

ABBA KYRILLOS

PATRIARCH AND SOLITARY

John Watson



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by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay is the fourth in a series of background papers for a projected biography of the 117th and reigning patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, His Holiness Pope Shenouda the Third. Because I have been preparing that biography for over a decade, it seems right to publish these papers now. Time is always pressing and ever elusive. The completion of my work may be left in other hands.

I am indebted to the editor of the Coptic Church Review for his invitation to present this essay in his journal.

John Watson

September 1995

PREFACE

A friend in need is a friend indeed. This is Father John Watson in relation to the Coptic Orthodox Church. It was in 1981 during what was described as ‘The Autumn of Fury’ that this relationship started. On September 2, 1981 President Sadat of Egypt deposed Pope Shenouda III and exiled him to the desert monastery of St. Bishoi, replacing him with a five-bishop committee. He put eight Coptic bishops, 24 priests and more than 100 laymen and women in prison. He also ordered the closure of two Coptic newspapers and three welfare societies. All this could be tolerated by the Copts who have suffered persecution for 20 centuries, from pagan, heretic, Christian and finally Moslem rulers. But the greatest blow came two weeks later from inside the Church when the Holy Synod, under pressure from Sadat, accepted to delegate the authorities of the Pope to the government-appointed ‘Papel Committee.’ Not only did this divide the Church, but it also prevented her from getting any outside help. Neither the World Council of Churches nor the National Council of Churches discussed the issue, considering it an internal Church affair. No voice was heard from a single Christian Church or any international organization for one year. It was at this time that several articles appeared in *The Tablet* explaining the true Coptic situation. The author was an Anglican priest called John Watson, unknown to any of us at the time, but would soon become a great support to the laity of the Coptic diaspora during the following years. It was thanks to the writings and work of Father Watson in Europe and other western friends in the U.S. that enough international pressure could be built up in order to change things in Egypt. Pope Shenouda returned to his see in January 1985.

Since 1981, Dr. Watson has worked hard for the Coptic Church. Because he loved the Coptic Church he studied her history, her theology, and spirituality, her liturgy and language and her icons. Before writing this book, he had prolonged visits to Egypt during which he lived among the monks in their ancient monasteries, spoke to the highest ranks of the hierarchy as well as to the poorest Copts in the slums of Cairo, and visited the historical churches.

This book is a well balanced biography of the previous Patriarch that looks at him from several angles whereas most of the many other books about him deal with his miracles or with one of his ascetic virtues. Those who have known Pope Kyrillos, will enjoy seeing him alive in this book.

The picture on the backcover is taken from a color icon presented to the author from Isaac Fanous, Professor of Art at the Institute of Coptic Studies in Cairo.

Editor

INTRODUCTION

Egypt has a population of over fifty-five million. It is possible that as many as eight million Egyptians are Christians.¹ If there are that many Copts in Egypt then there must be at least twice that number of portraits of Abba Kyrillos, the 116th Coptic Patriarch in the country. Postcards, posters and prayer cards bearing his image can be found wherever there are Coptic Orthodox Christians.

An exhaustive catalogue of the photographs, paintings and even icons of this outstanding church leader does not exist, but it would fill many volumes.² There are highly coloured collages of Abba Kyrillos with his patron Saint Mina and the camels of that saint's tradition. Church shops sell postcards of the patriarch having a calming effect upon the imperial lions in Ethiopia, during a very rare visit outside Egypt. Portrayals of the holy man, with an obvious Messianic reference, show him seated upon a donkey in the Mariout desert. Disconcerting portraits of him as a long-haired ascetic and hermit, before his days as Coptic Pope, remind us of his reputation as a solitary and a mystic. There are portfolios of press photos of Abba Kyrillos with President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, President Anwar Sadat, WCC General Secretary Eugene Carson Blake, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenogoras of Constantinople; and a parallel collection with Grand Muftis and Sheikhs of Al Azhar. It seems that no opportunity to point a camera at the holy man was ever missed. Even more unusual, and slightly disturbing from a Western viewpoint, are those photographs which show Pope Kyrillos after

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- 1 There has not been a census which identifies the number of Christians in Egypt. A publication of the Ministry of Information *The Copts Through the Ages* (7th Edition and undated but probably published in 1972) is the work of Bishop Athanasius of Beni-Suef and Bahnasa and states that there are five million Copts in Egypt. This is a serious, or possibly deliberate, underestimate. My figure is based upon calculations from public obituaries where Christian and Muslim names can be identified. In his '*Religious Demography*' (pp. 41-115 of Christians in the Arab East), Robert Brenton Betts, in 1979 calculated that there were over three million Copts in Egypt. Even then, he recognized that the estimate might be conservative.
 - 2 But see esp.: *Snaps of Pope Kyrillos VI Every day Life* (64pp. undated but purchased in Cairo in 1989 Publishers: Pope Kyrillos Publications, Cairo, Egypt) with captions in Arabic, French, German and English. Despite its title, the book is a large format biographical record in black and white photographs. It is an eloquent work and should be studied with great care.

his death, but still seated upon the patriarchal throne of Saint Mark: large electric fans cool his body as the patriarch receives the final, tearful farewells of the faithful. A few of these extraordinary images are available in photographic collections, others enliven the pages of numerous monographs and books devoted to the study of the life and miracles of the Coptic “Pope Kyrillos the sixth, the Most Holy Pope and Patriarch of the great city of Alexandria and of all the land of Egypt, of Jerusalem the Holy City, of Nubia, Abyssinia and Pentapolis, and all the preaching of Saint Mark”³

A student of the Coptic Orthodox Church, visiting Egypt in the 1900s, quickly discovers that the iconographic presence is an accurate reflection of the impact of this solitary monk upon the Egyptian Church. His importance for modern Church history in Egypt is the equivalent of Mao Tse Tung’s in contemporary Chinese history. Both deserve their status as icons. The church in Egypt at the end of the twentieth century is the church created during the primacy of Abba Kyrillos.

3 Quoted in Edward Wakin *A Lonely Minority*: The modern story of Egypt's Copts (The challenge of survival for four million (sic.) Christians. Wm. Morrow, New York, USA, 1963 p. 103.

I

It is often the case that those who establish a reputation for lives of inner depth and strength have quite simple outer lives. It is particularly true of Abba Kyrillos. His life as a model of outward stability: sixty-eight years spent almost entirely in Egypt and over three hidden decades as a monk and solitary.

Even when he rose to the senior bishopric in the Coptic Orthodox Church, Kyrillos was faithful to his inner life. Some Copts were disappointed by his quietism and pietism. They saw that he preferred to be absorbed in prayer and contemplation. It was not easy to distract him from this absorption. Not only had a monk become Patriarch, but the Patriarch remained a monk.⁴

'The Child is father of the man'.⁵ Azer Yussef Atta was born, the second of three sons, into a family of devout Christians on 2nd August, 1902. He was raised as a pious Copt in the small village of Toukh El-Nassarah in the Delta Province of Gharbiyah. His father was a deacon, an outstanding cantor and a calligrapher of Coptic and Arabic scripts. The worship of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Bible-reading, prayer and the veneration of the saints through their icons were primary experiences for Azer.

One of the Coptic Orthodox monasteries had its dependency in Toukh al-Nassarah, and a frequent visitor to the family home was one of the monks. Abouna Tadros came from one of the ancient monasteries dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Wadi Natroun. His monastery was the earliest monastic settlement in the Desert of Scetis. The cloister is commonly known as al-Baramus, the monastery of the Romans. (The Arabic derives from the Coptic Paromaïos a term which is the subject of debate but which probably means 'belonging to the Romans'). This alludes to the tradition that Maximus and Domitius, the sons of the Roman Emperor Valentinian, are, according to Coptic tradition, buried in the monastery where they were clothed as monks by Saint Macarius the Great.⁶ The traditions of al-Baramus and of Coptic monasticism were passed to the young Azer by Abouna Tadros el-Baramousi. Azer became attached to the monastery in his mind. According to the hagiographical traditions which later surrounded the boy, it

4 For one use of this phrase see Wakin op.cit.p.119.cf. Otto Meinardus *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life*. AUC Press Cairo, 1970. Meinardus appears to be quoting from the *Egyptian Gazette*, April 20, 1959. Both must be quoting some formal Coptic document.

5 William Wordsworth (1770-1850): 'My heart leaps up.'

6 See. Otto Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Desert*. Revised Edition. The American University in Cairo Press. 1989 pp.52-71.

was at this time that the idea of a monastic vocation was formed in Azer's heart. He decided to be a monk. It has even been said that he was so influenced by the monk from the Monastery of the Romans that he started to wear a black tunic over his own clothes in imitation of the monk's habit. The sources are unanimous in the view that Azer's parents did not welcome this interest.

As a young boy, Azer attended the primary school at Damanhur. He completed his secondary education in Alexandria and obtained employment with Thomas Cook and Son (Egypt) Ltd. He had good English and did well in the firm. The Australian manager and many British customers appreciated Azer's straightforward manner. He was soon promoted. It is said that his day began long before the working day at Thomas Cook. Azer attended the Coptic Orthodox church every morning before he started work at 9.00 am.⁷

A portrait of this time shows a fine looking young man with a dapper moustache. He is wearing, at a jaunty angle, the flat-topped conical red hat with a tassel which is known to us either as a fez or tarboosh. It was the badge of the white-collar worker in the Ottoman empire. Azer has something of the look of a dandy. His hagiographers tell us that he was already absorbed in a private life of asceticism and solitariness, keeping his bedroom as a monastic cell.⁸ 'He was absorbed by the love of the Lord. This love was manifest when he started practicing the life of solitude in his private room, being content with little food and abandoning his comfortable bed for the floor.'⁹ Certainly, it was at this time that he began to read *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*. It was an experience which placed many questions against the life of the Church as he saw it and determined the course of his own life.

7 Most of the biographical information in this essay is obtained from a number of small booklets in Arabic and English. The following are especially worthy of acknowledgment: Ernest T. Abdel-Massih, *The Life and Miracles of Pope Kyrillos the Sixth*. Troy, Michigan USA 1982. *The Miracles of Pope Kyrillos the Sixth*. Sons of Pope Kyrillos PO Box 40 Shoubra, Egypt. undated. Raphael Ava Mina, *Pope Kyrillos VI and Spiritual Leadership*. Fox Chase, PA, USA, 1977. New Edition, Shoubra, Cairo 1989 contains a letter from the present writer. Yohanna Yussef Atta *Memories of the Life of Pope Kyrillos the Sixth*. (Arabic) Shoubra, Cairo 1986. Yussef Mansour *Ten Years in the Service of Pope Kyrillos*. (Arabic) Purchased Cairo 1989 but undated.

It is inevitable that these works should be hagiography rather than biography. The concept of a critical biography seems to be unknown in Middle East church circles.

8 See Raphael Ava Mina 1977 op.cit.

9 Raphael Ava Mina op.cit. 1989 p.2.

Azer soon wished to go into the desert to be a monk. Many obstacles were placed in his path. His family attempted to change his mind and his bishop discouraged him because he believed that the desert life was unsuitable for a modern, urbanised young office worker. When everyone realized that Azer was not going to change his mind they gave their approval. He joined the Theological Academy in Alexandria to await his posting to the Monastery of the Romans. He was conscious that he was giving up a comfortable life but he also realized that Maximus and Domitius had abandoned the imperial purple to go to the same place. He did not feel that his sacrifice was as great as that, but at least it was a step in the right direction.

On 27th July 1927 Azer was ordered to report to the monastery. The bishop instructed one of the monks to keep the postulant's clothes in a store in case the life should prove to be too hard for a city-dweller. On the journey to the station nearest the Wadi Natroun Azer learned that the conductor wanted to wear the traditional fez but could not afford one. The aspiring monk took off his fez and gave it to the man. His jacket he gave to the poor train driver, with the promise to send shirt and trousers from the monastery. Within days the driver received them from a visitor returning from al-Baramus. Azer adopted the black robe of poverty which he was to wear for the rest of his life.

Azer was assigned to work in the kitchen. He was known for his baking of the monastery's bread and especially for the preparation of the corban, the bread of the Eucharist. In the Coptic tradition several loaves are prepared, a final selection of the bread which is to be consecrated is made by the celebrant at the Eucharist. The making of bread became for Azer a sign of his constant need for spiritual food. At this early stage in his monastic vocation, and in his late thinking, the Eucharist was the focal point of the spiritual life. At the same time he became attached to a famous monk in the monastery of the Romans, Abouna Abd-al-Masih ibn Abd al-Malak al-Masudi, who became his spiritual father.

On 25th February 1928 Azer was ordained a monk and became Abouna Mina el-Baramousi. He was appointed an assistant to the Librarian, the distinguished savant Abouna Abd al-Masih ibn Salib al-Baramousi. The monasteries of the Western Desert are not especially noted for scholarship. Most great Coptic scholars are laymen and work in the cities. Abouna Abd al-Masih ibn Salib was the exception rather than the rule. He was an eminent scholar who was famous for his linguistic skills. Father Abd al-Masih had the Christian scholar's traditional knowledge of Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Arabic was his first, bread-and-butter language. He also worked skillfully in English and French. In the dialects of Sahidic and Bohairic Coptic he was accomplished and in Syriac an acknowledged expert. Mina gave himself to the study of Patristics, his special interest being the works of Mar Ishaq Al-Suryani (Saint Isaac the Syrian). Under the direction of his learned superior, the monk Mina made a set of hand copied texts of St. Isaac and bound them into hardback for the monastic library.

After a further three years of routine and hidden monastic poverty, chastity and obedience, the monk Mina was ordained priest at St. Mark's, Alexandria by the 113th patriarch of the See of Saint Mark, Pope John XIX (1855-1942). It was noticed by the patriarch, who was also a monk of al-Baramous and who had earlier tried to discourage the candidate, that the new priest Father Mina attended a banquet given by his family after the liturgy but ate nothing, being content with a cup of coffee. The asceticism was not paraded but it was there. In the Coptic tradition it is an essential for the reputation of a holy man.

The Coptic Pope John XIX had established a theological college for monastics. He intended to raise the standard of theological education amongst the monks. Father Mina became a reluctant student in the Pope's new institution at Helwan, a few miles south of Cairo. It was his home for two years and he acquitted himself well as a Patristics scholar. Even as a theological student he insisted upon the daily celebration of the Eucharist. This was to become a pattern for life. According to recent biographers, the only upset in Mina's life as a priest and monk came when the Patriarch suggested that he should be a bishop. For a brief period, Father Mina retreated to the ancient White monastery of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite near Sohag in Upper Egypt. There was some friction between Pope John and Father Mina until the Patriarch accepted the priest's explanation that he intended to seek permission from his brethren to become a hermit.

About two and a half kilometers to the North-West of the Monastery of the Romans there stands the Rock of Abouna Sarabamoun, named after a monk of the monastery. The rock is a permanent reminder of the many Coptic monks who have lived the eremitic life throughout the centuries: the eponymous monk was extremely well-known for his exceptional asceticism and had died just before Abouna Mina's arrival in the Wadi Natroun. The empty limestone cave was a challenge to Abouna Mina. After his return from Upper Egypt he was completely convinced of his vocation to the solitary life. At first the fathers of the monastery resisted his requests to leave the community to become a hermit. They turned to the celebrated monastic Abouna Abd al-Masih ibn Abd al-Malak al-Masudi: he had been a monk for forty years but he had not found it necessary to go outside the community and he was Mina's spiritual director. Surely it was enough to be a monk in the choir? The aged Abba would not condemn his protégé. Everyone was silent, but the eloquent silence of the great spiritual director, Abouna Abd al-Masih, and the silence of acceptance and acquiescence from Abouna Mina were enough for the chapter of monks.

After some preparation within the community, Father Mina retired to the desert cave about two and a half kilometers to the northwest of the monastery. Mina was thirty years old. The move can now be seen as a part of a major revival of anchorite asceticism in the Coptic Orthodox Church. In the desert, miles away from urban civilization, the future Patriarch of the Church met Father Abd al-

Masih al-Habashi (the Ethiopian), ‘the prophet of the desert’, who inhabited a cave near the monastery for thirty-five years from 1935 to 1970.¹⁰ The internationally famous spiritual teacher Father Matthew the Poor lived with the Ethiopian and has subsequently had much experience of the solitary life both as a practitioner and as a spiritual director. The present Patriarch also lived the life of solitude for some time before being raised to the episcopate.¹¹ The anchorite tradition is still alive in the Western Desert in 1994. It owes most to the inspiration of the Ethiopian but also to our subject, Abouna Mina al-Muttawahad (the Solitary) al-Baramousi, who became Patriarch. This modern development of the eremitic life is probably the most important contribution of the Copts to universal Christian self-understanding in the twentieth century. It is an authentic expression of Christian Freedom. The Ethiopian, his contemporaries and those who followed their example did not solicit the accord of Coptic society. Even the approval of the current hierarchy was not essential for them. We know of some who ran away into the desert. These solitaries were free men who had, in Thomas Merton’s phrase, ‘become free by paying the price of freedom.’ Their extreme asceticism is the necessary outward expression of this freedom. Their intercession and supplication are the selfless reasons for the solitariness. Freedom with and for God, leading to freedom for the other, is the meaning of the solitary life. The Coptic solitary is with and for the Church.

Abouna Mina did not come close to the years of solitude recorded by Abouna Abd al-Masih the Ethiopian. The Egyptian priest soon approached the Patriarch with a new plan. Mina wished to rebuild the ancient Shrine of St. Mina the Wonderworker in the Mariout desert, to the West of Alexandria. Permission was refused. Now, from 1936 to 1942, the solitary monk moved to the Gebel al-Guyushi (the Mokkatam Mountains) to the east of Old Cairo. His monastic cell was a deserted Napoleon windmill: French control of Egypt began with the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte in July 1798 and, although the entire French force had been evacuated from the country by 1801, the invasion was of decisive and seminal importance for Egypt. Mina loved his relic of French occupation and converted part of the windmill into a chapel for his daily Mass.

The six years at the windmill and the years of ministry in Old Cairo are very important for the story of Mina the Solitary and will require closer examination.

Abouna Mina was compelled to move out of the windmill during the Second World War. According to Otto Meinardus, the British forced this move because they thought that the priest was a spy.¹² Father Mina moved down into Old Cairo.

10 See: Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life*. The American University Press, Cairo 1970. pp.434-5.

11 See Otto Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*. Revised Edition AUCP 1989. pp.70-71.

12 Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life*. p.44.

He built the Church of St. Mina. It was at this time that he was made responsible for the Monastery of St. Samuel at al-Qalamun which belongs to the Fayoum group of monasteries. The Fayoum is a large oasis about eighty-five kilometers southwest of Cairo and has a long Coptic tradition. Father Mina travelled to the monastery every month during the period of his appointment as Qummu, the arch-priest responsible for the monastery. He also saved the modest gifts and offerings from the congregation in church and built a centre next to the church in Old Cairo. It was used to house Coptic students. For over two decades Abouna Mina established a powerful reputation as spiritual director and healer who was devoted to the solitary and contemplative life in the midst of the old city. He celebrated the Liturgy every day, often with a large congregation of students from Cairo University and other places of higher education.

On April 19, 1959, a small child was led to the altar in St. Mark's cathedral and selected the name of Abouna Mina from a chalice. Chance, according to the Apostolic practice of Acts 1:26, but seen by the Orthodox in Egypt as an act of Divine Providence, is the final act in the election of a Coptic pope. Three names were placed in the chalice. One was drawn out. Father Mina became Pope Kyrillos the Sixth, the 116th patriarch of the See of Saint Mark. It is often related that the monk could not bear to read the appointed Gospel passage at his consecration as patriarch because it began with the words "I am the good shepherd" (St. John 10.11). He began with his own gloss which was not in the missal: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "I am the Good Shepherd"'. It is an expression of the man and of his understanding of a ministry. A patriarch can say words, wear certain robes and make gestures but all depends upon the One who calls men to His service.

Abba Kyrillos held the position of Patriarch from 1959 to 1971. In this period he showed himself to be a man of considerable political insight. He personally determined his succession. He settled innumerable problems of internal Coptic politics. He retained his reputation as an ascetic, celebrated the Eucharist every day and established his renown as thaumaturge. During the patriarchate of Pope Kyrillos repeated apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary were reported at Zeitoun in Cairo. These appearances received international attention.¹³

Kyrillos the Sixth died on 9th March, 1971. Since his death the reports of his healing powers have increased. His tomb is a pilgrimage centre. Although not yet glorified by the Holy Synod, his icons are used in prayer and worship. His quietism has been favorably compared with some modern Coptic political activity. His reputation amongst Muslims, Christians and even sceptical secularists is unsullied and bright.¹⁴

13 See: Francis Johnston, *When Millions Saw Mary*. Augustine Publishing, Devon, England. 1980. Pearl Zaki, *Our Lord's Mother Visits Egypt*. Dar El Alam El Arabi, undated. Jerome Palmer OSB *Our Lady Returns to Egypt*. Culligan, California USA 1969.

14 cf. Mounir Shoucri in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* Ed. Aziz Atiya, 8 Volumes, MacMillan, New York 1991 pp.679-681.

II

Kyrrillos was first and foremost a priest who celebrated the Eucharist daily. He was also a monk. 'Priest-monk' is not always a useful description of either one who has given himself to the sacerdotal life nor to one who has joined a monastery as a monk. The priesthood has often been little more than a process in the progress of an ambitious man to a political and ecclessial role in the episcopate. This is often obvious in many episcopal careers in the Anglican and Catholic churches in the West. Monastic life is a necessity for a monk seeking the episcopate in the Eastern churches. The abuse of the system may not be universal, but it is certainly transparent in many cases. A man who has devoted his life to the attainment of Episcopal office may sit lightly to his priestly or monastic obligations. It was not so with Kyrrillos: 'priest-monk' is the precise term to define the life of Abba Kyrrillos over four decades, whether he was in a monastic hermitage or patriarchal palace.

For forty years Kyrrillos stood before the altar almost every day and consecrated the Bread and Wine so that it would be for him the true Body and precious Blood of Jesus Christ. It was the central action of his life. It is calculated that he celebrated the Divine Liturgy on at least 12,500 occasions. It is not usual for Orthodox monks to attend the Liturgy every day even though some monasteries do have a daily celebration; some only have a weekly observance. Orthodoxy has tended to emphasize the necessity of the presence of an earthly congregation, brought before the gate of heaven and the heavenly congregation, and the altar has been perceived as the divine throne set amongst the assembled people of God. In the West it would not be uncommon for a patriarch or priest to celebrate the Mass every day. Western sacramental devotion can be, at least in part, much more personal and contemplative than communal. Kyrrillos certainly understood the Eucharist not only as infusion with the life of Christ but also as meditation upon the Incarnation, and he seems to have taken a very literal attitude towards the dominical command 'Do this in remembrance of me'.

Father Raphael of St. Mina's monastery in the Mariout desert who was once the patriarchal deacon, records the Coptic Pope's comment when asked about his daily Eucharist: 'If the priest is accessible, the flour is handy and the altar is available, and then if we do not pray, what shall we say to God?' Kyrrillos would have understood those many Western Christians who have experienced the daily allure of Remembrance and Thanksgiving which are the essentials of this great anaphora. Each day is the first and last day of our pilgrimage on earth. The food of the

Eucharist is our bread and drink for today. Kyrillos was deeply convinced of the strength gained from the Eucharistic elements. This daily devotion to Christ in the Eucharist is especially noteworthy, continuing, as it did, throughout the twelve hectic years of his patriarchate.

He was a monk, but Kyrillos did not spend much of his life in a cloister. Although dedicated to the monastic life in the monastery of the Romans, he probably spent less than three years within the community. For two years he studied at Helwan. For just over two years he spent most weekdays in the desert cave at the Rock of Sarabamoun. For six years he was at the old windmill in the Mokkatam hills. For a period of about seventeen years he lived in one room in Old Cairo, constructing a church dedicated to St. Mina, his patron saint, and leaving only to fulfill his duties at the monastery of St. Samuel.¹⁵ For twelve years he was patriarch and, though he made retreats in the desert, he was occupied for much of his time in Cairo.

Thirty-nine of his forty-two years of monastic profession were spent away from the monastic community in the Wadi Natroun. But when Edward Wakin remarked so pointedly that Kyrillos the patriarch had remained Mina the monk he was pointing to the primary emphasis in the man's life. Kyrillos was a man of remarkable religious insights who somehow reached a bureaucratic position in an ecclesiastical structure where he disappointed many because he had no mind or heart for administration.¹⁶ The patriarch found ways of delegation which suited the times, but he remained what he was: "There is no doubt that" Kyrillos was "a genuine thamatugos (sic.), a deeply pious and religious person with extraordinary spiritual gifts."¹⁷ It is perhaps rarely appreciated how distracting the religious establishment can become, nor to what extent being a priest or bishop can be so easily reduced to little more than an ecclesiastical career. This is no less true in Orthodoxy than in Western churches.

Kyrillos as a monk was a living testimony to the supernatural dimension of the Christian vocation. He was not a monastic preacher of negativism and withdrawal, who had no meeting place with the problems of our age. But for Kyrillos, as for all mystics, the only Christian society of importance was spiritual and extramundane: the Mystical Body of Christ on the Earth.¹⁸ Kyrillos experienced the life of that

15 Most sources are unreliable at this point. But cf. Meinardus *Faith and Life* op.cit. p.44.

16 Ibid. p.45.

17 Ibid. p.45. The usual English word is thaumaturge.

18 In this discussion, I am indebted to the essay, The Wisdom of the Desert in Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*. Sheldon Press, London 1974. pp.3-24.

mystical community and represented its society before his church and community. His life with Christ in the Eucharist may perhaps be described, though with ungrudging recognition of our linguistic and theological poverty, as 'the true church'. The true church is that place where all men are truly equal because subject to only one charismatic authority of wisdom, experience and love under God. By this expression, we mean to imply that the denominational structures are not free, but limiting and very often deeply unChristian. It may be said that, within a hierarchical society and structure, Kyrillos knew the freedom for which so many have craved in the varying movements of psychological personalism or by their opposition to the herd instinct of modern times. Kyrillos is unique, not merely in contrast to the frantic and jaded life of Western Christianity, but also by comparison with the hierarchies of Oriental Orthodoxy.

At the height of his earthly eminence, Kyrillos presided over the elaborate ceremonies which accompanied the return of the relics of St. Mark to Egypt. The great national hero President Gamal Abdel Nasser accompanied Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia to the celebrations. Delegations from Rome and the World Council of Churches crammed the sanctuary. At the end of the day Kyrillos called his deacon to one side. 'Did you see all these great ceremonies, my son?' The puzzled assistant replied that he had of course seen all that had taken place. He had stood all day beside his master. Kyrillos repeated the question and received the same answer. Then the patriarch overwhelmed his deacon when he said, "All these ceremonies, my son, are not equal to one day spent in the solitude of the windmill above Old Cairo."¹⁹

Kyrillos as a monk was known as al-Muttawahad - the Solitary. His instinct that only a monastic revival and a parallel renewal of the eremitic life would rescue the Copts from their anxieties has been entirely justified. It can be appreciated in the context of Coptic history whose greatest spiritual directors were all monks: when the monasteries are strong, the Copts are strong. At the same time, the monasteries have sometimes been a retreat in the worst sense and they have depended completely upon the secret lives of their finest hermits, like Abouna Abd al-Masih el-Habashi. Kyrillos carried the deepest monastic inspiration into the Windmill and his room in Old Cairo. The twenty-three most important years of his ministry as a desert hermit were lived far from the physical desert in the city of Cairo, because he was an outstanding example of those twentieth century Christian mystics who carry the desert and the hermit's life within themselves. Kyrillos would have been perfectly at one with Thomas Merton, the Cistercian whose con-

19 Raphael Ava Mina op.cit. p.11.

summate communication of the charm of the desert life has influenced many who would otherwise find the life of a hermit especially repulsive:

‘The one who has been found by solitude and invited to enter it, and has entered it freely, falls into the desert the way a ripe fruit falls out of a tree. It does not matter what kind of desert it may be: in the midst of men or far from them. It is the one vast desert of emptiness which belongs to no one and everyone. It is the place where one word is spoken by God. And in that word are spoken both God Himself and all things.’²⁰

A life of Eucharistic devotion and prayer was the answer Kyrillos gave to the Coptic situation, the Coptic problem and the Coptic anxiety in Egypt. Kyrillos was no demagogue, not even an orator. He was a holy man. The daily Eucharist and the monastic discipline of the Hours was his way of coming to terms with the sufferings and persecution experienced by his people. It would be a gross misunderstanding of his spirituality to see it as mere ritualism. It was a participation in the life of the people through the recollection and representation of Christ’s passion. In the fellowship of the cross, evil is already defeated and infinite love triumphs. Kyrillos would have liked the negro spiritual which says, ‘You must go home by the way of the Cross to stand with Jesus in the morning.’ The emphasis upon strength through weakness, or humility, derives from the Patristic studies he took as a young man.

When Kyrillos, as the monk Mina, worked under the direction of Abouna Abd al-Masih ibn Salib al-Baramusi and produced his hand-written copy of the work of Mar Ishaq al-Suryani. (St. Isaac the Syrian) he was copying from an Arabic original. The work of St. Isaac was first copied into Arabic not long after the 7th Century. It will probably be established, in future study, that the work of St. Isaac of Nineveh has played a decisive role in the Coptic monastic renaissance of the twentieth century. Its impact upon Kyrillos is certain.

St. Isaac (fl. 650-700) was a bishop for less than a year and lived in solitude for most of his life. He taught that the absolute imperative for Christian life is the renunciation of the world, by which he also meant the self. The Christian life is an imitation of Christ. We are to follow Christ: the kenotic Christ, the Lord of Glory who in the Incarnation engages in the process of self-emptying, self-giving love, emptied of the divine powers and prerogatives. Kenosis is a central concept in the interpretation of Coptic spirituality. The Christian life is a moulding again of another

20 *Thomas Merton, Disputed Questions*. Hollis and Carter, 1961. p. 197.

er version of the Christ's life of renunciation and humility. Only the Christian who has followed this path of self-forgetfulness can be truly human and free.²¹

In 1933 an American theologian visited the Rock of Abouna Sarabamoun in the Western desert. He was taken there by a member of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo to assist the American scholar who was researching the period of Coptic Egypt before the Islamic invasion. For three hours Father Mina the Solitary read passages from his own copies of St. Isaac the Syrian and provided his own commentary on them: they were a precise exposition of the nature of authentic monasticism for all time. The Western theologian later said that three months research was nothing compared with three hours in the desert cave with the future Patriarch of the Copts.

Kyrillos occupied, and to a large extent still occupies, an important, emotional place in Coptic consciousness. He was, and is, the great intercessor. It was known that he rose daily at 3 a.m. to pray and that he officiated publicly at the Divine Liturgy. During Lent he fasted daily from midnight until 6 p.m.

It is thought by some Copts that the patriarchate of Kyrillos was prophetically foretold in the days when he lived in the Windmill. In 1939 the aged Pope John XIX visited Father Mina. Being forced to lean heavily upon his staff to climb the hill the patriarch broke it. When Abouna Mina offered to repair the patriarchal staff the Pope insisted that Mina the Solitary keep the symbol of high office. He would one day need it. The notion of the divine appointment is important and Kyrillos always emphasised the spiritual aspect of his vocation as Pope for the Copts.

When the press interviewed Kyrillos soon after his consecration as Patriarch, he answered all the tricky questions about Coptic anxieties with an admonition: 'It is better not to speak, rather to pray.' Many Copts were disappointed. Politics is part of the patriarch's job. They wanted to enlarge his definition of prayer.²² But no patriarch can please all Copts, and it is common to hear hostile criticisms of the present patriarch because of his supposed political activism. Shenouda is often unfavourably compared with Kyrillos, but this may indicate no more than a misunderstanding of both men.

Kyrillos knew what was possible. He understood Coptic anxieties. He also felt that he knew how far to press Nasser and the government. Mohamed Heikal says that Nasser and Kyrillos admired each other and that Kyrillos, 'always anxious to

21 See. Sebastian Brock, *Syrian Spirituality* in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. SCM London 1983 and Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Tradition* in *The Study of Spirituality*. SPCK London 1986.

22 cf. Wakin op.cit. pp.115-119.

avoid a confrontation', made use of this relationship to resolve the problems of the Coptic community.²³ When challenged by an American journalist about the future of the Copts, Kyrillos replied in the third person and reported of the Coptic Patriarch:

'His great ambition is to see the church in a spiritual revival that resembles the early days of the Apostolic Fathers. As a hermit, he has had very deep experience with prayer and a great faith that prayer will lead the church to this great revival. He is trying to encourage all Coptic congregations to develop this experience with prayer.'²⁴

These words are an exceptional epitome of the patriarchal ministry which followed. As a programme or manifesto for a man entering into an office with a long and distinguished public history they are extremely rare in the annals of Christianity, Coptic or any other. The Apostolic character of the comment is unmistakable:

"For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5 NASB).

Kyrillos entered into a position of power and status in humility, and, as Kenneth Cragg memorably says, "Humility is appropriate to a right esteem of power and status".

From those first moments Kyrillos' ministry remained what it had been, a ministry of prayer. For some commentators, prayer is the beginning of Liberation and it is not impossible to see the contemplative life of Kyrillos as the first and greatest expression of a spirituality of liberation in Egypt. He was committed to those Copts who suffered poverty and oppression, and his mode of living was consistent with the Gospel. His commitment was realistic and his political insight was perhaps sharper than his critics gave him credit for. It can be seen that he solved some major problems facing the church in Egypt, but he would have been pleased to draw the attention of admirers and critics alike to the Epistle of Saint James, 5.13:

'Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises.' (NASB)

23 Mohamed Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*. Andre Deutsch, London 1983. p. 157.

24 Edward Wakin, *A Lonely Minority*. Morrow, New York 1963. p. 116.

III

Thaumaturge is the word. Kyrillos was by every account a healer and wonder worker. Entire volumes are devoted to this aspect of his life and to reports of healing associated with his tomb, pictures, icons and after-death appearances. Many of the miracles have been subject to professional medical scrutiny, and there is every reason to believe that they are genuine. Many hundreds of miracles have been reported.

Although the Coptic Orthodox Church does not carry out the kind of investigations associated with Lourdes or Fatima, the present patriarch has pointed out that prayers and actions of healing are a normal part of the Church's ministry. Physical and spiritual healings are essential elements in the contemporary Coptic Christian experience. It would be wrong to suggest otherwise. Miracles are normal in a belief system, Orthodox Christianity, which acknowledges the reality of God's continuous action in the world. The world bears the spirit. It is the world of the Incarnation of God, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. It is the world where man becomes God, a 'participant of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1.4). It is a world where theosis or deification is salvation.

Miracles are a part of Orthodox life in Egypt. The scepticism of many Western Christians in the face of the miraculous, or the supernatural in general, is incomprehensible to the Coptic Christian. The Copt experiences the healing presence of the saints in the centres of pilgrimage. Miracles and other supernatural events are the norm. The Christian visitor from the West will often be gently chided: 'For you Western Christians heaven is closed. For us Copts it is still open'. When the Gospel is preached signs follow, though the Coptic Orthodox Church also understands that she awaits the eschatological fulfillment of her ministry when all tears shall be wiped away and there will be no more pain and suffering.

The Coptic Orthodox Church has produced many wonder workers, a number of whom were particularly popular amongst the Muslim majority because the healing ministry was for all: healers make no reference to religious affiliation. The true thaumaturge can be identified not only by his refusal to examine the religious beliefs of the patient, but by the absolute refusal to accept any money in payment for services. The wonder worker shared his charisma and achieved a recognized role in Egyptian society through the centuries.

Kyrillos was conscious of the tradition and was especially devoted to St. Mina (Abu Mina), an Egyptian officer in the Roman army of Diocletian, who converted to Christianity and was subsequently martyred in Asia Minor. St. Mina's body was buried in the Mariout desert by St. Athanasius. His shrine was for centuries a place of pilgrimage. Miracles were reported daily for centuries. Having once taken the saint's name as his own name in religion, Kyrillos was always determined to emulate Abu Mina in every way possible. From the earliest moments of his ministry in Old Cairo, Kyrillos entered into a ministry of healing.

Healing at its most obvious includes the power to restore the physically sick to health. Kyrillos is widely reported to have been the instrument for the healing of cancer, fever, open wounds, deafness, hemorrhages, paralysis, diabetes and blindness. His routine ministry is credited with the regular cure of numerous common infections and disorders.²⁵ He anointed the sick with holy oil. He breathed the healing breath of the spirit over the sick. He used the sign of the cross over wounds and lesions. He often blessed with the hand-cross which he invariably carried.

Pope Kyrillos was also an exorcist, healing the psychologically and spiritually disturbed. He was gifted as a clairvoyant, using this capacity to speak directly to those who imagined that he knew nothing about them. There are innumerable recorded instances of bilocation, usually involving a physical healing. These are aspects of his life which lie outside the scope of this essay.

The Healing ministry of Pope Kyrillos must not be divorced from his entire ministry of reconciliation. Through a life of prayer and meditation the priest-monk was healed himself. The Eucharist was the medicine of inner healing for him every day. He cured many of the diseases experienced in a deeply diseased church. He represents Holiness and the pursuit of sanctity in the sense of one who sought and found wholeness of body, mind and spirit. He was an undivided man. In his dealing with the great crises which he faced upon his election as Patriarch he was the agent of reconciliation and Wholeness. Any attempt to limit his healing ministry to the curing of the physically sick is unjust to the man and to his spirituality. Words commonly attributed to a recent Coptic monk might easily have been those of Abba Kyrillos: "My doctor is Jesus Christ. My food is Jesus Christ. My fuel is Jesus Christ."

25 See Ernest T. Abdel-Massih op.cit. pp. 30-137.

IV

Abba Kyrillos loved the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. History may record that his greatest act of healing was that effected when he healed the fracture between the sister churches of Egypt and Ethiopia. It has been one of the tragedies of more recent church history, possibly one that the present Holy Synod in Cairo will overcome, that a festering wound has been left open for some years where Kyrillos the healer brought only a balm, but the present tragic divisions (1994) merely emphasise his ministry of agape and Reconciliation.

The Apostle of Ethiopia was Frumentius from Tyre on the Mediterranean coast who, after an adventurous youth in the Horn of Africa, was consecrated to the episcopate (circa. AD 350) by St. Athanasius of Alexandria.²⁶ He returned to Ethiopia, translated the Greek Scriptures into Ge'ez, converted thousands to the Gospel and is remembered as a strong opponent of Arianism. He is known as Anba Salama, the Father of Peace or Kasate Berhan Salama, the Revealer of Light. He received the title of Abuna, meaning our Father. It remains the title of the head of the Ethiopian church. Because the Apostle of Ethiopia was consecrated by St. Athanasius, the Egyptian Church claimed its authority over the southern Church.

The See of Saint Mark exercised its control over Ethiopia by appointing an expatriate as Abuna. This was the practice for many centuries. At times there were long interregnums when the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was left without an Abuna, but it was usual for a Coptic Orthodox monk from Egypt to be made available to rule over the Church in Abyssinia. From the Egyptian point of view, it was a canonically formalised arrangement, and they experienced no difficulty in the notion of a foreign bishop wielding great power over a clergy and people whose language, culture and psychology he rarely understood.²⁷ The imposition of an outsider was never whole-heartedly accepted by the Ethiopians.

Europeans of different nations often share the strange notion that racism is a peculiarly Western disease. This is not true. In the light of recent events in Bosnia it

26 Otto Meinardus, *Christian Egypt: Faith and Life*. AUCP, Cairo, Egypt. 1970 p.369.

27 Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to the Country and People*. 2nd Edition. OUP, London 1965. p. 107.

might be more reasonable to argue that ethnic cleansing is a particularly Orthodox concept. Racism is everywhere. Certainly, the Ethiopians are a proud people who recognize their own cultural history as being at least equal to that of Egypt. The Egyptian Copts have at times harboured the extremely unpleasant notion that they have preserved the ethnic, racial purity of the Pharaohs which somehow distinguishes them in a superior sense from the Muslim majority in Egypt. The Copts share with many other peoples a particular suspicion of black people. For centuries this incipient and unacknowledged racism was at the very least a part of the Ethiopian-Egyptian Christian problem. It often seemed strange to the Ethiopians that bishops who crumbled before the might of Islam in the Nile valley were so aggressive and assertive when dealing with black Christians on the shores of Lake Tana.

The conquest of Egypt by the followers of the prophet Muhammad weakened the claims of the Copts over the Ethiopians. The patriarchate in Egypt moved to Cairo. At times the House of Islam stood between the northern and southern houses of Coptic Christianity. To the southern Christians it seemed that Ethiopia was a great Christian kingdom where the Abuna and his flock could walk with their heads held high, whilst the Copts were an oppressed dhimmi people under the sword of Islam. Through the centuries, hundreds of thousands of Egyptian Christians converted to Islam. The history of ambivalent relations between Copt and Ethiopian is very long and rarely edifying, acrimony always surrounded the comparison made between the apparent freedoms of the established Christian empire and the Islamic State. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church found that it was always numerically much stronger than the sister Church in Egypt.

By the beginning of the twentieth century the situation had become completely untenable, but the Coptic Synod in Egypt was unwilling to release control over the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.²⁸ The turning point was the Italian occupation of Ethiopia which almost resulted in the incorporation of the Abyssinian episcopate and people into the Roman Catholic Church. In 1941 His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie the First, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia returned from exile and was reinstated in Addis Ababa. His agenda included the establishment of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church which was absolutely free of Egyptian influence.²⁹

28 Meinardus op.cit. p. 392.

29 Meinardus op.cit. p.392.

In 1942 the Holy Synod in Egypt rejected Haile Selassie's application for a form of autocephaly, or self-government. When the Egyptian Synod absolutely refused any significant form of autocephaly again in 1945, the Emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church decided to act decisively and threatened to sever all relations with the See of St. Mark. A degree of freedom was suggested but this was not enough for Haile Selassie and his people. On October 22nd 1950 the reigning Abuna died. He was to be the last Egyptian Copt to hold the office. Because the state of affairs of the Church in Egypt was itself internally chaotic at the time, the situation was allowed to drift.

It is likely that Kyrillos had discussed the venerable Church of Abyssinia when he had lived as a hermit near the saintly Ethiopian prophet of the desert, Abouna Abdel-Masih el-Habashi. We do not know, but we do know that Kyrillos had sufficient knowledge of the situation to make him act immediately and decisively upon his election to the Papal office. Even before his enthronement, Abba Kyrillos, as the patriarch-elect, was in contact with Haile Selassie. The Pope invited the Emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox bishops to the ceremony in Cairo. The Emperor did not attend, but some of the bishops did.

The new Patriarch acted with great speed. He was enthroned on May 10th, 1959. Barely six weeks later he had come to a complete accord with the Emperor Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Abba Kyrillos signed a pact with them on June 29th 1959. In it he elevated the Abuna in Addis Ababa to the dignity of Patriarch-Catholicos. It was further agreed that any future choice of Abuna was to be made from the Ethiopian monks in accordance with the Alexandrian tradition. The Copts also agreed that they would not establish any bishoprics or titles in the Diaspora without first consulting the Ethiopian Church.³⁰

Kyrillos proceeded immediately, on the same day as the decree, to raise the existing Ethiopian metropolitan Anba Basilios to the new Catholicate. After Basilios' death in 1971, the Bishop of Harar, Anba Theophilos was consecrated Patriarch-Catholicos. As far as the Emperor and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were concerned a completely autocephalous and autonomous church came into being in 1959.³¹ Abuna Theophilos was deposed by the Marxist military government in 1976. He received the martyr's crown sometime before 1979, during his imprisonment.

30 Meinardus op.cit. pp.393 f.

31 Ullendorff op.cit. p.108.

The bonds between the sister churches were strengthened when Abba Kyrillos paid a pastoral visit to Ethiopia in October 1960.³² The encounter between Coptic Pope and Ethiopian Emperor was particularly important. Haile Selassie was delighted that Kyrillos had come to him in Addis Ababa. They got on well together and saw that the new arrangements could be helpful to both churches. The Emperor of Ethiopia was a prime mover in international non-aligned conferences and in continental African congresses some of which met in Ethiopia. The Emperor thought that this secular development ought to have its ecclesiastical equivalent.

Haile Selassie was a visionary. He had seen a great deal of the Western churches which were not Roman Catholic, especially the Anglican church, and he had been impressed with their deep theological learning, their ability to work together without loss of local tradition and above all their willingness to face the problems of tomorrow's world. In the great university which he built in Addis Ababa there was a theological college. It was the emperor's intention that this seminary should become the principal theological centre for Copts, Armenians, Ethiopians, Syrians and Indians.³³ Addis Ababa was the obvious place for such a centre because the Ethiopian Church alone was in a Christian country: the Armenians were much harassed and hemmed in at that time in the USSR, the Indians were a very small minority in an enormous secular state, the Syrians were locked in Baathist Syria and the Copts were subject to demographic and religious pressure from Islam. The Emperor wished Ethiopia to lead the Oriental Orthodox family of churches. Perhaps he was also aware of the possibility and desirability of a representative role for the only Christian emperor at the heart of an Oriental Orthodox confederation.

In another visionary moment, Haile Selassie decided to invite all the patriarchs of the non-Chalcedonian or Oriental Orthodox churches to meet in Addis Ababa in January 1965.³⁴ These churches shared a common monastic tradition, a distinctive Oriental Orthodox spirituality and a devotion to their Lord within the drama of the Divine Liturgy. All these churches were recognizably Orthodox. They had doctrinal and historical links but they had never met as a family, and even those who had met in groups of two or three had not done so for many centuries. The Emperor's idea was idealistic but realistic. Nobody refused the invitation.

32 Mounir Shoucri, *Coptic Encyclopedia*. p.680.

33 Ullendorff op.cit. p.202.

34 Karekin Sarkissian, *The Witness of the Oriental Orthodox Churches*. Mesrob Press, Beirut, Lebanon 1968.

Abba Kyrillos was the senior of six patriarchs who attended the 1965 Addis Ababa Conference from January 15th to the 21st. The others were Ignatius Yaqub III, the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, Basil, the Catholicos of the Apostolic Throne of St. Thomas in India, Vasken I, the Supreme Patriarch Catholicos of all Armenians, Anba Khorin the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia and the host, the Patriarch-Catholicos of Ethiopia. Other senior bishops of the Oriental Orthodox tradition also attended.³⁵

The proceedings of the Conference and the resolutions adopted indicate that the meeting was far in advance of its time. Very little action has been taken to convert resolutions on paper to performance in the world. Most of the leading participants are now dead. There are few tangible results from 1965, but the convergence of needs and expressions of solidarity are now recognized as historically important for the individual churches involved.

The Conference regretted the gulf between the Church and the educated, especially the young. It reaffirmed adherence to the Orthodoxy of the undivided Church, the Bible and the Fathers. The Conference recommended a re-examination of the practice of fasting. The participants called for careful scrutiny of the Liturgy. Proper study should be given to the possibility of reducing the length of the Divine Liturgy, changing the language where necessary and adjusting the times of Liturgical worship to accord with pastoral needs.³⁶ The Conference recommended simplification and 'adaptation' of the Liturgy. It supported Lay participation in church government and Youth involvement in decision making.

The meeting called for a new orientation in pastoral ministry especially in relation to marriage. Christian Education, Theological Literature, accessible critical Sociological Studies and even the production of popular Christian novels were recognized as priority areas. The Oriental Orthodox were to act together in these fields.

The participating churches recognized that they all needed urgently to restore Religious Orders for women.³⁷ In direct response to the Addis Ababa encounter all the cooperating churches represented were requested to exchange monks and nuns. This was to be organised carefully at an international level. Traditional monasticism, including manual labor, was recommended.

35 Sarkissian op.cit. facing p.71, has an historic photograph of the assembled dignitaries with the Emperor.

36 Sarkissian op.cit. p.73.

37 Sarkissian op.cit. p.75.

The Conference recognized the need for a Common Theological Curriculum within Oriental Orthodoxy.³⁸ A detailed and careful reassessment of theological education was acknowledged as a necessity for all the participating churches. Evangelism was to be linked to worship and social activity.

In the ecumenical field it was recognized that the Eastern Orthodox Churches are closest to the Oriental Orthodox. They must become the main partners in Ecumenical dialogue. The Roman Catholic Church must be approached positively because of its numerical strength. Protestants have proselytised amongst the Orthodox faithful, and this would make dialogue very difficult for the Oriental Orthodox, but the Anglicans and Old Catholics, whose relations with the ancient churches were seen as very good, were regarded as being worthy of special attention.³⁹

The Conference reproduced popular Christian sentiments about equality, peace and justice: 'All men are equal in the eyes of God. All are children of the one heavenly Father. The blessings of God in nature are for all human beings without distinction of race, religion, colour, class or sex.'⁴⁰

It is perhaps especially ironical that the Decisions of the Conference include the following statement: 'It should be specially remembered that witnessing for Christ is not passing on our national cultures to men and women of other nations'.⁴¹ In general experience, Oriental Orthodox hierarchs customarily identify their individual national cultures with the Christian Gospel. Coptic clergy have been known to devote entire sermons to the evangelical necessity of kissing the hands of hierarchs. One Oriental Orthodox bishop in Australia recently devoted a retreat address to a comparison between Christian teetotal practice in his church and in Islam: Jesus used unfermented grape-juice for the Last Supper and total abstinence was a point of dogma! Such stories abound in the Oriental Orthodox tradition.

Although most of the participating churches would be unable to distinguish between Gospel and Culture, some did understand the problem and they were successful in inserting these affirmations into the Conference proceedings. The autocephalous Indian Orthodox had been particularly prominent and assiduous in this area of thought and understood the fullest dimension of pluralism in a largely secular state, though the Indians have always been regarded as dangerous radicals by

38 Sarkissian op.cit. p.77.

39 Sarkissian op.cit. pp.81-84.

40 Sarkissian op.cit. p.85.

41 Sarkissian op.cit. p.80.

the Copts and Armenians. It is often observed that to be baptised as an Armenian or Copt is to be baptised as an Armenian or Copt and also as a Christian. It would probably be easier for a Western Christian to convert to Islam than to Oriental Orthodoxy and such conversions as there have been have generally resulted in great unhappiness. Nevertheless, the Conference, if not individual churches, reached out from the relative isolation of Addis Ababa to the wider world.

Always the healer, Abba Kyrillos left Addis Ababa determined to overcome another inter-church difficulty. He had noticed from time to time that certain Copts had been able to obtain the dissolution of a marriage simply by appealing to the Syrian Patriarch. These Copts had 'converted' to the sister-church of Antioch where they had immediately received a dissolution. Kyrillos met Mar Ignatius Yacub the Third and they agreed a common policy. The joint Coptic-Syrian declaration of 1965 stresses the doctrinal unity of the two churches and accepts a common pastoral practice with regard to marriage and its dissolution.⁴²

Pope Kyrillos remained deeply attached to the Ethiopians and other Oriental Orthodox. If he had lived longer the tragic experience of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church under Marxism and its aftermath, especially in Eritrea, would have been a source of great sorrow to him. Haile Selassie outlived Kyrillos by a few years, but he was dethroned on 12th September 1974. He was brutally murdered on 27th August 1975. An important era in church history also came to an end. Ethiopia entered a dark period of persecution under an atheist dictatorship.

Since the fall of the Communist dictator Mengistu, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has struggled to overcome her many problems, which are internal, social, economical and ecumenical. The complexities of Ethiopian-Coptic ecclesiastical politics lie outside the scope of this essay. Criticism and debate have often seemed to focus upon internal political developments and domestic appointments. Questions were raised about the selection and nomination of bishops during the Mengistu period. Bishops who resisted Marxist control of the church were excluded or imprisoned.

It is unlikely that the problems of the Ethiopian Church under Marxist rule are clearly understood by outsiders, but some Egyptian Copts sought a mediating, some commentators would say controlling, role in Ethiopian Church affairs. As is invariably the case in such difficult family affairs the verdict of the outsider

42 cf. *Coptic Encyclopedia* p.680.

depends almost entirely upon the domestic sources consulted, and the parties excluded from dialogue. Many further difficulties between Copts and Ethiopians have arisen because of the migration of Ethiopians. The problems of Ethiopia sometimes appear to be a diversion for some Coptic hierarchs from their own intractable problems at home.

The continuing political instability in Ethiopia is a source of constant anxiety for the natives of the country, not least for the Church, which has suffered so much in the last two decades. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has received little understanding, support or help from outside. As far as Ethiopian relations with the Copts are concerned, she would welcome another Abba Kyrillos. The present Coptic Patriarch has shown that he is at least aware of the difficulties of the situation, but, at the time of writing in 1994, Pope Shenouda and Patriarch Paulos of Ethiopia have failed to achieve a rapprochement. The Copts have assumed the responsibility of establishing an independent church in Eritrea. His Holiness Pope Shenouda the Third consecrated five bishops for Eritrea on June 19th, 1994 in Cairo and affirmed his right to enthrone any future 'Patriarch' of the Eritreans. The action was regarded by many in Ethiopia as a calculated insult to their own ancient and venerable Church. Relations between the Ethiopian Church and the Church in Egypt broke down at about the same time. The situation is fluid and unpredictable.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church occupies a special place in any projected scenario of the future of Christianity. She has a significant geographical position. It is increasingly recognized that the survival and expansion of Christianity in the next century lies with the churches of the developing world. The enormous numerical strength of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church places her alongside the ecclesial communions of Russia and Greece. She is one of the big Orthodox churches. The openness of the Ethiopian Church to other Christians indicates a new confidence and maturity. She has faced modern martyrdom and has survived. The ancient liturgical tradition, with sacred dance, drums and sistrums, is also suggestive of the role the Ethiopians might have in the continuing growth of an African Christianity, distinct from the Western culture of the European churches and from the Arab culture to which the Coptic Orthodox Church is so firmly bound.

When Emperor Haile Selassie made a state visit to Egypt, during the time of President Gamel Abdul Nasser and Pope Kyrillos the Sixth, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry failed to include any visits to Coptic institutions in the programme. The Emperor delighted Egypt's Christians by pointedly attending the very long Divine Liturgy in the patriarchal cathedral and visiting the historic churches of Old Cairo.

V

Pope Kyrillos Thaumaturgos was perhaps at his best when applying a salve to the wounded body of his own Church at home in Egypt. There was much need for a curative ministry.

The election of a new patriarch had been delayed for over two years. The clerical Holy Synod, which was generally conservative and anxious to reassert its authority, wished to return to the canonical procedure of appointing a patriarch from amongst the monks. The Majlis Milli or Coptic Community Council wished to appoint a diocesan bishop. They felt that the Coptic community in general and the Coptic Orthodox Church in particular needed someone who had political and administrative experience. In their view, the Coptic community, which included many citizens who were nominal Copts, required a patriarch who would understand Coptic aspirations and demands. He must be someone who could articulate these communal matters before the leaders of the national revolution.

The three patriarchs immediately before Kyrillos were chosen from amongst the bishops. Conservative elements in the monasteries and parishes blamed many of the difficulties experienced by the church upon the fact that the Copts had ignored the canons by failing to elect a monk on three occasions, and in any case the Holy Synod considered all three of the previous episcopal appointments to the patriarchate to have been bad for the Church.⁴³ The election of Kyrillos the Sixth marked a triumph for the clerical traditionalists, but the new patriarch accepted the notion that experience was important too, and he was ready to take advice.

The Majlis Milli existed to take part in the administration of Coptic affairs. It was made up of laymen. It had not been a success and had been weakened by the Egyptian Revolution. Nasser's regime stripped the Community Council of its jurisdiction over marriage, divorce and alimony. These were now referred to state courts. Education was nationalised, depriving the Majlis Milli of its role in the management and administration of Coptic schools. A Ministry of Social Affairs

43 Wakin op.cit. p.107.

cared for the work of benevolent societies, weakening the role of the Majlis Milli as a social security agency.

The administration of waqfs remained the province of the Coptic Community Council. Waqfs are the endowments and trusts (property and investments of various kinds) held for the monasteries, colleges and churches. The properties involved had accumulated for centuries: one Ottoman sultan alone gave the Copts one thousand feddans (acres) of rich arable land in the Nile Delta. This chocolate coloured soil bore abundant harvests for the church.

The waqfs should have been administered for the benefit of the Church, but the relations between the Community Council on the one hand and the Patriarch and Holy Synod on the other had rarely been harmonious.

Upon the succession of Kyrillos the Sixth, the Community Council were anxious to save their control of the waqfs, and the patriarch Abba Kyrillos wished to avoid the chaos and confusion of the past. By the 19th July 1960 he had secured a decree from President Nasser which provided for a joint board called the Council of Coptic Waqfs which was formed under the Patriarch and comprised six bishops and six members of the old Community Council.⁴⁴ This change was effected with consultation and was not in the least autocratic in implementation. The Holy Synod and the old Majlis Milli were now working together in a Council where nobody could claim superiority because everyone was a 'new boy'; though the continuity was obvious to everyone.

Whenever administrative difficulties arose within the Coptic community after the papal accession in 1959, Kyrillos intervened personally and acquired state support by presidential decree. These arrangements applied until the death of Pope Kyrillos in 1971.

It would be quite wrong to suggest that the affairs of the Majlis Milli or even the waqfs were of major importance to Kyrillos. He was pleased if he could resolve difficulties with a careful piece of legislation supported by the government with a presidential decree. Kyrillos had his own pressing spiritual priorities. There were also more urgent national political problems.

44 cf. Adel Azer Bestawros, *Coptic Encyclopedia*, pp.580-592.

VI

There is a popular apocryphal story about Kyrillos and Nasser which tells how an Islamic terrorist, wishing to discredit the Copts, disguised himself as a Coptic Orthodox bishop. The impostor went to the audience chamber at the Presidential palace and waited to murder the leader of the revolution. Kyrillos the clairvoyant foresaw the assassination. He rushed to the palace, identified the man as an impostor and saved Nasser's life.

The story is an expression of the supposed relationship between president and patriarch and by extension between Church and State in Egypt. It bears little relation to reality.

The Copts identify themselves as a suffering community. They may not have experienced state-controlled and state-directed persecution like the Russian or Ethiopian churches but they have borne centuries of deadly, daily discrimination. In the long years of his solitary ministry in Old Cairo, Kyrillos must have spent a great deal of time hearing all about the daily irritations and frustrations associated with discrimination against Copts. For sensitive men, Coptic identity symbolised the long suffering of a people. When Salama Musa (1887-1958) returned to the Coptic Orthodox Church he wrote, 'I returned to her with affection, finding in her our tormented and broken history'.⁴⁵ Kyrillos had personal experience of that broken history: it is impossible to be a Copt and avoid the torment. As Patriarch he was to absorb and express the heritage of heroic defiance in the face of repression from nominal Muslims but he was also to embody the Coptic search for survival.

In April 1959, just after the patriarchal election, Nasser attempted to coerce Kyrillos into a public visit to the President's residence. The Patriarch would not be compelled. Orthodox Patriarchs are visited; they do not have to visit. The President sent a representative to the Patriarchate. Kyrillos responded with two bishops. When Nasser's Coptic-puppet in the government attempted his own pressure, the patriarch told him not to try to 'take care' of the Church. 'God elected me, not Nasser: the Church is my problem, not yours'.

45 Quoted by A. Kenneth Cragg in *The Arab Christian*. John Know Press, USA 1991 p.202.

Kyrillos knew where to draw the line and the second of these stories is far more reliable than the first. It reflects the reality of the Coptic experience. One visiting politician gets two bishops in response. Eventually, in his own time, Kyrillos went to visit Nasser. The President did not return the visit for many years.

There was, in the relations between Nasser and Kyrillos, as between the Copts and the State, an element of cat-and-mouse with a modicum of calculated diplomacy and more than a little risk. There is little doubt that Kyrillos was a fervent Egyptian nationalist who supported the Wafd in the years after the First World War when British control in Egypt was weakening. Many more politically motivated Copts participated actively in the nationalist movement and some of them rose to national prominence.⁴⁶ Like most Copts of his age, Kyrillos would have heard Sa'ad Zaghlul, the pre-eminent political nationalist of the Wafd, speak of Coptic-Muslim brotherhood.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it was the Coptic politician Tawfik Dus who formulated the slogan 'Al-Din I-Allah w-al-Watan I-il-Jami' (Religion is for God alone and the homeland for all its people).⁴⁸ The sentiment would have appealed to Kyrillos. It represented a programme which could benefit the Copts, but as a realist the Coptic Pope would not have set too much store by a slogan. The new Constitution of the Republic of Egypt on January 16th, 1956 clearly stated: 'Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic its official language'.

Kyrillos was aware of those Copts who had crossed the demarcation line between Islam and Christianity, State and Church. The Pope was much more sympathetic towards them than most of the episcopate which was deeply conservative and extremely wealthy. The greatest of the nationalist Copts was Abouna Sergius Malati (1883-1964) who mounted the minbar of al-Azhar, the home of Sunni Orthodoxy, and preached fifty-nine sermons to his Muslim brothers about Freedom.⁴⁹ This brilliant revolutionary priest deserves more attention in the West.⁵⁰ He was the first non-Muslim ever to enter the pulpit of the great mosque and university. His speeches at al-Azhar and at the Mosque of Ibn-Tulun resulted in his banishment to Sinai. The British were not his only adversaries. He fought endlessly for the reform of the church and was excommunicated and banished by the Holy Synod. He rejected the judgement and continued to preach to packed churches and to administer the Blessed Sacrament to thousands. His parish church was forcibly appropriated by the patriarchate.

46 See: Robert Brenton Betts, *Christians in the Arab East*. SPCK, London 1979. p.168.

47 See: B.L. Carter, *The Copts in Egyptian Politics*, Croom Helm, London 1986. pp.161-181.

48 cf. Wakin op.cit. p.70 Carter op.cit. p.290. Betts op.cit. 168-9, 266.

49 Wakin op.cit. p.42.

50 See: Ibrahim Hilal in the *Coptic Encyclopedia* pp.2096-7. Jamaat al-Ummah al-Qibtiyyah, Al-Wa'y al-Qibti. Cairo, 1965.

After a period in the political wilderness, Father Sergius returned to an active ministry in 1944 when he was appointed a deputy by the patriarch. Sergius convened a national council of churches in Egypt. The Greek Orthodox patriarchate was strongly represented, Armenians and Protestants were actively involved, some representatives of the Uniate Coptic Catholic Church attended and even Anglicans, who were under some suspicion because of their obvious connections with the British, were keen supporters of the meeting. This was years before the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam (1948) and two decades before the Second Vatican Council. It was a brave though unsuccessful bid for Christian unity. It seemed absurd to Father Sergius, as it has to many, that Christians, faced with the obvious theological and communal unity of Islam and a powerful, all-embracing secular state, should wish to define themselves by their theological differences.

From 1956 onwards Sergius was placed under house arrest in an act of collusion between the government and the church. He was excommunicated once again. In 1964 the old campaigner died. In a typical gesture, Pope Kyrillos lifted the excommunications against Sergius. The cathedral of St. Mark was packed with thousands who came to pay homage to a great reforming Copt. It is unlikely that Kyrillos was merely yielding to mass protests. It is probable that he was expressing his sympathy with a maverick Copt who was closer to the ideals of Kyrillos than those of many bishops who, before his arrival upon the scene, had purchased their bishoprics during the patriarchate of Pope Yusab II, the same patriarch who had defrocked and excommunicated Sergius. Abouna Sergius Malati was buried with the rites and dignity attaching to a priest.

Kyrillos attempted to be a patriarch for the Coptic Community Council and for those far to the Left, like Abouna Sergius. The Pope recognized the dangers of fanaticism and of the contrasting slave mentality which had dogged the Copts at other times. He realised above all that Nasser could tolerate religion if it did not ask too much. When Nasser made his only speech at a Coptic cathedral the president defined his position: 'We are all Egyptians. Islam recognizes Christians as brothers in religion and brothers in God. God calls for love, and we will not tolerate any more fanatics who create obstacles and problems for the people in their revolution'.⁵¹ The warning on that occasion was meant not for the Copts but for the Muslim Brotherhood. Nasser sent six leaders of the Brotherhood to the gallows in 1954, just months after the Revolution. (Executions of members of the Brotherhood followed in 1966, 1974, 1977 and 1981. On 29th August, 1966

51 Quoted by Betts op.cit. p.223.

Sayyid Qutb, an important Muslim thinker and writer, was amongst those executed. A number of Muslim activists were executed in 1993).⁵²

Nasser knew that the Copts posed no threat to him. They welcomed his words. Patriarch and President saw eye-to-eye on the question of ‘fanatics’ because the only extremists asserting their rights in Egypt were Muslim believers. It was largely thanks to the passivity and piety of Kyrillos that there were no Coptic activists or ‘fanatics’. It is the formidable spiritual strength of the Copts, and their social and political weakness, that they have been able, for centuries, to accept the role of second-class citizens in their own country.

Modern Egyptian Islamicism expects serious and sincere Copts to aspire to a Muslim state which will guarantee economic and social justice for all. Too much in Egypt is owned by too few. Islamicism also expects the Copts to vote for a conservative morality. Too much in Egyptian culture is dominated by the false values of an American materialism which debases women and is devoid of all ethical standards. Islamicism sees the political and economic involvement of America in the Middle East as a simple matter of the pursuit of Oil without Virtue. Such thoughts were common in the time of Kyrillos but, though he must have considered them, we have no evidence of his willingness to speak out on these matters. He turned first to the Church. The Church, expressed above all in the daily celebration of the Divine Liturgy, was always his first consideration.

Kyrillos kept on asserting Coptic cultural identity by the ‘spiritual’ means of building monasteries and churches. He understood that in Muslim eyes the people of the Book may peacefully enjoy their status of dhimmi if they do not make too much noise. For the period of his patriarchate there was an uneasy peace, but some of his appointments made it certain that the peace would not last.

52 See: Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and the Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt*. Al Saqui, London 1985. pp.26-69, 156-64.

VII

Mohamed Heikal is generally acknowledged to be one of the most important and best informed journalists in the Arab World. He has been closely associated with presidents and generals: his close friendship with Nasser was continued with Sadat until disagreements over policy at the time of the 1973 War. He has edited *Al Ahram*, the weightiest and most widely quoted Arab paper in the world. He is a stylish broadcaster. He is the author of many books which have won him a reputation as a leading Arab authority on the contemporary Middle East. It is his opinion that the solitary monk Mina became the patriarch Kyrillos with the backing of a group of young university graduates who had become monks. The group included four in particular who wanted reform.⁵³

Heikal says that Kyrillos was shrewd in his acceptance of this new breed of postulants. Kyrillos had no real interest in the changes looked for by the new activist monks. He was willing to yield to their pressure for some reform. Heikal believes that Kyrillos owed them this much for their support in securing his election. The patriarch knew that they represented the aspirations of a new generation of Copts. He made three of them bishops. The fourth he appointed to a vital task of monastic renewal.

There are reasons for finding Heikal's analysis far too simplistic and sweeping, not the least being the difficulties raised by his presentation of Abba Kyrillos. Heikal introduces a political portrait of a manipulative Kyrillos. It is at variance with a careful examination of the patriarch's life, which reveals a character of transparent integrity and profound piety. There is always an element of fantasy in Heikal's interpretation of Coptic leaders, despite his undoubted knowledge of events. This is not to deny the vital importance of the four appointments to which Heikal is pointing.

We have noticed that the arguments surrounding the patriarchal election focused in part upon the choice, monk or bishop? The rich and influential bishops

53 Heikal *op.cit.* pp.156-160.

who survived the appointments of Yusab II were sometimes accused of simony. But it is true that the anxiety about a monk's lack of administrative experience remained. Kyrillos took the significant and innovative step of appointing new bishops who were to have no territorial dioceses. They became known as 'general' bishops. When Kyrillos went, bishops without a diocese but with experience would be available for election. The first three 'general' bishops were Bishop Samuel, Bishop Shenouda and Bishop Gregorios. The fourth, and most important monk in the context of international Christianity, was not consecrated as a bishop. He was a former pharmacist Yusuf Iskander who had the religious name Father Matta al-Miskin (Matthew the Poor).

Pope Kyrillos sent Father Matta to the ancient monastery of St. Macarius in the Western Desert. Matta presided over one of the most momentous revolutions in twentieth century monasticism. Matta is revered throughout the world.

Samuel and Shenouda were consecrated together on 15th September 1962. Amba Samuel was made Bishop of Public, Social and Ecumenical Services, the most weighty post for the new era of Pope Kyrillos. Amba Shenouda was to be responsible for Religious Education. Amba Gregorios was not consecrated to the episcopate until 10 May 1967 when he was made Bishop for postgraduate studies and research in Coptic Culture.

Gregorios is a scholar. In the 1940s he obtained a B.A. at Cairo University, a B.D. and a Diploma in Egyptian Archeology. He moved on to the prestigious Department of Biblical Studies in Manchester, England, where he was awarded a doctorate in 1955. As Dr. Waheeb Atalla, he established an international reputation, lecturing before the distinguished Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius in the United Kingdom, the Evangelical Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches. He studied with the great Egyptologist Professor Walter Till and became a lay observer for the Copts at the Second Vatican Council in Rome. Upon his return to Egypt, Dr. Atalla was ordained as a monk in 1962, becoming Abouna Bakhum al-Muharraqui. He was priested in June 1963. For thirty years, Bishop Gregorios has pursued a scholarly life at the Institute for Higher Studies in Abassiya. Theologians in the ecumenical movement are mystified by his absence from dialogue. Gregorios is the most considerable theologian in the Coptic Orthodox Church. He is now 74 years of age and separated by death or disagreement from the other two general bishops appointed by Kyrillos.

The ecumenical career of Amba Samuel began under Pope Yusab II (1880-1956) who sent Samuel, at that time Father Makari as-Suriani, to represent the Copts at the 1954 General Assembly of the World Council of Churches at

Evanston, Illinois in the USA.⁵⁴ Yusab was a weak patriarch who was unable to control financial and administrative corruption in his own household. He was forced into exile for the last years of his life. But he had received his theological education in Athens and he knew that the Copts needed the Ecumenical Movement. His choice of Abouna Makari as the Coptic representative to Evanston was refreshing and exciting.

Makari as-Suriani was born Sa'ad Aziz on 8th December, 1920. He graduated in the Faculty of Law at Cairo University in 1942, obtained a post-graduate Diploma in Theology in 1944 and a B.A. at the American University in Cairo later in the same year. He went to America after the Second World War and received his M.A. from Princeton in 1955: his dissertation was on Education. In addition to his work at Evanston in the summer of 1954 he also contributed to a Conference in the Lebanon during the spring of the same year. His contribution to that Muslim-Christian Convention is warmly remembered forty years later. It was said that he was the only member of the monastic elite to address contemporary problems.⁵⁵ The problem of the relation between the world religions remains one of the major issues of our age.⁵⁶ The Bhamdoun Covenant of 1954 was signed by forty Muslim and forty Christian religious leaders. It was in part the work of Father Makari and it pledged 'that under God we will work unceasingly, with mutual confidence and regard for the rights of others, to promote understanding and brotherliness between the adherents of Islam and Christianity'.⁵⁷ Makari was to be remembered in Egypt as one who worked to eradicate Coptic prejudice against Islam.⁵⁸

Pope Kyrillos appointed Abouna Makari as-Suriani as his Secretary and Chaplain. Those who met him were impressed with his seriousness and ability even when they suspected 'some signs of patriarchal ambitions'.⁵⁹ He gave the impression of being a good tactician when dealing with issues of the moment though it is often said that he was always lacking in deep analysis. He had taught in Ethiopia and had an excellent manner when dealing with the ecumenical contacts who began to pour into Cairo during Kyrillos' more open era.⁶⁰ Even before his

54 See: Mounir Shoucri, Yusab II in the *Coptic Encyclopedia*.

55 Wakin op.cit. p.123.

56 See: Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. SCM, London 1991.

57 *Hand Book for Fellowships of Muslims and Christians*, Lebanon 1971 pp.22-4, cf. Attiya op.cit. p.121.

58 See: *His Grace Bishop Samuel: Pages from his life, Service, Thought*. Undated booklet, purchased Cairo 1989 (Arabic 65 pp. English 15pp. Illustrated. See also, Gabriel Abdelsayeed and Maurice As'ad, Bishop Samuel in the Coptic Encyclopedia. NY 1991.

59 See: Wakin op.cit. p.123.

60 Ibid. p.123.

consecration as a bishop with ecumenical responsibilities Father Makari was in effect the Coptic Orthodox Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁶¹

In September 1962 Makari, 'a small bustling man with a big heart'⁶² became Bishop Samuel and embarked upon a course which was to make him the most famous Copt inside and outside Egypt.

He was passionately concerned for the poor and established the Kanisat al-Zabbalin so that the garbage collectors, who were mostly Copts, could be granted some dignity and their children some opportunities. He established the Diaconate of the Rif (countryside) through which he penetrated the distant and isolated villages of Egypt where a Copt was often only a Copt by name.

Bishop Samuel became a permanent member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. He was a founding member and vice-president of the All Africa Conference of Churches. In Eastern Europe he joined the Continuation Committee of the notorious Christian Peace Conference where he became close to Hungarians of the Reformed Church and hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Samuel was almost a career diplomat, being well-known in all the foreign embassies in Cairo and in the corridors of power in Washington and Moscow.

He was not too proud to learn from younger churches. He felt that the Coptic Orthodox Church should be seen to be as up-to-date as the Western churches. Many of his actions and his programmes were revolutionary in Coptic Orthodox terms. He did not believe his innovations to be inconsistent with the Gospel or Tradition.

Bishop Samuel wanted to allow the secular clergy in Egypt to wear plain clothes outside the sanctuary. He had seen this practice as an advantage in Russia and he thought that it would help in Egypt. He welcomed the participation of women in worship, especially as readers. He saw that intercommunion worked, and at ecumenical celebrations of the Divine Liturgy he was delighted to give Holy Communion to Christians who were not Copts or Orthodox. He was a reformer at every level. He regarded the Ecclesiology which denied the reality of any Christian Baptism as a shallow blasphemy. There is a sharp division in the Coptic Orthodox Church between those who recognize Catholic and Anglican baptism and those

61 cf. Heikal op.cit.159.

62 *The Times*, London. Obituary. Monday October 12th, 1981.

who deny the sacramental integrity of any churches who may not be described as Orthodox. Bishop Samuel was firmly on the side of those who recognize the baptismal fellowship of all Christians who have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. His views were always advanced with skill and with great personal charm. He was a healer and reconciler like Kyrillos.

Although he obtained the maximum number of votes in the Patriarchal election of 1971 his name was not drawn from the chalice at the final lottery. Heikal believes that Sadat rigged the altar ballot in favor of a candidate who was 'guaranteed' by puppet Copts in the Government.⁶³

Bishop Samuel remained a general bishop under the new patriarch and travelled even more extensively in the growing Coptic Diaspora. He often represented the Church at national events in Egypt especially at times when the patriarch was experiencing difficulties with the Administration, which was often. Bishop Samuel was representing the Copts when he was shot dead by Muslim extremists at the same time as President Sadat. It was October 6th 1981.

The third of Abba Kyrillos's general bishops was elected as the 117th Patriarch and Pope on Sunday 31st October 1971. He was Bishop Shenouda, the bishop responsible for Education, a gifted man who would probably have risen to the top of any profession.

Shenouda was born on 3rd August 1923 in Assiyut, the predominantly Christian Province of Upper Egypt. His name was Nazir Gayed. Nazir was educated in various parts of Egypt and graduated from Cairo University in 1943. He entered the Monastery of the Syrians in the Western Desert in July 1954. As Father Antonious es-Souriani he lived for a time in a desert cave near the monastery. Abouna Antonious was a secretary to Pope Kyrillos for a period. He executed his duties efficiently but gave the impression of being unhappy with the job.⁶⁴ He subsequently held the post of Dean of the Theological College and Bishop for Education, being consecrated with Bishop Samuel who was also from the Monastery of the Syrians.

Shenouda came to be regarded as a leading theologian of the Coptic Church. His theological education lacked the depth and scholarship of Gregorios but he was more focused and less frenetic than Samuel. He is a natural teacher. To his critics

63 Heikal op.cit. p.162.

64 Wakin op.cit. p.124.

he is too fond of the sound of his own voice; to his admirers he speaks like an angel. He became the idol of Coptic youth with a status somewhat akin to that of a pop star in America. He is a man of great personal charisma.

Soon after his appointment as Bishop of Education, Shenouda started to give open lectures on Friday evenings. Friday is the Muslim holy day. Not surprisingly, many Copts were forced to take the day off work. They were employed in businesses owned by Muslims or in departments controlled by the State where the needs of the Muslim majority were paramount. Mohamed Heikal has said that Shenouda's lectures were known as the 'lesson of Friday' (dars el-guma'a), and that they were deliberately based upon the 'lesson of Tuesday' instituted by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) for al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Society of Muslim Brethren, or the Muslim Brotherhood) which he founded in Ismailiyya in 1928.⁶⁵ Heikal believes that the meetings were intentionally provocative inviting the Copts to a kind of militancy comparable with that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Shenouda's Friday evening meetings attracted audiences numbered in thousands. (Since the Pope's imprisonment from 1981 to 1985 the meeting has been moved to Wednesday. It still attracts an enormous audience.) Some reliable Copts, who have been associated with the meetings since their inception, reject the notion that the gatherings were provocative or based upon a Muslim model. They point out that the subject matter was usually devotional, only later venturing into the psychological, social and political fields. The name of the meetings was never 'dars el guma'a', which is an invention of Heikal: its name has always been, and remains, 'the Meeting (Egitmaa) of Bishop, later Pope, Shenouda'. It may have been useful for Heikal, writing in the aftermath of Sadat's assassination, to suggest that Coptic radicalism existed alongside that of Islamic extremists.

Amongst Arabic speakers, Shenouda became known for his captivating use of language but it is not necessary to speak much Arabic to be aware of the exciting atmosphere created by this remarkable communicator. He is something of a demagogue, in the better classical sense. He is a dangerous mover of crowds. As Bishop of Education, Shenouda controlled the theological teaching in the Church. He emphasized the appeal to Tradition and wished to emphasise the Patristic interpretation of Scripture. The Tradition was to be practically applied to Coptic life today. He has loved and been loved by young and old, rich and poor, the intellectuals and the simple.

65 Heikal op.cit. pp. 159-160. Hassan al-Banna was the founder and first 'Guide' (1928) of the Muslim Brotherhood: see esp. Anouar Abdel Malek, *Contemporary Arab Political Thought*, Zed Books London, 1983 pp. 45-56, Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh*, Al Saqi Books, London, 1985

The teaching of the Copts in modern times has been influenced to a rare degree by the work of Protestants. The doctrine of Pope Kyrillos IV (1816-1861), called the Reformer, has enjoyed an extraordinary authority for over a century.⁶⁶ He was Pope from 1854 to 1861. He had learnt his theology from the CMS missionaries, at that time an extremely conservative Protestant body. The Arabic translation of Matthew Henry's eighteenth century Puritan Commentary has also been a primary source for modern Coptic teachers.⁶⁷ Shenouda has not been free of these influences, but his intention as the bishop for Education was to recover the pristine purity of the Primitive Church.

Patristics did not feature on the agenda of the Egyptian government, and to them Bishop Shenouda appeared to be adequately apolitical. Shenouda evidently kept quiet enough for Sadat to regard him as the best choice for patriarch when Kyrillos died. It was a misunderstanding or miscalculation by Sadat. Shenouda as an advocate for his people has always refused to accept an inferior status for the Copts. He is regarded as a Folk Hero by the poorer Copts in Egypt.

The fourth of the monks of Kyrillos listed by Mohamed Heikal, and expected by Edward Wakin to have a particular impact upon the Coptic Orthodox Church, is Abouna Matta el-Miskin.⁶⁸ Matta has not yet been made a bishop though he was nominated to be the Coptic Pope in 1971. He remains in the monastery of St. Macarius in the Wadi Natroun or in one of its dependencies.

The Monastery of Abu Maqar is the most outstanding and interesting monastery in the Wadi Natroun. For centuries the community found mere survival a problem, but in 1969, despite personal difficulties and disagreements, Kyrillos sent Matta to the monastery. Matta had been living with twelve other monks in the Wadi Rayan. For ten years they had lived in caves. That decade in the Wadi Rayan has mythic status not only amongst the Copts but throughout the world wherever people are interested in twentieth century monasticism. In the Wadi Rayan, Matta and his brother monks found Coptic cave paintings from the fourth century. These paintings confirmed the archaic purity of the experiment. The community adopted the anchorite tradition. Each monk had his own cave. They had no radio and wrote no mail. In the desolate, inaccessible valley they devoted themselves to complete silence, broken only for a weekly Eucharist which was followed by the traditional

66 See my *Transfigured Matter: A Theology of Icons* in the *Coptic Church Review*, Summer 1992 pp.35-48. cf. Mounir Shoucri *Coptic Encyclopedia* pp.677-679.

67 cf. Geoffrey Rowell in the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. SCM, London 1983. p.98.

68 Wakin op.cit. p.123. Heikal op.cit. p.160. Rowell op.cit. p.98.

Agape or Love Feast before each of them returned to the Silence. Water was carried by donkey across dunes and shale. It was a hard and dangerous place. The monks could be compared with the gazelles, called 'pilgrims of the desert', who lived almost on nothing in the harsh environment.

When they arrived at St. Macarius in the Wadi Natroun, Matta and his monks completely restored the monastery, and the renewal has been architectural and spiritual. In 1969 only six old men lived at St. Macarius. Today there are more than a hundred monks. The library, refectory, one hundred and fifty beautiful new cells, bakery, barns and garages cover an enormous area and are all spotlessly clean and most attractive. The modern printing press produces books and magazines. The monastery surgery and dispensary is staffed by monks who are dentists, physicians, surgeons and ophthalmologists. There are several pharmacists. Most of the monks are graduates of universities in Cairo or Alexandria.

In 1983, a Japanese academic⁶⁹ estimated that the monastery land was over one thousand acres. Half of the land was used for farming. Melons, tomatoes, onions, lettuce, lemons, corn, figs, olives and grass were the main crops. There was a large animal breeding farm. The monks cared for one hundred head of milk and beef cattle. Many were Swiss bred and for beef. There were a hundred turkey, one thousand French chickens and 500 sheep. Milk was sent to hotels in Cairo every day. Cheese and yogurt were made and exported. The monastery employed about fifty workers including carpenters and builders. One of the fathers, a graduate of the Cairo University Department of Architecture was the Manager. In the last decade the work and the attendant statistics have increased by something like one hundred per cent. Mohamed Heikal describes the monastery as 'a huge agricultural enterprise'.

Matta is the greatest theologian in the Coptic Orthodox Church. His first book, *The Orthodox Life in Prayer*, was published in 1952 and drew many educated men to the monastic life. He has published more than 50 major works of Patristic and ecumenical theology. He has composed hundreds of articles and sermons which regularly appear in journals throughout the world. Several articles have been translated into English, Russian, French, German and Japanese. His book, *The Communion of Love*,⁷⁰ is the most substantial work of Coptic Theology in English available outside Egypt. It appears in a translation of rare quality: most Coptic the-

69 Takao Yamagata, *Coptic Monasteries at Wadi Al Natrun in Egypt*, University of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, Japan, 1983.

70 Matthew the Poor, *The Communion of Love*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, USA 1984.

ologians have an exceptional knack of finding translators whose gifts lie in a language other than that required.

Abu Makar is the only Coptic Orthodox monastery in Egypt where European Christians are welcome as equals. The altars are open to Catholics and Anglicans. The Monastery of St. Macarius has had fraternal links with the Benedictine house of Byzantine Rite at Chevtagne in Belgium. Matta maintains friendly links with Dr. Geoffrey Rowell, the former Warden of Keble College, Oxford, who is now a bishop, and with the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres, the premier religious community in the Anglican Communion. The monks of the Wadi Natroun had a happy relationship with Lee Abbey International Students Club in London, with Solesmes Abbey in France and Dair al-Harf in Lebanon. The teaching at the monastery, which is generally Patristic, is admired in all these places. In the warmth and depth of their ecumenism, Matta and the monastics of Saint Macarius are light years ahead of their fellow Copts.

It is impossible to know if Kyrillos knew what forces he was unleashing when he raised these four monks to positions of such importance. It is not difficult to find Copts who believe that Kyrillos hoped that Samuel would become patriarch. When Kyrillos died, Matta, Shenouda and Samuel were all nominated to take his place. Gregorios joined Matta and Samuel in opposing the elected candidate at a crucial moment in recent Coptic history. One of the four died. The remaining three, now in their seventies, are barely on speaking terms. Although there are reports of isolated visits from the patriarch when Gregorios and Matta were sick, there are no visible signs of genuine reconciliation, and certainly not at the Lord's Table in the Divine Liturgy.

Matta believes that he is maintaining the best traditions of Kyrillos in the question of church relations with the State. He was an adviser to President Sadat on church matters and has attacked the present patriarch for his political actions. His alliance with Sadat seems out of character. Many commentators on the Arab Christian churches, including the veteran analyst, Robert Brenton Betts, have identified Matta as a type of Christian-Socialist. It is perhaps sufficient to say that Father Matta is unique. Apart from one visit to the USA for medical treatment, he has remained in the monastery or at one of its dependencies. He continues to be extremely popular with most Copts and his authority as an internationally respected spiritual director is secure.

Gregorios attempts to maintain the ancient traditions of Coptic scholarship. He thinks in centuries. His erudition is above question. His first-class mind is as active

as ever but he is now a rather lonely, though venerable figure. To some extent, Gregorios represents, in the Coptic context, a type of intellectual who is well-known in the developing world. His mind is partly developed by the West and a wider international scholarship. In this respect he can be usefully compared with Samuel and contrasted with Shenouda and Matta. The most erudite, cultured and gifted of the group, Gregorios has always been slightly aloof from the rough and tumble of church politics.

Shenouda is a jet-setting President of the World Council of Churches. He is well liked in ecumenical circles, whose dealings with the Copts are otherwise superficial. He is interested in theological and spiritual developments in the developed world but the Western churches remain a mystery to him. He is ebullient and charming. He has the most attractive sense of humour. He laughs a lot. He is also seriously overworked and understandably tired, but, despite an appalling workload, he usually completes a fifteen hour working day. His very personal pastoral care for every visitor must be experienced to be believed.

Because Shenouda does not understand the problems of the Western Christians, he has nothing to say to them. He has alienated the Anglicans by his unwillingness to understand their difficulties with regard to homosexuality or the ordination of women. He talks down to the West without understanding where the occidental Christian finds himself. He does not listen.

Since his long exile in the desert, Shenouda devotes an inordinate amount of time to the small Coptic Diaspora and to international relations. His popular following for the Lesson of Wednesday is enormous and filled the cathedral crypt in Abassiya every week. He now appears in the cathedral nave. Thousands come to hear him because he knows how to teach and how to entertain at the same time. He loves Egypt, the Arabic language and the Coptic Orthodox Church and he enjoys an understanding of each of them such as only a lover can have.

It is the considered view of no less a commentator than Mohammed Heikal that Kyrillos regretted promoting the cause of these four men; three as bishops and one as abbot of the most important monastery in the whole of Africa. It is hopeless to speculate. Their elevation determined the kind of Church Kyrillos would leave behind. Their several appointments were the most important practical, pragmatic, political decisions made by Abba Kyrillos.

VIII

The most significant event in the patriarchate of Abba Kyrillos was an act of grace. It was a miracle for which no natural explanation is possible. From 2nd April 1968 until 29th May 1971 apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary were witnessed by nightly crowds of up to a quarter of a million Christians, Muslims and Jews.

It was in the aftermath of the June War of 1967 when Israeli planes swept over Cairo in broad daylight, terrifying the children on their way to school. Over fifteen thousand Egyptian soldiers were killed, thousands more were wounded. One million Palestinians were displaced. The Suez Canal was blocked. Egyptian oil in Sinai was in enemy hands. Jihan Sadat, widow of the President, has said that Faith was the only resort for most Egyptians.⁷¹ When the Virgin Mary appeared in Cairo, the front page of *Al-Ahram* carried a report which interpreted the appearances as a message from the Blessed Virgin: 'I know that you can no longer come and see me in Jerusalem. I have come back to Cairo again to see you'.

The first vision at the Coptic Orthodox Church in Zeitoun occurred on the night of Tuesday 2nd April 1968 at 8.30 p.m. A Muslim workman thought that he saw a young girl about to commit suicide by jumping from the church roof. By the time he had rushed off for help and returned, the lady on the roof revealed herself as a luminous being in robes of light. In a moment, people recognized the vision as 'Settana Mariam' (Our Lady Mary). They knew who she was.

The apparitions were to be seen again and again in the years ahead. The radiance of the lady was as intense as the light of the sun. The frequency of the visions and their duration varied, but she came back to the roof on many nights. At times she was continuously visible from dusk until dawn so that some onlookers in the early evening were able to call families and friends to join them.

Physical Healings have invariably been associated with apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary throughout the world. Zeitoun was not an exception.

71 Jehan Sadat, *A Woman of Egypt*. Bloomsbury, London 1987. pp.260-61.

Numerous cures were reported by religious believers of many faiths and by those with no faith. The range of maladies varied from relatively simple disorders to chronic and even normally terminal illnesses. People were taken to Zeitoun on stretchers and in wheelchairs. The recorded numbers of claimed cures were always high.

News of the appearances of the Blessed Virgin and reports of the miraculous cures spread like wild fire throughout Egypt and the Middle East. His Holiness Pope Kyrillos the Sixth quickly appointed a committee comprising three bishops and a large number of doctors of various medical specialisations. They were briefed to make a study of the apparitions and the miracles associated with them. The members of the committee spent many nights at Zeitoun; watching, noting, and examining those who claimed a cure. It was felt by some that the authenticity of the manifestations could be tested by examining the supposed miraculous cures. By this criterion the qualified medical personnel on the committee soon came to the opinion that the appearances could only be judged as genuine. They presented their findings to Kyrillos on 5th May 1968 and he declared that the appearances were genuine. He reminded the faithful that the Coptic Church in Zeitoun stood on a road through which the Holy Family had passed during the Flight into Egypt. Abba Kyrillos concluded with a prayer for peace in the world and prosperity for the people of Egypt.⁷²

People came to Egypt from all over the world to see the Blessed Virgin. A typical response of a Western-educated observer is that of Pearl Zaki from the USA, who wrote a moving account of her visit to Cairo. She saw the Virgin who was 'all light' and returned to America 'saturated with the joy of our visit'.⁷³

The ecumenical and international dimension of the Zeitoun phenomenon was important for Kyrillos. The Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics united with the Oriental Orthodox in devotions at Zeitoun.⁷⁴ In their liturgical worship, the Copts express their love and devotion for the Theotokos, the God-bearer, and, although the Copts are separated from Rome by the unbridgeable gulfs of Papal infallibility and the doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception, it was important at Zeitoun to

72 See esp. Pearl Zaki, *Our Lord's Mother Visits Egypt*. Dar El Alam El Arabi, Cairo. 1977. Francis Johnston *When Millions Saw Mary*. Devon, UK 1980. Iris Habib el Masri, *The Story of the Copts*. MECC, Cairo, 1978.

73 Zaki op.cit. p.64.

74 See esp. Johnston op.cit. He is a Catholic monk of the Order of St. Benedict.

express Christian solidarity in relation to Mary. She is the common Mother of Copts and Catholics. In Coptic devotion she stands at the head of the rank of apostolic witnesses to the faith that the Son of God was conceived in her virginal womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Summer Fast of the Theotokos is a major event for the Copts, with the celebrations which surround what the West calls the Feast of the Assumption. The light of Zeitoun fell upon the divided Christians, reminding them of the fundamentals of unity and confirming the Coptic Orthodox profession of the doctrine of the Council of Ephesus which proclaims the Blessed Virgin as the true Mother of God.

For Kyrillos the ministry of the Virgin of Zeitoun was much more than a confirmation of the steadfastness of the Copts during the long centuries of discrimination, persecution and martyrdom. The appearances were an evangelical challenge to the Copts and to all Christians. They were authentic appearances of Mary because they directed the observers to look beyond her and above her to Christ. The Church at Zeitoun looked to Mary, who brought forth Christ, so that through the Church today Christ might also be born and increase in the hearts of all Christians. In her authentic vocation Mary still carries Christ to the world. God-bearer. Theotokos. The title represents a claim upon all Christians who carry Christ before the watching world. In one sense the designation Theotokos encompasses the demand and description of priesthood or patriarchal service. The appearances of Our Lady of Zeitoun in Egypt are widely regarded as a seal of approval upon the ministry of Abba Kyrillos.

IX

One of the first projects of Kyrillos as patriarch took place on Friday, 27th November, 1959 when he laid the foundation stone of a new Monastery. On that day in the Mariout Desert Kyrillos celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the open air over the tomb of his patron saint Mina, the Egyptian who served as a Roman officer and was martyred upon his confession of Christ. Kyrillos was assisted by Abouna Makari as-Suriani, the future Bishop Samuel.

The text upon the foundation stone reads as follows:

The Monastery of Abu Mina Thaumaturge.

This Stone was laid by the hand of His Holiness

Pope Kyrillos the Sixth, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark,

Friday, 27th November, 1959.

17th of Hatur, 1676 in the Year of the Martyrs.

A vast new monastery and monumental basilica now occupy the site. Many monks live in the monastery under the direction of Bishop Mina who was consecrated in 1980. The entire project refers back to the great Coptic period of Athanasius.

One of the last projects of Kyrillos as Patriarch referred back beyond Athanasius and Mina to the foundations of African Christianity. In June 1968, Kyrillos consecrated the new Cathedral of St. Mark in Cairo with the Divine Liturgy celebrated at a superb golden altar, the gift of the Russian Orthodox Church, and hallowed the crypt with the relics of the Evangelist and Apostle of Egypt which were returned to the Copts from the Roman Catholic See of Venice.

Kyrillos lived fully for the Coptic present by constantly referring to the Coptic past, just as he saw contemporary Christian existence confirmed in the daily Eucharist. When he died his body was finally buried at the Monastery of Saint Mina in the Mariout desert. Many pilgrims go to the tomb to receive a blessing. They rest their heads on the sepulcher. They touch it. They kiss it. They always make the sign of the cross on their bodies. When he was alive it was said that Kyrillos answered any question with the sign of the Cross. In the light of his life, focused as it was upon a daily Eucharist, it is the most eloquent answer.



ΠΑΠΑ ΑΒΒΑ

ΚΥΡΙΑΡΟΣ

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