when he witnessed the generosity of Christians and their love, even for their enemies. He left the army and was baptised in 307 AD, becoming a disciple of Saint Palamon the Hermit. He established the *Cenobitic* order and founded two monasteries in Egypt, as well as two convents under the guidance of his sister. He established the *cenobitic* rules of monasticism, which were later translated into Greek and Latin, and used by Saint Basil the Great.

Saint Macarius the Great founded the *communal* order in the desert of Scetis, now known as *Wadi-El-Natrun* and visited Saint Anthony on at least two occasions.

Saint Shenute the Archimandrite ('Head of the Anchorites') was the abbot of the White Monastery of *Atribe* in the desert of *Thebes* for more than 65 years, during the 4th and 5th Centuries, and lead approximately 2200 monks and 1800 nuns. In 431 AD, he accompanied Saint Cyril the Great at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus.

Saint Sarah the Abbess lived in *Pelusium*, and was endowed with the grace of true leadership and spiritual discernment. Her sayings were treasured by the desert fathers.

Saint Syncletica founded the first monastic community for women in the world, in Alexandria. Her biography and teachings were preserved by Pope Athanasius.

Effects of Coptic Monasticism on the World

Coptic Monasticism is considered the most profound spiritual revival in the history of the Church. The news of the spiritual life of the monks spread to every part of the world despite the fact that they did not write about themselves, and for this reason, there is no Coptic history of the Coptic monks. Despite this fact however, people came from all over the world in order to hear a word from one of the monks, and to take it as a word of spiritual guidance and benefit throughout their lives.

Saint Palladius visited many monks and wrote his famous book, *Paradise of the Fathers*, from which we learn about these holy fathers. They were not preachers, but they were living sermons, and were examples of the true spiritual life. They were the image of God on earth.

Furthermore, the monks, nuns, hermits and anchorites of Egypt influenced monasticism in the rest of the world in the following ways:

- During his exile in *Treve* and his flight to Rome in 339 AD, Pope Athanasius was influential in the introduction of the monastic movement to Roman religious life. He also wrote '*Vita Antoni*' (*The Life of Anthony*), which is read the world over.
- The Pachomian rules were translated into Greek by Palladius, and into Latin by Saint Jerome.
- The rules of Benedict of *Nursia* (480-550) were based on the Pachomian rules.
- Saint John Cassian (360-435 AD) dwelt in Egypt for seven years, and wrote his two famous

books, *Institutes* and *Conferences* based on his experiences there.

- Evagrius Ponticus, who occupied a central role in the history of Christian spirituality, lived as a monk for two years in *Nitria*, and then for fourteen years in the *Celia*.
- Saint Jerome and Saint Rufinus visited Egypt.
- Saint Hilarioun of Palestine became a disciple of Saint Anthony and returned to his own land to practice asceticism.
- Etheria (Egaria), a Spanish abbess of the fourth century, visited Egypt.
- Saint Melania the Elder, a Roman lady, visited the desert of Egypt.
- Saint John Chrysostom stayed in one of the Pachomian monasteries for 8 years.
- Orphenus came to Egypt and wrote *The Desert Fathers*.
- Saint Epiphanius (315-403 AD), Bishop of *Salamis* in *Cyprus*, was instructed in Coptic monastic thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mission in the Coptic Church

The First Missionary

The first missionary in the Coptic Church was Saint Mark himself, who entered Egypt with the desire to spread the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to those who lived there, and since that day, the Coptic Church has always been a vessel through which the word of God has travelled throughout the world, and over generations.

Mission in the Church

Organised groups, individuals, monks, clergymen, merchants, soldiers and devout women from Egypt went out to almost every part of world and spread the Gospel. Pantaeenus is well-known for his work in India.

The School of Alexandria sent out missionaries to pagan tribes in *Libya, Phrygia, Sinai, Arabia, Felix*, the *Thebaid* and Upper Egypt. Christianity was first introduced into *Ethiopia* by Egyptian merchants through their commercial and maritime relations, and likewise into *Sudan* in the 6th century.

5. In Europe, Saint Athanasius founded a church in *Belgia* during one of his exiles. In Switzerland, the Theban Legion, led by Saint Maurice, filled the land with the blood of their martyrdom when they refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods; hence the place was named *Saint Moritz*.
6. Felix, his sister and their friend spread the Gospel in Zurich, and the official seal of Zurich still bears the picture of these three Coptic evangelists.

7. In Ireland, seven Coptic monks were among the pioneers of the Faith, and left many traces in the life and art of the people; three manuscripts in the Royal Academy of Dublin confirm this.

Mission Today

The missionary work of the Coptic Church was not limited to the early centuries, but extends to its active and vibrant ministry today.

With many treasures to share, the Coptic Church now exists in almost every continent of the world, and spreads proclaims its Faith, Dogma and history in the only way it knows- by living the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and maintaining its Traditional and Conservative approach in its belief, while at the same time utilising every means of proper communication and form of printed, electronic, wired and wireless access to the surrounding community.

The philosophy of the Church is not to go forth and transform every human being to being a Coptic Orthodox Christian, but rather, that she follows the instruction of our Lord in the gospel of Saint Matthew, in which He let our *"...good works shine before men, that they will see (our) good works and glorify (our) Father in heaven."*

Although the Coptic Church follows the above philosophy all over the world, this missionary work is most obvious on the African continent, where there is a permanent Coptic bishop for African affairs, who has established many services for the local community, such as, a Theological college, a community hospital, training programs allowing locals to gain skills which then permit them to have a source of stable income for their families. These training programs assist to the extent of providing the graduates with the

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appropriate tools to continue their new careers, such as sewing machines and carpentry tools.

The work of the Church in numerous countries in the above way has led to many native conversions to Coptic Orthodoxy, to the extent that we also now have ordained local clergy, from amongst the people, to serve their own people.

The missionary work of the Coptic Church does not stop there. In 1995, with great foresight, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III consecrated a 'Bishop for Mission' having this particular responsibility, and travelling to Africa, North America, South America, Australia, and many other countries, to conduct seminars on the area of Mission.

All of this shows that from the day of its establishment until today, The Coptic Orthodox Church has always been, and continues to be, a true ambassador, bearing the word of God to all nations in love, without any desire for dominance or personal worldly glory.

CHAPTER SIX

Coptic Culture

Art and music are the most ancient languages of worship which have led man to a heavenly atmosphere, helping him in his fellowship with God. Worship is the expression of man's response to God's infinite love. Man feels that mere words are inadequate to express this response, therefore he uses his gift in arts in his worship.

It is man's desire to offer his life and devote all his culture to express his deep, unspeakable love for God. At the same time, it is God's beneficence that He longs to sanctify man's being, life and culture as a sign of man's great value in God's sight.

God loves man as a whole; He accepts his soul as His dwelling place and does not despise his body and human culture, for both these can be sanctified by the Holy Spirit to act spiritually as instruments of righteousness, for the edification of God's Church on earth.

Coptic Art

In the early Christian era, many thousands of Copts preferred to live in the wilderness out of their longing for the angelic life. For those who remained in the cities and countries, the Christian Faith penetrated their daily life, even their eating, drinking, literature and arts. There is evidence that Christian symbols and images were inscribed on their rings, painted on their walls, doors, cups, plates, chairs, and the like.

Coptic Iconography

The word 'icon' denotes a religious picture which is used to depict the image of God. Today the word 'icon' is primarily associated with the paintings of the Orthodox Churches.

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Historians date the appearance of the iconographic style to the first three centuries of Christianity. The idea behind the use of icons in the early Church was due to the unique experience that the Church faced. As many Christian converts had difficulty understanding Biblical teachings and their spiritual meanings, the early Church leaders permitted the use of icons to help them.

With the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine (307 - 337 AD) to Christianity, came a dramatic change. He hastened the triumph of Christianity over paganism by forbidding idolatry. The statues of the pagan gods were removed from the capital, and icons were used to decorate churches and state buildings. In the following century, Pope Cyril I (404 - 430 AD), the 24th Coptic Patriarch, permitted icons to be hung in the patriarchate and in all the churches of Egypt.

Icons are not meant to be worshipped or venerated as something holy in themselves, in the way that idols were; the reverence shown to an icon is not to the artwork, but rather to the person or event which it portrays. An icon is meant to be a window into the spiritual world, used to help the believer to contemplate spiritual matters and to put him into a prayerful frame of mind, as a reminder of events in the Bible, and of the life of Christ and the saints. The center of the Christian Faith is that "the Word became flesh" (John 1:1), and thus it is not surprising that the loving and merciful face of our Lord Jesus Christ is the subject of many icons.

The art of making Orthodox icons follows specific symbolism which carries meaningful messages. Some of these characteristics are, for example: firstly, large and wide eyes, symbolising the spiritual eye that looks beyond the material world, for the Bible says, "the light of the body is the eye " (Matthew 6:22); secondly, large ears, which listen to the word of God, for the Bible says, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:23); and thirdly, gentle lips

to glorify and praise the Lord, for the Bible says, "My mouth shall praise You with joyful lips" (Psalm 63:5).

The eyes and ears on a figure in an icon are disproportionately large because a spiritual person spends much time listening to God's word and seeking to do God's will. On the other hand, the mouth, which can also often be the source of empty or harmful words, is small. The nose, which is seen as sensual, is also small. When an evil character is portrayed in an icon, it is always in profile, as it is not desirable to make eye contact with such a person and thus to dwell or meditate upon them. Figures in Coptic icons often have large heads, meaning that they are individuals devoted to contemplation and prayer.

Icons portraying saints who suffered and were tortured for their faith, depict them with peaceful and smiling faces, showing that their inner peace was not disturbed, even by the hardships they endured and suffered willingly and joyfully for the Lord.

It is noteworthy to mention that from time to time, miracles are performed through icons. In the last few years, for instance, there have been icons that have "wept" oil, leading to the healing of many, the conversion of some non-Christians, and the strengthening of the faith of believers. This happened in many places both in Egypt and in our churches in other countries.

Coptic Music

The Copts inherited a very ancient musical tradition from their ancestors the pharaohs. One of the foremost Coptic musical scholars, Dr. Ragheb Muftah, says, "Scientific research has proven that the music of the Coptic Church is the most ancient ecclesiastical music in existence, and constitutes the oldest school of music which the world now possesses. The Coptic Church owes the preservation of this monumental and invaluable heritage of its ecclesiastical

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music to its conservative nature inherited from ancient times."

Dr. Dryioton, a renowned Egyptologist, also writes, "The key to the mystery of Pharaonic music will then be found in a good edition of Coptic ecclesiastical music in use in our days". The English scholar, Earnest Newlandsmith of Oxford and London Universities, who spent winters in Egypt (1927 - 1936), invited by Dr. Moftah, specially noted the Coptic hymns, said:

"Coptic music is a great music and may be called one of the seven wonders of the world, and indeed, if a Caruso filled with the Spirit of God were trying to sing some of the Coptic themes in the form of a great oratorio, it would be enough to rekindle Christendom (spiritually). This music, which has been handed down from untold centuries within the Coptic Church, should be a bridge between East and West, and would place a new idiom at the disposal of the western musicians. It is lofty, noble and great, specially in the element of the infinite, which is lacking today. Western music has its origin in ancient Egypt".

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Church Today*

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Coptic Church underwent phases of new development. In 1853, Pope Cyril IV established the first modern Coptic school, including the first Egyptian school for girls. He also founded a printing press, which was the second national press in the country, the first having been established by the government at an earlier date. Pope Cyril IV established very friendly relations with other demoninations, to the extent that when the Greek patriarch in Egypt had to absent himself for a long period of time outside the country, he left his Church under the guidance of the Coptic Patriarch.

The Theological College of the School of Alexandria was re established in 1893. It began its new history with five students, one of whom was later to become its dean. Today, it has campuses in Alexandria, Cairo, and various dioceses throughout Egypt, as well as outside Egypt, in New Jersey and Los Angeles, Australia, and in the United Kingdom, where potential clergymen and other qualified men and women are taught many subjects, among which are: Theology, Church history, missionary studies and Coptic language.

Today, the Coptic Orthodox Church is the largest Church in the Middle East, with about 12 million faithful in Egypt. There is an increasing number of monks and nuns in monasteries and convents in the deserts of Egypt, and an increasing number of well-educated young men and women who are consecrating their lives to the ministry as parish priests, monks, nuns, deacons and deaconesses.

The Holy Synod of the Coptic Church is now made up of approximately ninety metropolitans and bishops, headed by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

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The Coptic Church is an active member of the World Council of Churches (*WCC*), the Middle East Council of Churches (*MECC*), the All Africa Conference of Churches (*AACC*), and many other such international, regional and national bodies. It was the founding member of the Middle East Council of Churches in 1974, under the leadership of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

His Holiness, being a great ambassador of the Coptic Church, and Christendom in general, was recently president of *WCC* for a seven-year period, and remains one of the presidents of *MECC*.

In this same spirit, the Coptic Church is currently engaged in either official or unofficial dialogues with most Christian denominations, continuing its work for unity and the reuniting of the one, holy, universal Church.

As the head of the oldest Church in Africa, Pope Shenouda was keen to extend the Apostolic Mission of Saint Mark across all Africa. In June 1976, His Holiness ordained a bishop for African Affairs (refer to chapter 5) to commence missionary work among the African tribes in Kenya. Today there are over fourteen Coptic churches, two monasteries, a clinic, and a vocational centre in Kenya, Zambia, Zaïre, and the surrounding regions as well as churches in Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa.

Outside Egypt, there are over eighty churches in the United States, as well as two theological colleges and a monastery in California, whilst in Canada, there are twenty-one churches. There are over twenty churches in Australia alongside two monasteries, a Coptic Theological College and a number of Coptic schools. In Europe, there are over fifty churches across twelve countries. There now exist: Saint Anthony Monastery in Frankfurt, Saint Shenouda Monastery in Milan, and a new monastery in France.

The United Kingdom now has over fifteen churches, a retreat centre in Birmingham, and a Church Centre and Theological College in Stevenage.

An important indication of the success and growth of the ministry of the Coptic Church outside of Egypt is the growing number of her children who have been brought up in various countries now having become monks, nuns, priests, and even bishops. They serve their own churches and the Church at large as people who have lived in these communities and have an indepth knowledge of their language, people and culture.

As an important pastoral note, the Coptic Church is now appointing bishops to oversee various diocese and areas around the world, ensuring more concentrated local pastoral care. There are currently: four bishops across the United States, one in Australia, two in France, two in Italy, one in Germany, one in Switzerland, one in Australia, two in Africa and four in the United Kingdom. As the ministry grows and expands, we can be sure of seeing many more such appointments in the coming years.

In considering all of the above-mentioned facts, it is obvious that the Coptic Orthodox Church has been blessed with a very firm foundation which has lead it to grow in many directions, maintaining its care for its children throughout the past twenty centuries, and leading them into the twenty-first century with the approach of intensified educational and pastoral care. This approach ensures the continued line of Traditional and Apostolic Orthodoxy faithfully handed down from generation to generation, and maintains the role of the Church in spreading the message of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and professing the Salvation which He has provided for us through the ultimate sacrifice of the Cross, and His glorious Resurrection. It is also obvious that the Lord has kept and protected the Church through wave after wave of persecution, maintaining

it as a devoted witness to His divine and joyful message throughout the ages.

We pray that the Lord Jesus Christ, the true incarnate Word of God, grant His Church continued protection and guidance for years to come, in preparation for the glory of His joyful Second Coming, that He may then guide us into His everlasting kingdom with the joyful words *"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"* (Matthew 25:34).

* Statistics used in this chapter are constantly changing due to the growing and expanding nature of the Church and its activities, and thus, the figures used are those available at the time of the second publication of this book.

The Coptic Centre In Stevenage

Shephalbury Manor, a magnificent Gothic building set in the midst of the greenery of Shephalbury Park, has been an important part of Stevenage heritage since its' construction in 1865 AD, and has been the home of many groups and activities, including a boarding school.

In 1991, the Manor, which was by then dilapidated due to closure, was purchased by the Coptic Church to be used for various social and youth activities, and became 'Archangel Michael & Saint Anthony Coptic Orthodox Church Centre'. Since its purchase much effort and expense has been put into the renovation of the Manor, bearing in mind the maintenance of its heritage, while at the same time adding our own Coptic culture and style, as is evident in the chapel.

The church at the Centre is named after the Archangel Michael & Saint Anthony, the connection between them being that Archangel Michael is the leader of the heavenly angels, while, being the father of all monks throughout the world, Saint Anthony is leader of the 'earthly angels.'

Although visiting priests from other churches would come and serve various liturgical services at the Centre on Saturdays for the first few years, December 1995 saw the commencement of regular pastoral services with the arrival of its first permanent priest, and since then, the pastoral, spiritual and social activity of the Centre have greatly increased. Due to the further increase of activities at and through the Centre, a priest, formerly one of the congregation of the church, was ordained especially for the service of Archangel Michael and Saint Anthony church at the Centre in September 2000 by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III in the church itself, and amongst its congregation.

The Centre serves as a local parish, covering Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, North London and other surrounding areas; being so close to London, it also provides a series of social and general services, including:

- Christian Education in the form of Sunday School, Bible Studies and youth meetings on Saturdays and Sundays
- The Publication of the official English internationally-distributed magazine of the Coptic Orthodox Church
- The publication of various books, pamphlets and other material in the English language.
- A Coptic Theological College which serves the whole of Europe.
- A Papal Residence for His Holiness Pope Shenouda III during pastoral visits to the United Kingdom.
- Hosting various ecumenical meetings with church leaders, both locally from Stevenage, nationally from the United Kingdom, and even internationally.
- Social and ecumenical ties and contacts through an official press and public relations office for the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom.
- The annual U.K. Coptic Youth Conference.
- Various conferences and spiritual retreats.
- Various seminars for clergy and lay servants.
- Numerous social and sporting days throughout the year.
- Officially-recognised Scout, Cub and Beaver activities.

Besides being a Centre for Copts throughout the United Kingdom and providing the above services in a family environment and atmosphere the Centre also prides itself on having very good relations with the surrounding community, including: local Churches and denominations, local government, community service groups, the District Scout Association and all with whom it has come into contact.



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The Centre is also home to:

- **Archangel Michael & Saint Anthony
Coptic Orthodox Church**
- **Saint Athanasius the Apostolic
Coptic Theological College**
- **Coptic Orthodox Church
U.K. Press and Public Relations Office**
- **C.O.P.A.
(Coptic Orthodox Publishers Association)**
- **Saint Athanasius
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- **El-Keraza English Magazine**

Front cover icon painted exclusively by Isaac Fanous
Back cover icon painted exclusively by Tasony Sawsan

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