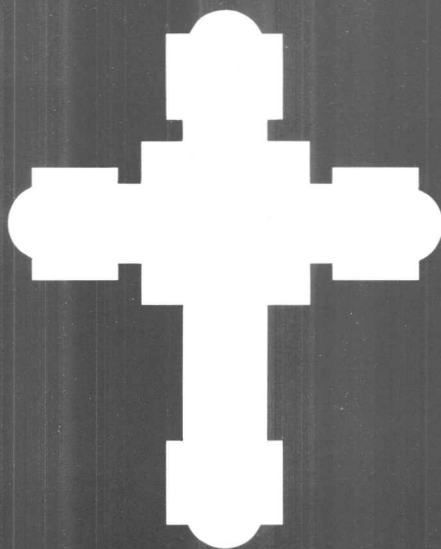


COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW

Volume 1, Number 4

Winter 1980

- ★ The Church and the Inward Man
Bishop Antonious Markos
- ★ Epiphany or the Day of Lights
Father Matta El-Meskeen
- ★ Symposium on Coptic Monasticism



Society of Coptic Church Studies

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Starting this issue, the Editorial Board of Coptic Church Review has the honor to have among its members **His Grace Anba Wissa**, Bishop of Al-Balyana, Egypt. His contribution concerning the ascetic aspects of patristic writings will be a much needed addition to the Journal's articles, as well as a great help for the reader who is interested in the advancement of his spiritual life.

We are happy to introduce the winter issue by *'The Church and the Inward Man'* by **Anba Antonious Markos**, Bishop of African Affairs in the Coptic Church and a member of the Editorial Board of Coptic Church Review. He remarked that this article came out of his personal experience, life and ministry in Africa, an experience which is not much different from what we see in America.

In this season, the Church celebrates several feasts, that together make the cycle of Theophany or the manifestation of our Lord in the flesh. This includes two major feasts (Christmas on January 7, and Epiphany on January 19) and two minor feasts (Circumcision on January 14 and the first miracle at Cana on January 21), in addition to the commemoration of the Magi visit on January 11. **Father Matta El-Meskeen** discusses in *'Epiphany (Theophany) or the Day of the Lights'* the traditional importance of this feast; and he concludes by mentioning three spiritual benefits one can get by celebrating it. This article is translated from his book, 'Feasts of Theophany' published in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1975.

The greater part of this issue is given to our first *'Symposium on Coptic Monasticism'*. It is natural to start by an article on the life of *'St. Anthony the Great'*, the Father of Monks everywhere. Father Tadros Malaty of Alexandria, Egypt, a member of the Editorial Board and a writer of a vast number of books and articles, discusses *'Early Monasticism Among Women'*. He concludes by elaborating on the life of two of its early pioneers—**Abbess Sarah** and **St. Hilaria**. Both stories are enlightening, fascinating and challenging.

Contemporary monasticism in the Coptic Church is the scope of two articles. **Professor Iris el-Masri**, describes *'Present Day Convents in Egypt'* from an actual first-hand experience. Miss Iris is Professor of Church History at the 'Higher Institute for Coptic Studies' in Egypt, and author of *'The Story of the Copts'*.

The reader is then taken in a pilgrimage to see the *'Contemporary Life in an Ancient Coptic Monastery'*. The Monastery of Our Lady of Al-Syrian, one of

the four ancient monasteries that still remain from the fourth century great monastic foundations of Scetis in the Western Egyptian desert, has witnessed the beginning of a great spiritual revival in the Coptic Church.

The section of Book Reviews deals with the three books by the late D. J. Chitty about early monasticism.

We feel that this symposium is only an introduction for a wide and essential subject. More studies about monasticism, both early and modern, are to be included in the next issues of the Journal.

THE CHURCH AND THE INWARD MAN

A Deep and Frank Look into Modern Christianity

by His Grace Bishop Antonious Markos

“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.” (II Cor. 4:16.)

THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE INWARD MAN

The Christian Church was established by the divine wisdom of her founder and redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, to offer man a doctrine of salvation so that it might satisfy the needs of the inward man and the human soul. The plan of God to save mankind started because man lost the image in which he was created. “And God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness.” (Gen. 1:26.) Through these divine measures man could be restored to his original image and likeness. This salvation, seen in the lives of the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Testament, was perfected, and completed in the person of Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, who came in the form and shape of man so that he might save man.

St. Paul expresses the condition of the human race before Christ:

“For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.” (Rom. 8:22.)

“Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law which is in my members.”
(Rom. 7:24, 22, 23.)

“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body. . . .” (Rom. 6:12)

“Who shall deliver me?” (Rom. 7:24.)

For long ages man could feel that he could not overcome the world and the flesh by his own power.

“For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (I John 5:4, 5.)

The Lord who created the outward and inward man, is thoroughly knowledgeable of all the needs, weaknesses, lusts, desires, as well as gifts and abilities of this inward man. The early Church could deliver the inward man from his weakness, give him rebirth, forgive his sins, and enable him to grow spiritually to the full height of Christ.

As pilgrims and strangers in this world, we are susceptible to the world and its continuously changing character and nature. The world changed since the Creation; it changed since the coming of Christ; it is changing at an even more rapid pace today. Even though the surroundings of this inward man are changing, the nature of the inward man remains constant. The nature of the inward man is the same as it was in Adam's day. It has the same needs, weaknesses, and dependency upon guidance. It has the same need for deliverance, redemption, support and forgiveness so that it may be renewed day by day.

The early Church of our Lord was established and masterfully designed in all its details, sacraments, teachings, traditions, practises, and services to suit the inward man of all ages, times, and generations. The Apostles received this Church directly from the hands of Christ and delivered it to their successors, without changing a single detail, so that human made doctrine would not replace heavenly doctrine, and so human wisdom would not replace God's wisdom.

“For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Verily, Verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.” (John 13:15-17.)

The successors of the Apostles accepted the Christian faith in the early Church, and found it to be the same Church as established by the Lord. As a result they found it suitable to their souls, and their inward man. In turn, they delivered it to honest people who were able to teach others.

“Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” (II Tim. 2: 1 & 2)

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” (II Thes. 2:15.)

The early Church in obedience to the heavenly designed Church, was attaining perfection. It could produce a great change within the inward man

through the power of the Holy Spirit, who acted in the daily life of each individual. By reading the history and writings of early Christians, we can see the spiritual standards of sanctification and perfection which their inward man could reach.

THE MODERN CHURCH AND THE INWARD MAN

The modern church of today pales in comparison. The call for modernization, reformation, modification, or reinstitution is aimed at making the church more suitable to the modern man. The inevitable result of such an emphasis is a church that is unable to reach the human soul or the inward man. While the modern church attempts to please the outward man and his intellect, she strays further and further from the inward man and his needs. The early church addressed the soul of man; the modern church addresses the mind of man. All that is addressed to man's brain can be resisted, or washed away by other ideologies, but all that is addressed to the soul and spirit of the inward man penetrates deeply, changes, delivers, saves, gives victory, and works forever.

The inability of the modern church to touch the inward man can be witnessed by the decreasing number of Christians in the modernized church, and by the diversity of the modern churches. In contrast, the early church was both unified and growing throughout the first three or four centuries of the Christian age.

A new phenomenon in Christianity called the "Independent church" is an offspring of the modern church. It has spread all over the world. In Africa, for example, there are over 6000 independent churches, containing a following of over twenty-five million Christians. Many different pictures of Christianity are presented in these churches. A great number of the same churches also exist in South America, Asia, and even North America. Many of these church bodies are splits from the Western churches; however, a few indigenous churches have sprung up from the people.

Unable to attract the youth, or keep their congregation, the modern churches should ask themselves the question: "Why is all this happening?" If they would only sincerely ask this question before God, the answer could easily be found. We believe that the answer is still to be found in the original church of the Apostles, founded by the Lord Jesus Christ, designed to meet the need of the inward man, which can grow, spread, and deliver from sin just as well today as it could in the early years of Christianity.

EPIPHANY (THEOPHANIA)

or the Day of the Lights

Father Matta El Meskeen

The Feast of Immersion (Baptism), namely Epiphany, or the Divine Manifestation, is one among the major Lord's feasts. It ranks third in importance after Easter and Christmas.

Almost to the closing of the fourth century, most churches held one celebration for the Birth of Christ and His Baptism and called it Epiphany: considering that both have one end in view, i.e., the manifestation of Christ's divinity to the world. The birth of the Son presented him in the flesh. His baptism showed the Trinity. However, the Church thought of celebrating each event separately to enforce the concept of each and called the Feast of Christ's baptism Epiphany.

St. John Chrysostom witnessed the beginning of the official separation of the two celebrations as well as the setting of the rituals of each. In one of his sermons preached in 386 on a Christmas eve, he mentioned that only a few years before during his life, the church celebrated both together. Later on, the commemoration of Baptism was solely called Epiphany as distinguished from Christmas. St. John Chrysostom then mentioned the reason: the Lord, during His Baptism, was manifest to everyone; while in His Birth, He was hidden from everyone.¹

Although the early church never distinctly mentioned the Birth, it considered it as the essence of Epiphany, i.e., the Divine Manifestation and used to celebrate it with Epiphany.² The tangible proof of the mutual celebration is that the Feast of Epiphany or Theophany up till this date involves the celebration of a Christmas incident, i.e., the coming of the three wise men and the offering of their gifts to the born Christ, which is an elaboration of His Divinity. Also with the Lord's Baptism, "immersion", was still considered and named the second Epiphany by some great theologians like St. Gregory of Nazianz,³ because the first Epiphany is the Birth itself. Cassian (350-435) declares that Egypt celebrated Baptism and Birth on one day.

A sermon delivered by St. Gregory of Nazianz on the Epiphany of 381 indicates that Epiphany has a special ritual in the church as distinguished from that of Christmas, and that on that date a special ritual was set aside for Christmas other than that of Epiphany. Other scattered referrals designate

that many churches—especially those of Egypt—celebrated Epiphany for a long time. The Didascalia or the Teachings of the Apostles, says, “Let Epiphany be honored among you, because the Lord started to manifest His Divinity in the baptism in Jordan by John. May you commemorate it on the 11th of Tubah” (Chapter 18/ Arabic)

In the records of Emperor Theodosius the Great, statements that indicate the closing of law courts, public celebrations, theatres and amusement houses were included; Epiphany and Christmas were regarded as official holidays of the state.⁴ There is also an interesting account of the celebrations of Epiphany in the Journal of Sylvia Etheria, the Spanish pilgrim, as she witnessed them in the churches of Jerusalem. In the acts of St. Philip the Martyr, bishop of Heraclia who was brought to martyrdom in 304 A.D. during the reign of Diocletian, there are hints about Epiphany, (Theophany). In a sermon of St. Gregory of Nazianz there is a reference about the way St. Basil, bishop of Caeseria, celebrated Epiphany.⁵ There is also a reference in the writings of St. Augustine when he accuses the Donatists of refraining from the commemoration of Epiphany with the Church as it has been the case with the Eastern tradition.

Epiphany assumed a great ritual importance to the Church in general and to Egypt in particular, because on this anniversary, the Pope of Alexandria undertook the responsibility of announcing the start of Lent, Passover and Easter on an accurate astronomical basis. The other churches of the world followed these dates. It is also a well-known historical fact that the first one to undertake this commission was St. Dionysius, Pope of Alexandria (248-265) according to the records of Eusebius of Caeseria the Church historian.⁶ All the other popes kept this tradition after him—especially St. Athanasius who in his letters elevated the ritual practices to a spiritual standard. His Paschal letters, brimful of preaching, teaching, wisdom and spiritual valor would be sent immediately following Epiphany. The first Paschal letter for St. Athanasius was on the Epiphany of 329 A.D. Actually we were handed seventeen complete Paschal letters of St. Athanasius in Arabic and Syriac, besides three epistles for Pope Theophilus and others for St. Cyril the Great.

These letters delivered immediately after Epiphany were regarded as an early spiritual alarm that drew the minds of people to the significance of repentance and marked the approach of the blessed Lent. They summoned joy to all the monks in the Egyptian deserts. As an eye witness, the blessed Cassian (350-435) indicates in his writings that, “It is an ancient tradition in Egypt that the bishop of Alexandria sends out circular epistles to the churches of Egypt and its monasteries immediately after Epiphany Day (Immersion) in which he assigns the start of Lent and Easter day.”

Epiphany Day in itself held a great and honorable position among many great Church Fathers. We have many eloquent speeches from the Saints—

Gregory of Nazianz, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom.

The most common name the Fathers gave to this feast is the "Day of Lights." St. Gregory of Nazianz says in his sermon (39), "This holy day is the Day of Lights; we celebrate it because on it Christ the true light that lights for everyone coming to the world, was baptized." St. Gregory of Nyssa follows his example in his 4th sermon saying, "The Day of Lights on which the Lord was baptized."

To this present date, the Church on Epiphany continues to symbolize the concept of divine lights by lighting many candles and using them in the ritual service and in homes as well. People compete in lighting candles as an expression of the divine light that came to the world on that day; the day of the Lord's baptism and on which He was anointed to start His official ministry and shed light on those sitting in the darkness of sins and shadows of death. The tradition of lighting candles became so common that some western churches named this day "Candlemas Day."

Because the Divine Manifestation is associated with the waters of the Jordan, the Church used this occasion to sanctify the water and practise Baptism. The Church had already established three seasons for performing the sacrament of Baptism for the catechumens, the most important of which is the great Saturday night prior to Passover night. Next comes the Day of Pentecost on which the Holy Spirit came on the Disciples, and then comes Epiphany. On this ranking, St. Gregory of Nazianz says, "One would say, I'll wait for Epiphany (as to Baptism) and the other would say, no, I give more honor to Resurrection, and a third says, as for me, I'll wait till Pentecost Day." This is also clear in the sayings of St. Athanasius, "We also believe in one baptism, the new birth of the Spirit that renews man, the birth without a womb that our Lord showed us when He presented himself to the world on the waters of Jordan."⁷

Because the water which enfolded the blessed Body of the Lord came to be considered sacred as well, the idea of sanctifying the water was passed to the common congregation and they came to believe that the water the Church prayed on in the Font had consecrating and healing powers. St. John Chrysostom says in this respect, "On this occasion of the commemoration of the baptism of the Savior on which He sanctified the nature of the water, the people on leaving the church after midnight used to take home some of the water and keep it. It was noticed that this water stays pure and placid for two or three years."⁸

The blessing of the water is also a part of the Church ritual for (in the water blessing that precedes the Eucharistic Liturgy) the priest pointing to the water with the cross says, "Sanctify this water and bestow on it the grace of Jordan. . . . May it become a fountain of blessings, a pure gift to untie sins and remove

sickness.” Some books indicate that some churches of olden times had a tradition of keeping some of the Jordan water and adding it to the pot or the Font during the liturgical service for the water on that day.

Everytime the Divine Manifestation (Epiphany) is commemorated, the Church is actually presenting a great chance to accept many spiritual blessings. First, a chance of actual participation in the manifestation of Christ's Divinity as shown in the Jordan is offered to us. This is expressed in our thoughts and acts as an enlightenment and a spiritual intuition to grasp eternal life. Second, we are prepared (especially the ministers) to accept the renewal of anointment of ministry in participation with the anointment of the Lord Jesus Christ which He received from the Highest to start His official ministry. Third, we are freely granted the right of washing with the holy water for the purification of the body and the conscience from the filth of sin. Many people keep this water all year round and wash with it after confession; they cross their foreheads and hearts and senses, thus keeping the unique blessing of the Epiphany as a spiritual reminder and blessing to aid their daily walk with the Lord throughout the year. In this sense Epiphany becomes an event not only to be celebrated once a year, but becomes a blessing throughout one's spritual life and an invaluable aid in the quest for eternal life.

Translated by Mrs. Nabila Banout

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1. Orat. XV
2. Dict. of Chr. Antiq. Vol. I, p. 617
3. Nazianz. Orat. by Ruffinus p. 249
4. Cod. I, 3 tit. 12 by Birming
5. Orat XI: iii : 52
6. Euseb. Hist. eccl. 7, 20
7. Athanasius in a letter to Constantius
8. Hom. 24. de Bap. Christ.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We thank all readers who send their comments. Letters selected in this section are based on the general interest of their topic, and are subject to editing or shortening, if necessary.

About the second issue . . .

To the Editor:

With great pleasure I finished reading the Coptic Church Review, Volume 1, No. 2, Summer 1980. I was not aware of the existence of this publication until a few days ago. I am impressed by its serious character and its attempt to deal with religious issues in the light of patristic writings. A publication in the English language is long overdue for the English speaking individuals here and on the continent. Now that the Copts are spread in the free world, away from the oppression of Mohamedanism, they ought to avail themselves of the great exegetical and ascetical works of the Church of Alexandria now easily accessible in English, French and other modern languages.

I particularly bow with awe to the translation work of the article entitled "Spiritual Insights into the Daily Office" because of the purity of its use of English and the correct rendition of the Arabic original.

Since you have invited response from your readers, I would like to point out two things:

First and most important:

Regarding the Editorial comment on page 46, paragraph 2, of the last issue (Volume 1, No. 2, Summer 1980) concerning Origen as being "... the greatest teacher in the early Church" I would like to say that, this Origen was condemned by the Holy Fathers as being a heretic and the author of the "Doctrine of Wickedness;" this condemnation is because of Origen's blasphemous teachings. Among many we mention:

- i —The pre-existence of the human soul.
 - ii —Reincarnation (i.e. metempsychosis) and his denial of the identity between the mortal and the resurrection bodies.
 - iii—Repentance and restoration of demons to their angelic state.
- and other pagan views.

St. Pachomius of Egypt (Tabenna) admonishes his visitors to stay away from the teachings of Origen and he, the blessed man, asked them, “to take all of the writings of Origen and cast them into the fire and never seek to read them again.” (The Rule of Pachomius of Egypt in *The Rule or the Asketikon*, page 15, published by Eastern Orthodox Books, Willits, California, 1976 and also in the *Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, Vol. I, p. 293, second paragraph.)

Our Holy Father and teacher, St. Cyril of Alexandria said about Origen, “Our Fathers denounced and anathematized (Origen) for perverting the truth.” (Cyril of Alexandria in *PG* 77, 373 A.)

The commentary in the Editorial about what St. Jerome said about Origen is quite true, *however*, in the year 395, St. Jerome changed his views after a visit of St. Epiphanius of Salamis to Jerusalem. In fact, St. Jerome requested from the bishop of Jerusalem at the time, Bishop John, a condemnation of Origen.

Origen also taught a dogma which was precursor to the Latin dogma of Purgatory, by preaching that hell has an end and that once the soul is cleansed of its stain it will enter Paradise. In this regard see the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 5:41.

In the last year, a book about Origen was published in English under the title, “*Origen—An Exhortation, Prayer and Selected Works*” published by the Classics of Western Spirituality, which reflects opinions basically heretical coming from the West. I would like to see a write up about it in your “Book Review” section warning the readers against its errors.

I am aware of Father Tadros’ view concerning quoting and studying Origen. But is it not time for us to heed the teaching of our Fathers among the Saints—Cyril and Pachomius? Is it not time for us to heed the correct teachings which are unto salvation, in a time of general secularism and defiance of correct (i.e. Orthodox) dogmas everywhere? Is it not time for us to pay particular attention to our heritage, that is, our faith which belongs not only to the “ecclesia docens” but to every individual?

Second—and equally important:

It is mentioned in the Editorial about the “Feast of the Assumption” (page 47). I am not really certain what is meant by this term in the publication. The Assumption is a dogma pronounced by the Latins in 1950 in their “scholastic” “theology” to which the Coptic Church and other Eastern Churches are under *no* constraint to accept. However, the DORMITION of our Lady the Theotokos has been a feast in the East since ancient times (probably from the times of Dionysius the Areopagite as is mentioned in his work: “The Divine Names”) celebrating the translation of the Body of the Theotokos directly into heaven.

Therefore, in the East we accept the Feast of Dormition but not Assumption.

Michael Alexander, Canada
October 22, Feast of St. Matthew, the Evangelist

The Controversy about Origen

We thank Mr. Alexander for his lengthy and scholarly comment. In his article about Origen, Fr. Tadros Malaty did not try to enter into the controversy about Origen which started by his banishment from Alexandria in 230 A.D. Instead he was completely fair in mentioning both the achievements and the defects of the great Alexandrian scholar. Since this letter has re-opened the controversy by presenting well the view of the opponents of Origen, the Journal has to clarify the historical facts about the controversy, and this we do very briefly:

1. Origen was never excommunicated by the Coptic Church. After his ordination in Palestine, St. Demetrius summoned a synod of bishops and priests which forbade him from teaching in Alexandria and banished him from it, but the council failed to depose him. The pope then summoned a second council of bishops only, in which Origen was deprived of his priesthood. Only three bishops were in this council. Origen was never tried nor his defence heard.

2. Towards the end of the fourth century, the Egyptian monks disputed about the writings of Origen. Pope Theophilus (23) chose the anti-Origenistic camp and the monks who defended Origen were expelled from Egypt, a tragedy which was then complicated by the greater tragedy of deposing the bishop of Constantinople—St. John Chrysostom. Under these circumstances, we expect to find harsh attacks on Origen in the letters of St. Theophilus, and after him St. Cyril the Great and in the monastic writings of that time—the *Life of Pachomius* and the *Sayings of the Fathers*.

3. The only council that really excommunicated Origen was the Council of Constantinople of 553 A.D. This council is not accepted by the Coptic Church since it occurred after Chalcedon. St. John of the Ladder, a byzantine saint, follows its rules.

4. Most of the Church Fathers and theologians admired Origen and borrowed much from his writings. The long list includes great saints and fathers like, Gregory the Wonder-worker, Pamphilus, Dionysius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Didymus, John of Jerusalem, Eusebius, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose and Rufinus. St. Athanasius spoke of him as, "the most admirable and assiduous Origen." St. Vincent of Lerins says, "what Christian did not venerate him as a prophet, what philosopher as a master?"

5. Even the western and eastern churches that consider the 553 council as ecumenical have long left their enmity to Origen, and his writings are now greatly studied. Paul Cheneau (Roman Catholic) writes in '*Les Saints D-Egypte*', "Was Origen a heretic? It is almost apparent now that this is not the case. It is certain that he never insisted on the mistakes which were found in

his writings with that obstinacy known about heretics. He complained bitterly about the additions entered in his books by his enemies. Even St. Jerome, a known opponent is a witness to this. What do we benefit from counting among the heretics a man who often denied this accusation, who always had friends and supporters among famous churchmen, and who suffered courageously for the true faith?"

6. *The position taken by the Journal, in line with most Church Fathers and scholars, is to admire Origen for the wealth of his writings. While we admit that some errors are found in his books, yet we can no longer use terms that describe his teaching as wicked, or blasphemous. When we speak about our heritage, Origen cannot be ignored. The book, 'Origen—An Exhortation, Prayer and Selected Works' is to be reviewed in another issue of the Journal.*

Assumption

Concerning the Virgin Mary, the Journal did not use the term 'assumption' but 'assumption of her body.' According to the tradition of the Coptic Church, there are two different feasts:

1. *Dormition (or Falling Asleep) on January 29 (Tubah 21)*
2. *Assumption of her body, on August 22 (Masari 16)*

The teaching of assumption of the body of St. Mary, has been held by the Church even long before the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius. It was mentioned by St. Athanasius and St. Cyril the Great. It differs from the Latin dogma of 1950 which declared that the Virgin overcame death and was taken body and soul to the glory of heaven.

Editor

Chalcedon

To the Editor:

Please accept our best wishes for the success of your journal. I must express my regret that one of your earliest contributors chose to re-open the wounds of Chalcedon, but it is important that all issues be discussed openly.

*Joseph F. Kelly, Associate Professor, John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio
Sec.-Treas., North American Patristic Society*

Ethiopian and Coptic Manuscripts

To the Editor

I have recently heard for the first time of the existence of your journal. As I understand it, the purpose of your journal is to preserve and propagate the values of the spirituality of the Fathers of the Desert and of the Coptic Church. The aim of this library, of which I am the Director, is somewhat

similar. We preserve on microfilm the riches of the human spirit and culture that are contained in manuscripts and we make them available to interested scholars. Of course, the interest of this library is not limited to the Coptic Church, but it does very definitely include it.

It may interest you to know that our library already has on microfilm many manuscripts that could be important for you. We have microfilmed some 7,500 manuscripts in Ethiopia, whose church, as you well know, has been associated intimately with the Coptic Church down through the centuries. An enormous part of Ethiopian literature has been received directly from the Coptic Church in Egypt, and occasionally some of these works have subsequently been lost in Egypt, and have been preserved only in Ethiopia. Our collection of microfilms of Ethiopian manuscripts is especially strong in lives of Egyptian martyrs and saints.

We also have some Coptic manuscripts on microfilm. The originals are kept for the most part in the Austrian National Library in Vienna. This collection includes not only a small number of proper manuscripts, but also thousands and thousands of papyrus fragments from Egypt, written in different dialects of Coptic, as well as Greek and Arabic. Not all these manuscripts and fragments would be of interest, perhaps, to readers of your journal, but many of them surely would.

It might also interest you to know that we have more than once given serious consideration to the possibility of microfilming Coptic manuscripts in Egypt. That we have never done so has not been from a lack of interest, but from various factors over which we have had no control that have not allowed us to go ahead. We have recently been approached in connection with Anba Samuel's project to preserve the treasures of the Coptic Church. At the moment, it seems that other organizations are planning to do the same thing and apparently have greater chances of success. Should they change their minds, however, we would again seriously explore the possibilities. In any case, we are prepared to collaborate with other organizations in the preservation of the treasures of Coptic spirituality and willingly support their efforts as far as is reasonably possible.

Julian G. Plante, Ph. D.,
Director of Hill Monastic Manuscript Library
and Research Professor of Classics,
St. John's Abbey and University,
Collegeville, Minnesota

SYMPOSIUM ON COPTIC MONASTICISM

Introduction

EARLY PIONEERS

Probably the first recorded incident of Christian monasticism happened during the reign of Emperor Antonious Pius (138-161 A.D.), when a certain Frontinus decided to reject the world and was accompanied by seventy others; they lived in Nitria, in the western desert of Egypt.

Then it was during the fierce persecution of Decius (250 A.D.) when multitudes of Egyptians fled to the desert. St. Dionysius of Alexandria mentioned in his letters that vast numbers wandered over deserts and mountains during the Decian persecution, some of those remained in the desert after the persecution was over. One of them was St. Paul of Thebes who was given the title of "first hermit" by St. Jerome.

"FATHER OF THE MONKS"

It was the Gospel alone, heard and taken literally by St. Anthony, a youth of Upper Egypt, that started anchoritism. After living in solitude for twenty years, he was forced by many followers to found the first monastic group in Arsinoe. Later he founded two other groups in the eastern desert of Egypt; one at Pispir, by the Nile, and the other at Mount Colzim near the Red Sea.

COLLECTIVE EREMITISM

Before his death in 355 A.D., St. Anthony had thousands of followers. At the same time other groups of anchorites began to erupt in various parts of the country.

In the western Egyptian desert three groups were started by disciples of St. Anthony. Palladius, who visited the first one in 389 A.D. wrote; "On the mountain of Nitria live close to five thousand men following different ways of life, each as he can or will. . . . All these work with their hands at making linen, so that none of them is in want. And indeed, along about the ninth hour (3 P.M.) one can stand and hear the divine psalmody issuing forth from each cell and imagine one is high above in paradise."

The monastic group known as the "Cells" was founded by St. Amoun together with St. Anthony.

The third group was founded at Scetis by St. Macarius the Great.

In Middle Egypt we find several settlements of hermits in the fourth century:

- In Babylon, St. Apollo led about 500 disciples. They were described as fervent in worship, joyful in the spirit; all were dressed in white. They used to leave their cells every day to gather for the Holy Eucharist.
- Other groups lived in Memphis and Antinoe. Palladius lived six years in the latter area, where he found 1,200 monks and twelve convents.
- In Oxyrhynchus (about 125 miles south of Cairo), lived 10,000 monks and 20,000 nuns.

In Lycopolis (now Assiut), many were attracted to the famous anchorite and prophet, St. John of Egypt (303-394 A.D.) and lived near him.

Even Sinai was not left. In that fierce desert, monks lived in tents or caves. few ate bread, as no corn could be grown. They had to be satisfied with beans or wild plants. Most of them had one meal a day; some only broke their fast on Sundays. They lived far from one another but used to meet early on the Lord's Day for the Eucharist.

CENOBITISM

The third stage after "anchoritism," and "collective eremitism" was "cenobitism" or monastic community life. This was started in Upper Egypt at Tabennesis by St. Pachomius (290-346). Born at Isna of pagan parents, he was touched by the charity of the Christians of Thebes during his military service. After he was released from the army, he received baptism; then he lived with a hermit, St. Palemon, for seven years before he started to build the first monastery in the world, where monks lived together in a common life. His regulations, the "Rule of St. Pachomius," became the basis for later monastic rules. Contemporary historians declared that he received a tablet with the rule inscribed on it from an angel. St. Pachomius died of plague at a young age when he was serving the sick monks by himself. But he left behind him a large number of monasteries.

In the fifth century, St. Shenute of Atripe organized a cenobitic colony of more than 2,000 monks near the modern city of Sohag (in Upper Egypt). Under his rule, the monks had to observe more severe fasts and ascetic practices. In addition, they were allowed to withdraw to the mountains to live in complete solitude.

In spite of the success of cenobitism in Egypt, anchoritism and collective eremitism continued to develop alongside with it.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

The rise of monasticism in Egypt has been the most profound spiritual revival that ever happened in all the history of the Church. People from everywhere and of all ranks of society were drawn to the Egyptian desert. The monasteries became swarmed with monks from different nations; Greeks,

Roman, Cappadocians, Libyans, Syrians, Nubians, Ethiopians, and others. Some of the greatest personalities of the age left their worldly life to live among the desert fathers.

In 381 A.D. two Roman princes, Maximus and Domedius, came to Scetis where they stayed for the rest of their short and angelic lives with St. Marcarius the Great. St. Apollinaria, a lady of high Roman birth, lived also in Scetis as a follower of St. Macarius; she was disguised as a monk by the name of Dorotheus.

Arsenius who was a very wealthy and cultured Roman of noble birth, and was the tutor of the children of Theodosius the Great, decided in 394 A.D. to set out for the Egyptian desert. In Scetis, he became the disciple of St. John the Short. One of the monks was astonished to see him one day asking one of the older fathers about his thoughts. "Abba Arsenius," he inquired, "How does it happen that you who are well learned in the Greek and Latin literature, are still in need to ask this illiterate Egyptian?" St. Arsenius answered, "It is right that I know the Greek and Latin literature very well, but the alpha and beta which this Egyptian has well perfected, I have not learned till now?" He was speaking about the ascetic life.

Abba Evagrius of Ponticus became a monk in Nitria in 383 A.D. Two years later he went to the "Cells" where he became a disciple of St. Macarius of Alexandria. He was very influential both in the East and through St. Cassian in the West.

St. Nilus of Sinai, a figure well known for his extant writings on prayer was the prefect of Constantinople at the time of St. John Chrysostom. In 330 A.D. he settled with his son Theodul on Mount Sinai, while his wife and daughters entered one of the Egyptian convents.

Actually Egypt in the fourth century became a second Holy Land where Christian spirituality based on the New Testament, the Celestial City and the idealized example of the first Christian communities, was given extraordinary vigorous expressions.

At the end of the fourth century St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, wrote "The desert of Egypt is now the most beautiful of all the gardens of the world. There you behold many angelic hosts in human form . . . and groups of virgins you cannot number. . . . The tyranny of the devil has been broken down and Christ is transfigured in all His glory. Everywhere in that country you see an army of Christ. . . . Heaven, with its different choruses, has no more beauty than the desert of Egypt."

Besides those who chose to spend their earthly lives in Egypt, and became themselves "desert fathers," a host of travellers came to visit the famous anchorites or to be their disciples for several years.

Around 373 A.D., St. Melania the Elder remained for six months in Nitria. She was accompanied by St. Rufinus of Aquileia who later visited also Scetis

and the Cells and met personally many of the Desert Fathers. On his return home he translated the now famous work "History of the Monks of Egypt."

St. John Chrysostom stayed in one of the Pachomian monasteries in Upper Egypt from 373 to 381 A.D.

In 385 A.D., St. Jerome came to Egypt with his disciple St. Paula. She was overwhelmed by the sight of the pillars of Christ whom she met in Nitria and Scetis and had the opportunity to sit at their feet. She longed to stay there, but she had a desire to see the Holy Land.

Palladius, a Greek from Galatia, went to Egypt about 388-390 A.D. He stayed one year in Nitria and nine years in the desert of "Cells" as a disciple of St. Macarius of Alexandria and Abba Evagrius. He later became a bishop of Helenopolis, and wrote his "Lausiac History" about 420 A.D.

St. John Cassian (360-435 A.D.) lived for seven years with the monks of Egypt. He became a bishop of Marseilles and founded two monasteries there.

At the end of the fourth century, Etheria, a Spanish lady, visited the Egyptian desert after her visit to Jerusalem. Her book "Pilgrim of Etheria" is a description of what she saw.

SPREAD OF MONASTICISM OUTSIDE EGYPT

It was only during the last part of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth that monasticism started in other countries. St. Hilarion, a disciple of St. Anthony, brought the monastic life to Palestine.

St. Basil visited the Pachomian monasteries in Egypt in 357-358 A.D., and when he returned to Asia Minor, he created his monastic community; the first one in Byzantium.

St. Cassian founded the first monasteries in Europe in 415 A.D.

St. Augustine, the greatest of the Latin Fathers attributed his conversion to hearing the story of St. Anthony in Milan in 387 A.D.

In the sixth century, St. Benedict developed his Rule for Monasticism. It is a known fact that in his Rule, St. Benedict freely used the writings of the Desert Fathers, especially the Rule of St. Pachomius and the writings of Cassian about Coptic monasticism.

According to a Chaldean tradition, St. Eugene with seventy other Coptic monks went to Mesopotamia and built several monasteries near Nisibis.

The revival of Western monasticism in the middle ages by the Carthusians, Cistercians, Franciscans and Dominicans was in each time influenced by the examples of the Desert Fathers. But probably the most significant monastic revival is the one happening now in the Coptic Church. At a time when monasticism started to fade in other traditional churches, the old monasteries where the Desert Fathers once lived, are now being rebuilt and the Coptic youth are hurrying to follow their footsteps. From everywhere once more, people are taking the way of the Egyptian desert for spiritual counsel.

CONTEMPORARY MONASTIC REVIVAL

If the history of the contemporary monastic revival in the Coptic Church is to be written, the names of two Popes, a Bishop, and a monk, will be found playing an integral part in the development of the renewal.

The burden of fifteen centuries of age, material poverty of the Church, repeated persecutions, lack of learning, and a general loss of interest in the spiritual life led to the disappearance or destruction of most of the ancient Coptic monasteries. Only seven of them survived until the twentieth century, and these monasteries were in a state of collapse: whether we speak of the condition of the buildings, the number of the monks, or the quality of spiritual life led in them.

Approximately 35 years ago as a result of the deplorable state of the monasteries, the Bishop of Beni-Suef asked a solitary monk by the name of Mina of Baramous to assume care of the nearly deserted monastery of Abba Samuel at Calamoun in Upper Egypt. Under his guidance the monastery quickly flourished, but Father Mina, who loved the solitary life, soon after returned to his cave in old Cairo. God, however, had different plans for Father Mina, and led him to an active life in Cairo. He soon established a church which quickly became a monastery that attracted university graduates who found in Father Mina the spiritual guidance for which they were seeking. Although the establishment of the monastery definitely had the mark of God upon it, it did not find a welcome or acknowledgement from the Church. The light was too intense for the darkness from which the Church was suffering at the time, and the new monks had to find another monastery, leaving the fate of the monastery of St. Samuel floundering until Father Mina became Pope Kyrillos VI in 1959. During his patriarchate (1959-1971), he acknowledged the monastery of St. Samuel and built the new monastery of St. Mina, near the archaeological site of the city named after the Saint. Meanwhile the monks who were under Father Mina's guidance at St. Samuel's, were received by the monastery of Our Lady, Al-Syrian, which was being renovated by Bishop Theophilus. In a few years this monastery became the center of monastic revival.

Throughout his patriarchate Pope Kyrillos the VI demonstrated his continuing interest in the revival of monastic life. Towards the end of his life, he asked Bishop Theophilus to preside over the neighboring monastery of Anba Pishoy.

In 1969, a third monastery in Scetis, the Monastery of St. Macarius, was about to close its doors. Its buildings were collapsing, and the five old monks who lived there could no longer meet their own needs. Bishop Michael of Assiut, who had been presiding over the monastery, consequently asked Father Matta-el-Meskeen to move to the monastery. Father Matta had been living with a group of ten monks for ten years in the Southern deserts of

Egypt. Believing that this request was the will of God, Father Matta and the monks travelled to St. Macarius Monastery. Although upon arriving they were tired from the journey and their previous wanderings in the deserts and dens and caves of the earth, they immediately started to rebuild the monastery and to plant, to study, to write, and to continue their life of praise and meditation. Since their arrival a new chapter in the monastic revival has taken place.

When Pope Shenouda III came to assume the patriarchate in 1971, it was his role to complete the last, but not the least, part of the monastic revival. In a systematic manner, he took care to revitalize all the other surviving monasteries of St. Pishoy, our lady of Baramous, St. Anthony, St. Paul and Al-Moharraq. New buildings were established, old churches renovated, roads cleared in the desert and new monks consecrated. Like St. Athanasius the Great, Pope Shenouda was devoted to the rise of monasticism, and like Athanasius, he found in the monasteries a haven for peace and quiet when dark clouds overshadowed the Church.

Editor

SAINT ANTHONY THE GREAT “STAR OF THE DESERT”

Rodolph Yanney, M.D.

In the book of Revelation, St. John pictured the Church as a woman clothed with the sun, in a struggle with a dragon. The woman had to flee to the desert, “But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.” This is what monasticism has been all about: Faithful Christians trying to lead a life in Christ in an evil age. During the Roman persecution, martyrdom was the absolute expression of Christian life—a life fully for Christ. Roman persecution came to an end by the edict of Milan at the beginning of the fourth century, and Christianity soon became the religion of the empire. But Satan was not defeated; the spirit of the world entered into the very life of Christians. Those who longed for the pure life of early Christianity had to flee to the desert. It was not then by mere chance that monasticism spread so suddenly just as the state made its peace with the Church.

The origin of monasticism is associated with the name of Saint Anthony. He was born in Coma, a village of Upper Egypt, in a Coptic Christian family. After the death of his parents, when he was about twenty, he heard in the church the words of the Gospel, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, . . . and come, follow me.” (Matt. XIX. 21) These words were a divine call which determined his life. He gave away all his property, that consisted of 300 acres of fertile land, and devoted himself entirely to the ascetic life. At first he retired near his village, imitating the lives of the holy elders who lived in the area. Whenever he heard of an ascetic distinguished for some virtue, he sought him out as a bee seeks the flowers, and never left him until, like a bee, he had gathered something good to carry home. He spent his days in continuous prayer, and either reading or working with his hands.

After the year 285, he retreated into complete solitude; at first he lived in a sepulcher; then for twenty years in the ruins of a castle; and last on Mount Colzim, near the Red Sea where his monastery stands now. Thanks to the contemporary pope of Alexandria, Saint Athanasius the Apostolic, we have a fine spiritual biography of Saint Anthony. He described his ceaseless struggle

with the devil. The devil appeared to him in visions, in dreams, and even in daylight, in all possible forms. He tempted him by wealth, by the shape of fascinating women; by reminding him of his former life and a sister he had left behind. He frightened him by the shapes of wild animals. Anthony was always victorious, because of his only weapon—faith in Christ.

After the year 305, disciples were attracted to him and he had to leave his seclusion to become their teacher and leader. Some of his teachings to the monks are preserved to us by Saint Athanasius; others are present in the “*Apophthegmata Patrum*” (Sayings of the Fathers). We have also seven spiritual letters attributed to him. In his life he founded several monasteries, first at Pispir by the River Nile, and later near Fayum. It has been stated that the number of his monks reached 100,000 during his life time.

Saint Athanasius described him as “a physician given by God to Egypt.” He was frequently visited and resorted to for consolation and aid, by Christians, and non-Christians, by ascetics, sick and needy. He received a letter from the Emperor Constantine, on the occasion of which he told his disciples, “Wonder not that the emperor writes to me, for he is a man; wonder much more that God has written the law for man, and has spoken to us by His own Son.”

Twice he left the desert. In the year 311, during the persecution under Maximinus he went to Alexandria to assist the martyrs and confessors. Again in 351, at the request of his disciple and friend, Saint Athanasius, he came to the same capital to bear witness to the Orthodox faith against the Arian heresy. During that visit, even the heathen went to church asking to see the “man of God,” and many were converted. He refused an invitation to stay longer in Alexandria, saying, “As a fish out of water, so a monk out of his solitude dies.”

During the last fifteen years of his life he retired again to solitude at Mount Colzim, keeping only two disciples with him. They were with him at the time of his death in the year 355, when he was 105 years old. After the Arab conquest of Egypt his relics were taken to Constantinople, and later to Arles, France where they remain. The monastery of Saint Anthony of Colzim has been, since its foundation in the fourth century, a main center for monasticism in the Eastern Egyptian desert.

EARLY MONASTICISM AMONG WOMEN IN THE COPTIC CHURCH

Father Tadros Y. Malaty

Monasticism, in all its forms, was adopted by women, for they were not any less than men for their love towards God. The Gospel states that many women followed our Lord Jesus Christ to his cross and to his tomb, earnestly desiring to devote their lives to worship him.

According to St. Luke, our Lord Jesus Christ praised Mary—Martha's sister—who preferred to sit down by the Lord's feet to listen to His divine words, than to wait on Him like her sister. He said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful; and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41, 42)

Thus Mary is the first Christian person who is counted as a living example of the true monastic life, i.e., the life of contemplation.

St. Mary, the Theotokos, was presented to those who lived in "the houses of the virgins" at Alexandria, as the great model of the virgins. She was depicted by the virgins as "the virgin of virgins" and their patroness.¹

COMMUNITY OF VIRGINS

Since the first century, many women had preferred to live in virginity, not despising the conjugal life but devoting all their lives to their spiritual Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. These holy virgins played a vital role in the early Christian church, and had a special place in the hierarchy of the early church. As well as worshipping God, they also tended to the welfare of the widows, orphans, the elderly and the sick.

These communes of virgins were called "parthenons".² St. Anthony had entrusted the care of his sister to one of these communes.

Some virgins lived at their houses. One of those virgins is St. Amoun's wife. About 297 A.D., Amoun was compelled by his uncle to marry. He lived with his wife for eighteen years as a brother and sister. Not only did she love the chaste life of virginity but she also recognized the excellence of the solitary way. She asked him to leave her in the house and go on to build himself a cell in the mountain of Nitria, coming back to visit her twice a year.

It is worthy to note that one of the charges leveled against early Christians was that they persuaded young girls to refuse marriage. Sometimes, persecutions rose because of the refusal of a Christian virgin to be married to a nonbeliever who happened to be a ruler or nobleman. One of those virgins was Theodora of Alexandria, who was martyred during the Diocletian persecution.

WOMEN'S CONVENTS

The first monastic community in the world for women was founded in Alexandria by St. Syncletica who has been considered the "Mother of nuns". Her biography and teachings have been preserved by St. Athanasius the Apostolic. Though she intended to live a solitary life, many young women were attracted by her spirituality and her teaching and ended staying with her. She lived till the age of eighty and never failed to lead her daughter nuns by her words or her example even when she was downtrodden by cancer in the last three and a half years of her life. It was with tears that St. Athanasius wrote about her terminal sufferings and he likened them to the sufferings of Job. But three days before her death, she had a vision of heaven and she left this life in an ecstasy.

St. Pachomius was the founder of two women's convents. One was in Tabennesis, near Dandra, in Upper Egypt, comprised of some four hundred nuns and administered by his sister Mary. It was in this convent that St. Theodore's (Tadros) mother decided to stay when her son refused to see her. It was then that she herself chose monasticism, saying, "I shall not only see him one day among the brothers, but I, too, shall gain my soul." The other convent was founded across the Nile from Tismenae.

The rules inscribed by St. Pachomius were the same for men as they were for women, except for the domestic side, where monks for instance would take care of building of the monasteries while sewing was left for the nuns.

St. Palladius refers to this fact, that apart from the priest and deacon, no man went across to the Pachomian women's convents, and the priest and deacon went to the nunnery only on Sundays.³

St. Palladius also tells us about a certain ascetic called, "Elias"⁴ who had a great concern for the virgins. . . . He showed compassion on the order of women ascetics and, as he had income property in Athribe⁵, he built for them a large monastery. He looked after them, providing them with every refreshment, gardens, household utensils and everything their life required.

NUNS IN THE DESERTS

The angelic life of the desert fathers attracted even Coptic and foreign women, who put on the habit of monks and lived in cells as if they were men, struggling for the perfect life, not less than many famous abbots, such as St. Hilaria, St. Anastasia and St. Appolinaria.

Some foreign abbesses came to Egypt and visited its desert to be guided by the Coptic monks, like St. Melania who was able to visit Egypt in 374 A.D., and her granddaughter Melania the younger who visited it in 418 A.D.

We also cannot ignore St. Mary of Egypt who was converted in Jerusalem. For forty-eight years, she dwelt in the desert beyond Jordan seeing nobody, except St. Zosima twice at the last two years of her life.

EXAMPLES OF NUNS AND FEMALE HERMITS⁶

1. Abbess Sarah

Many abbesses were bestowed with the grace of true leadership and spiritual discernment. They guided many nuns and sometimes gave counsel to them as well as to monks. Some of their sayings were treasured by the desert Fathers.

One of those abbesses was Sarah, who lived in Pelusium, and her sayings were mentioned in the "Apothegmata",⁷ from which I quote the following texts:

- It was said about Abbess Sarah that for thirteen years she was fiercely attacked by the demon of lust; and she never prayed deeply that the battle should cease, but all that she used to ask of God was, "O God, grant me strength!"
- Once the same spirit of lust attacked her more insistently, reminding her of the vanities of the world. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and maintained the rigor of her fasting and went up to the roof to pray. Then the spirit of lust appeared to her in a bodily form and said to her, "Sarah, you have overcome me." She replied, "It is not I who have overcome you, but my Lord, Christ!"
- It was mentioned that for sixty years she lived beside a river and never lifted her eyes to look at it.
- Once some monks of Scetis came to visit Abbess Sarah. As she offered them a small basket of fruit, they ate the bad fruit and left the good. So she said to them, "You are true monks of Scetis."
- Another time, two old men, great anchorites, came to Pelusium to visit her. When they arrived, one said to the other, "Let us humiliate this old woman." So they said to her, "Be careful not to become deceived saying to yourself, 'Look how anchorites are coming to see me, a mere woman.'" But Abbess Sarah said to them, "According to nature I am a woman, but not according to my thoughts."
- She also said to some brothers, "It is I who am a man (struggling against sin), you who are women (brides of Christ)."

Among her other sayings mentioned in the Apothegmata:

- "When I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, I place death before my eyes before lifting up the other foot."

- “It is good to give alms for men’s sake; even if it is only done to please men; through this one can begin to seek to please God.”
- “If I asked God that all men should approve of my conduct, I should be doing penance at the door of everyone. But I shall rather pray that my heart may be pure towards all, while I am far from all of them.”

2. St. Hilary—*The Eunuch*⁸

Zeno, the good emperor (474-491) was once very depressed, due to the fact that his older daughter (18 years) had been lost for a long time, and his other daughter, Theopesta was possessed by an evil spirit. She was sent to the elders in Scetis to pray for her.

When Theopesta arrived at Scetis, many monks assembled for prayer requesting God’s mercy, and after a few days, they asked St. Hilary, the Eunuch to take her in his cave and pray for her. He refused at first, but under pressure he eventually accepted the princess in his cave and began praying till morning. The Lord granted her complete healing and all the monks were pleased because they loved the emperor for his goodness.

The emperor, the empress and the court were pleased at the arrival of the princess, and the emperor immediately sent to the monks of Scetis inviting St. Hilary to the palace in order to receive his blessings. With many tears St. Hilary accepted.

St. Hilary was warmly received in the palace; and soon afterwards, the emperor and his wife asked him secretly; “Our father, why did you embrace and kiss our daughter all night?” St. Hilary promised to tell them if they would promise not to prevent him from returning to his cave! With this he said to them: “I am your daughter Hilaria.”

Immediately they embraced her, asking her to stay with them in the palace. But she told them that she was more happy in her monastic life than in her former life.

Three months later, she reminded them of their promise, and how she had asked them not to tell anybody about her true identity, for nobody in the desert knew her as a woman except her spiritual father “Pomei” who had guided her for three years. She then went and lived in a cave for five years.

The disguised monk returned to Egypt bearing a message from the emperor to the ruler of Alexandria, stating that he should provide the monks with wheat and oil every year. Also many buildings were established in Scetis by emperor Zeno.

St. Hilary lived in the cave for another five years. She preferred the desert to her parents’ palace!

References

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2. Derwas Y. Chitty: *The Desert/A City*, London 1977, p. 2.
3. Palladius: *His—Laus*. 33.2.
4. *Ibid.* 29:1.
5. The present Atripe, St. Shenute had established a monastery of nuns nearby and Elias may have been their confessor.
6. I have already written a small book, "St. Mary of Egypt" in English and Arabic, Alexandria, 1974.
7. Benedicta Ward: *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Oxford, 1975, p. 192. Owen Chadwick—*Western Asceticism*, London, 1978, P. 62, 87, 121. Wallis Budge: *The Paradise of the Holy Fathers*, London, 1907.
8. A. J. Wenainck—*Legends of Eastern Saints, Vol. II*, Leyden 1913. The legend which probably goes back (in Coptic) to the sixth century, is valuable for the picture of Scetis that it gives us. The story of St. Hilary is a verified, historical fact, accepted by many ancient and contemporary historians, in spite of what appears in it as fictitious elements. Her feast day is January 29 (Coptic Synxarium: Tubah 21).

PRESENT-DAY CONVENTS IN EGYPT

Iris Habib El-Masri

Whenever we speak of the Coptic Church or anything pertaining to her, we cannot speak only of the present, for the Coptic Church also has a glorious history consisting of nineteen centuries and two decades. Throughout her long history she has been (and still is) the faithful guardian and preserver of the Divine Legacy bequeathed to her from St. Mark and his successors. St. Mark is her founder and first shepherd, so that the unbroken line of his succession is always attributed to him. The present shepherd of the Coptic Church is Pope Shenouda III, the 117th successor to St. Mark.

Now, since the Coptic Church is conservative in her doctrine, her teachings and her practices, the convents for nuns (as well as the monasteries for men) of the present go back to the first centuries. The ascetic mode of life started in Egypt in the middle of the third century. The vanguards of this life of complete self-dedication to God, to a life of prayer and contemplation were all “solitaries”—i.e. each lived “alone with the Alone.” This life of complete solitude was lived by women as well as men. But the solitary life for women has ceased since the middle of the seventh century though it is still practised by men.

As for the monastic life in a communal order, it was started by St. Antony the Great (entitled ‘Father of monks’) and completed by St. Pakhom (known as ‘Father of Communal Monasticism, or more precisely ‘Father of Cenobites’). This communal monasticism, established at the beginning of the fourth century for both men and women, still exists today for the two sexes. The first monastery, as well as the first convent, was built by St. Pakhom in the region of Tabennesis in Upper Egypt. From this region they spread to the whole world. Outside their native mother land, monastic orders became diverse—as proven by their different names—Benedictines, Dominicans, etc. But in Egypt, their original home, there is but one Order for both women and men—The Pakhomian Order. Whatever differences may exist in each monastery or convent are related only to the daily routine of work. The principles are one throughout all the monasteries.

These principles assert that a monk (or nun) must perform some manual labor in addition to his prayers and meditations. This method was first

practised by St. Antony the Great and continued by all those who came after him. Work has a double purpose:

1. It helps the monk (and nun) to overcome the weariness which might assail him due to the surplus of his physical energy.
2. It is the means for gaining his livelihood, for helping the needy and for entertaining the numerous guests who go to him for spiritual advice and comfort.

Consequently monks and nuns maintain these principles up to the present, living the same life lived by the great desert luminaries across the ages.

During the early centuries, monasteries and convents were numerous; they dotted the Nile Valley from Alexandria up to Nubia. At present, however, there are nine monasteries and six convents. The monasteries are all in the diverse desert regions, but the convents are, without exception, within the cities. Yet despite their geographic situation, they are secluded and as much havens of peace and serenity as if they were in the heart of the desert. They are a living witness to our Lord's words that we are "*in* this world but not *of* this world." Their seclusion is the reason why the strangers hardly know of their existence.

The six convents are:

1. Mar Girgis (St. George) within the walls of the Babylon Fortress in Old Cairo.¹
2. Abu Stefein (Mercurius of the Two-swords,²) also in Old Cairo, but outside the Fortress.
3. The Blessed Virgin, and
4. Mar Girgis—both of which are in that section of Medieval Cairo known as Harit Zaweila.
5. St. Marina³ in the heart of the Cairo built by Sultan al-Moizz in 961 A.D.—namely at Harit ar-Rum.
6. St. Dimiana⁴ which stands on the site on which the Saint was martyred in 303 A.D.

The first five are within the Cairo area, while the sixth is in Barari near Damietta.⁵

Each convent (and monastery) is self-sufficient; nevertheless, they are all in close contact with one another. Moreover, the stream of guests who invariably visit the convents express their gratitude to the nuns by offering whatever they can give in money or in kind. Naturally these offerings are voluntary; therefore, they may be little or much, or even none at all because of the poverty of the visitor. And here, it is edifying to insert a passage from "The Prayer for the Offerings" chanted during the Holy Liturgy; it states: "Remember, O Lord, these offerings and those who offered them; Remember those who gave little and those who gave much; Remember those who would give but have not. . . ."

Each convent has its father-confessor chosen by the Pope or the Bishop under whose jurisdiction the nuns live. This father-confessor is also responsible for presiding over the Holy Liturgy on specific days for the nuns in the chapels adjoining the convents. But though these Liturgies are “private,” they are attended by whosoever desires to gain the spiritual blessing transmitted by them.

The works performed by the nuns are:

1. Whatever the convent may need of re-painting the walls, decorating them and adorning them with the icons of different saints and biblical subjects. The most outstanding convent for its beauty and attractiveness at present is that of Abu Sefein.
2. Gardening.
3. Cutting and sewing their own garbs.
4. Embroidering the priestly vestments needed during officiating.
5. Braiding leather crosses.

Needless to say they do their own cooking and baking; consequently, they breed their own fowls and plant their own vegetables. These diverse duties are performed by rotation—that is, two are responsible for baking, two for cooking, etc. for a week. The following week they exchange their duties.

Each convent has its own Abbess or as she is commonly called “The Mother Superior” or at times “The Big Mother.” An Abbess is chosen for life, unless the nuns find that they want someone else. When they have such a desire, they discuss the matter with their father-confessor. If he is convinced of their complaint, he asks the Pope or the Bishop responsible for them to effect the change. Should the Abbess become too old to fulfil her duties properly, an assistant Abbess is assigned for her.

However a writer may try to convey a true picture of the convents (and monasteries), words are inadequate. It is something that needs to be seen and experienced. To illustrate this point the writer accompanied an Indian journalist, some years ago, to some of these sanctuaries. As we were going out, the Indian guest stopped by the door and said, “Those who built these places must have been filled with peace, because I have never felt such an overwhelming peace within myself as I am feeling now.” My answer was, “Yet these sanctuaries were built in times of stress and strife.” She said, “The peace they had was that given by Christ when He told His disciples, ‘My peace I give unto you,’ so it is a peace that no outside persecution can shake.” These words of a stranger to the Coptic Church, though she is a Christian, are a message for all of us to ponder that we may come to a fuller realization of our Saviour’s tender care and of His ever-vigilant eye watching over His Church.

Footnotes:

1. This Fortress was so called since about 585 B.C. when the prophet Jeremiah was compelled to go to Egypt during the Babylonian captivity. And

as Jeremiah lived in that vicinity, it became known as “The Fortress of Babylon.”

2. He received this name because he was a captain in Caesar’s army, and on the eve of his conversion, an angel appeared to him in a dream and gave him a sword saying, “This is the Sword of God’s word which gives life unlike men’s swords which take away life.”

3. St. Marina is one of the 800,000 martyrs killed during the presecution started by emperor Diocletian (reigned from 284-305 A.D.)

4. Like St. Marina, St. Dimiana is another martyr killed by Diocletian. The site on which her convent stands encloses two churches—the smaller is older and encloses the relics of St. Dimiana and the forty virgins who were all martyred in one hour.

5. Damietta is the port near which the eastern branch of the Nile pours into the Mediterranean. It is famous for the battle waged against King Louis IX of France when he and his crusaders were defeated and saifed back to their homeland from Damietta.

CONTEMPORARY LIFE IN AN ANCIENT COPTIC MONASTERY

*This is the first of a series of
articles on the Coptic Monasteries
in Egypt.*

I wished I had stayed there

About thirty years ago, the editor of a monthly Christian magazine, published in Cairo, returned from a few days' visit to the desert Monastery of Our Lady Al-Syrian. It was hard for him to leave the place where every grain of sand had a story to tell and every stone inspired a spirit of awe and reverence. He described his experience in an article, 'I wished I had stayed there.' Initially there were several hindrances that delayed his response to the monastic call. In a few years these obstacles were overcome, and he left the world to enter the monastery in 1954. Seventeen years later, he was chosen to become Pope Shenouda III.

Nothing happened by mere chance in this story, for it is not an exaggeration to say that inside the walls of this small monastery, which occupies about one and a half acres, a revival of Coptic monasticism in particular, and of the spiritual life of the whole Coptic Church in general, has been taking place in the last thirty years.

'Deir Al-Syrian'

The Monastery of Our Lady Al-Syrian is one of the four monasteries that still remain in Scetis in the western Egyptian desert, and which have remained inhabited by monks since their establishment at the time of the great Desert Fathers. Dr. Monir Shukri in his book 'Monasteries of Wadi-el-Natrun' proved the existence of the monastery prior to 580 A.D. when it was functioning as an accessory monastery for the neighboring monastery of St. Pishoy and was called 'The Theotokos Monastery of Abba Pishoy.' The cave where St. Pishoy (4th century) lived still exists in the monastery. Also still in the monastery is a tree named after St. Ephrem of Syria. According to a tradition of the monks, it grew out of a cane left by St. Ephrem when he came to visit St. Pishoy. It is a big tree about 35 feet high; its trunk has a circumference of eight feet. The monks use its blossoms to prepare a type of tea which they believe has a healing power.

The monastery has its name Al-Syrian because it was inhabited by Syrian monks for several centuries from the ninth century A.D.

Churches of the Monastery

At present there are four churches in the monastery. The largest and most beautiful is the Church of St. Mary. It is of the basilica type and the paintings and ornaments on its walls, doors, and domes are not surpassed by any church in all desert monasteries. The church is divided into three choruses. The door that separates the front from the middle chorus is composed of four panels—each is divided into six divisions with decorations in the form of six different types of crosses which the monks interpret as signifying six different ages of the Christian Church. The back chorus leads to the table where the monks used to have their common meals, and to the cave of St. Pishoy. This is a narrow room with a low door, where the saint used to pray and to sleep. Interesting enough there is a metal ring attached to the roof, to which it is said the saint used to tie his hair through a rope in order not to fall asleep when he stood for prayer.

The second church is the Church of the Grotto. It is also a beautiful church, but it is of the byzantine type and of a smaller size. The monks use this church mainly in the winter months because of its small size and few outlets. Outside the church is the tree of St. Ephrem, under which the monks have an old custom of praying the vesper hour.

The third church is named after the forty martyrs of Sebaste who died in the frozen lake under the emperor Licinius in 320 A.D.

The fourth church is the Church of the Archangel Michael. It is present in what is called the 'Old Fort,' which is a tower about sixty feet high. Besides the church, the Old Fort contains seventeen rooms in four floors which were used by the monks in time of trouble when the monastery was attacked by the desert tribes. The bridge reaching from the monastery to the high door of the fort could be raised from inside, and the attackers had no way to reach the monks inside.

Library

The monastery has a library which contains beside the modern books, about 850 manuscripts in Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian and Arabic. Some are dated back to the twelfth century. They contain scriptures, sayings of the Fathers, biographies of saints, liturgies and Church rites. Some of these manuscripts are unique; no similar copies have been preserved anywhere.

The Monks

At present the number of the monks in this monastery is 101; only 43 of them really live in it while the rest have been called for the service of the

Church in various fields and places. This list includes the Pope himself, more than ten bishops, several monks in African missions, and some minister to churches of the diaspora.

Not all of the monks live the cenobite life; a few live as hermits, not far from the monastery.

The day of the monk starts at 3 a.m. (2 a.m. on Sunday) when the bell of the monastery rings. This is the time when the Daily Office² starts in the church. The Monastery of Al-Syrian is one of the few monasteries that have a daily Eucharist after the Office; the service ends about seven or eight in the morning. Then every monk goes to his cell to complete his private prayers before going to work. Work is not equally distributed among monks. The hermits do no work. Some work for one hour a day, such as those taking care of the library, or the church or those who prepare the eucharistic bread—the 'Corban'. Others spend more time working in the monastery or its garden.

In the Monastery of Al-Syrian, monks enjoy a lot of freedom regarding their meals and their spare time. Under the guidance of the spiritual director, who is usually an old priest among the monks, each monk decides the times for his meals and the type of food he eats, depending on his spiritual need. The Coptic Church has fast days more than half the year, and monks usually fast more than that. Although each monk eats privately in his cell, a common meal of lentils or beans is dispensed to all twice a week around the whole year with the exception of the fifty days of Pentecost.

You rarely see a monk walking around in the monastery. The time he is not in church or at work, he spends in his cell for prayer, meditation or study, and he sleeps around five or six hours a day. Each cell is composed of two rooms; the outer is used for daily living, the inner for retreat.

In the Service of the Church

Since Anba Theophilus, the present superior of the monastery has taken office in 1947, new life has started in the monastery. Many buildings including the monastery wall and the Old Fort have been renovated, and newer ones established; many acres of desert land were reclaimed around the monastery to serve as a garden for the needs of the monks and the visitors. A printing machine was brought to the monastery and quickly many books were published. Among the early books were writings of the Fathers which were never published before, such as St. John of Assiut, St. Gregory of Cyprus and St. Philoxenus of Hierapolis; a series of books about the history of the Patriarchs of Alexandria; and spiritual books written by the monks, probably the most important of which was 'The Orthodox Life of Prayer.' The last book alone inspired a whole new spiritual life in the Church. The bishop also established a theological school for the monks.

The fame of the monastery quickly spread everywhere in the Coptic Church and many were attracted to it and left the world to spend their lives inside its

walls. Many young adults used to go to the monastery for spiritual counsel, and when their number became too much for the monastery to hold, a new special 'Retreat House' was built outside the old monastery wall. In it a young man can stay for a few days in monastic surroundings. Although it was intended for the use of about 21 people, in some days up to fifty live there. A monk is responsible for the supervision of the retreatants and he has his room there, not in the monastery. The room of the monk differs from the other rooms in that where all the rooms have beds, the monk has to lie on the floor. He is responsible for cooking and for cleaning the whole house, but actually the retreatants do most of the work. A common meal is served at fixed hours three times daily, and during the meal one of the brethren reads from the 'Paradise of the Holy Fathers.' Meals are started and ended by prayer, and in between nobody rises from the meal; even if the door is knocked at, the visitor has to knock once and wait till the meal is finished. The retreatants go to the monastery to attend the prayers and the liturgy with the monks. At other times they may read in the library, stay in the retreat house where they may meditate or have counsel with one of the monks or have a walk in the desert. With the exception of the period of Great Lent, the monastery accepts visitors and retreatants. It is from these that some are attracted to the angelic life of the monks or to consecrate their life for serving the Church in other ways.

Thus the monasteries continue to play an integral part in the continued growth of the Coptic Orthodox Church, as they have done throughout history.

R. Y.

Footnotes

1. Monir Shukri, M.D.: *Monasteries of Wadi-el-Natrun*, Alexandria, 1962.

2. For a full discussion of the service of the daily office, see *Coptic Church Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2: *Spiritual Insights Into the Daily Office of the Coptic Church* by Father Matta El-Meskeen.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Letters of St. Antony the Great

*Translated by Derwas Chitty, 28 pp. SLG Press
Fairacres Publication No. 50, Oxford, 1975.*

The Reverend Derwas Chitty D.D. (1901-1971) devoted his life to the study of early Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism, summing up the fruits of forty years research in his book, 'The Desert A City' and his translations: The Letters of St. Antony the Great (7 letters), and Letters of Ammonas, successor of St. Antony (14 letters).

We know from St. Athanasius' 'Life of St. Antony' about his letters to the emperors, "The fame of Antony reached even the emperors; for when Constantine Augustus and his sons Constantius Augustus and Constans Augustus heard about these things, they wrote to him as to a father and begged him to write back. He, however, did not make much of the documents nor did he rejoice over the letters; but he was the same as he was before the emperors wrote to him. When the documents were brought to him, he called the monks and said, 'You must not be surprised if an emperor writes to us, for he is a man; but you should rather be surprised that God has written the law for mankind and has spoken to us through His own Son.' Indeed he did not like to accept the letters, saying that he did not know what to answer to such things. But being persuaded by the monks, who urged that the emperors were Christians and that they might take offense at being ignored, he had them read. And he wrote back, commending them for worshipping Christ, and giving them salutary advice not to think highly of the things of this world, but rather to bear in mind the judgment to come; and to know that Christ alone is the true and eternal King. He begged them to show themselves humane and to have a regard for justice and for the poor; and they were glad to receive his answer." (Vita 81)¹

St. Athanasius knows also of a letter addressed to the imperial official Balacius, who in his zeal for Arianism, bitterly persecuted the Christians. And since he was so barbaric as to beat virgins and strip and flog monks, Antony sent him a letter with the following contents: "I see God's judgment approaching you; stop, therefore, persecuting Christians that the judgment may not seize you; even now it is on the point of overtaking you."² But none of these letters is extant.

St. Jerome mentioned seven letters in his book (De. Vir. ill 88), "Antony the monk about whose life Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote a long work,

sent seven letters in Coptic to various monasteries, letters truly apostolic in idea and language which have been translated into Greek. The chief of these is to the Arosenoites . . .”³ who had read them in Greek, not in Coptic. The letters were written in Coptic, and translated into Greek, Latin, Syriac, etc. But now has St. Antony left us seven or twenty letters? We believe with G. Garritte that he wrote twenty letters.

It is probable that the other thirteen letters belong also to St. Antony. There is ample historical evidence of this.

Both St. Shenouda of Atripe and his disciple St. Visa included in their writings long quotations from all twenty letters; they related all letters (the disputed thirteen and the first seven letters) equally to St. Antony.⁴

Abu-el-Barakat Ibn Kabar (died 1324 A.D.), in his book MISBAH Az-Zul-mah fi Iddah al Khidmah, Chapter 7:15 writes, “It has been mentioned that St. Antony, Father of the Monks, has more than twenty letters. They are still extant in Coptic in his monastery in the desert and have not yet been translated to Arabic. They are of great value and contain beautiful and useful advice. He also has a treatise on the monastic rules and the economy of monks.”

Actually these letters were translated into Arabic in the 10th century and published in Egypt in 1899 A.D. under the name ‘Garden of Souls in the Letters of St. Antony’. G. Graff⁵ said about this translation, “This text was translated directly from the Coptic in the year 686 (Coptic, i.e. 970 A.D.). This is evident from an old Arabic manuscript kept in the Coptic Museum at Cairo under No. 63 (88 Rites) which mentioned that the letters were translated from two Coptic manuscripts which were compared to-gether.”

D. Chitty translated the seven letters from Latin and Syriac into English. This translation is the first English translation for these letters. In his introduction he gave a brief summary for some important ideas in the letters and his sources for this translation.

In general he made a great work. First, he brought these great letters to the English reader. Secondly, he made a good and clear translation. The letters of St. Antony are considered as a good guide for true and Orthodox spirituality.

Footnotes:

1. R. T. Meyer, St. Athanasius, ‘The Life of Saint Antony’ A.C.W. No. 10.
2. Ibid (vita 86).
3. N.&P.N.F. second series Vol. III, page 379.
4. Garitte, G. A propos des lettres de S. Antoine l-ermite. Le Museon 52, 1939.
5. Graff G., Catalogue des Manuscrits Arabes Chretiens Conservees au Caire.

K. K. Farag

The Letters of Ammonas

Translated by Derwas J. Chitty. 21 PP. SLG Press, Oxford, 1979.

St. Ammonas was the disciple of St. Anthony the Great and his successor at his Outer Mountain of Pispir. The sayings of the Fathers state that he was ordained bishop by St. Athanasius. But this is much doubted and may be due to a confusion with another St. Ammonius who was a monk at Tabana under St. Theodore, and stayed for 14 years at Nitria until ordained in 369 A.D.

The fourteen letters of Ammonas came down to us in Syriac, Greek, Arabic, Georgian and Armenian. They develop the teaching of St. Anthony about acquiring the Holy Spirit. They are actually letters of spiritual direction and touch important topics in the spiritual life mainly gifts of the Spirit, discernment of the will of God, trials and quiet.

The Desert A City

By Derwas J. Chitty. 222 pp. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York

This book has been acknowledged as a classic study of the early Christian monasticism because of its detailed scholarship and its vivid and dynamic descriptions. Of its nine chapters, four deal with Egyptian and four deal with Palestinian monasticism and the last chapter is concerned with the monasteries of Sinai.

D. Chitty has put much effort in this work with its many notes, chronological tables, indexes of names and places and huge bibliography, which makes it indispensable for anyone studying the monastic history between the 4th and 7th centuries. He was also aware of its defects some of which he mentioned in the prologue. He did not claim that the book is any more than an 'introduction' though it is 'sadly needed.' More effort is needed for more studies about this important aspect of Church history.

In our opinion the greatest drawback which has been acknowledged by the author was that he "dealt in Egypt only with what was to form part of the heritage handed on through the ages in the monasticism of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy." Actually this led him to a serious misrepresentation of the whole subject. First giving a nearly equal amount of pages to the Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism is not the right thing to do, given the vast material handed down to us by contemporary writers who visited Egypt in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. Then he tried hard to show that the origin of monasticism in Palestine was independent of Egypt. Starting by the first settlement of St. Euthymius in 411 A.D., he led us to ignore previous settlements directly influenced by Egyptian monasticism, namely St. Hilarion (disciple of St. Anthony) near Gaza in 308 A.D., St. Melania on Olivet in 376, and St. Jerome at Bethlehem in 385 A.D. In his book 'Men Possessed by

God,' that dealt with the same subject, the French scholar Jacques Lacarriere concluded, 'The general results are known: monasticism, originating in Egypt spread to Palestine and Syria, reached Cappadocia, Greece and then the West.'

According to Chitty, the center of monasticism moved after the fourth century to Palestine leaving the early monasteries of Egypt in a state of decline and desertion. The fact is that, being preoccupied by The Chalcedonian controversy, which took a substantial and unnecessary portion of the book, he had very little to say about Egypt after the middle of the fourth century. He admitted that St. Shenute was not mentioned. Historical data about the flourishing of Egyptian monasticism till the Arab conquest in the seventh century are not lacking. John Moschus (550-634) who wrote the 'Spiritual Meadow' went first to Egypt, stopping at all the Thebaid monasteries as far as the Great Oasis. He mentioned that he was told that 3500 ascetics lived at Scetis in the middle of the sixth century. Al-Macrizi quoted Christian writers who said that seventy thousand monks from Scetis met the Arab conqueror Amr.

The book is still of much value for what it covered, but what is sadly needed in the English language is a complete history of early monasticism in Egypt. A translation of Dr. Monir Shukry's book, 'Monasteries of Wadi-el-Natrun (347 pages, Alexandria, 1962), or of Father Matta-el-Meskeen's book, 'Coptic Monasticism' (879 pages, Cairo, 1972) may fill this gap.

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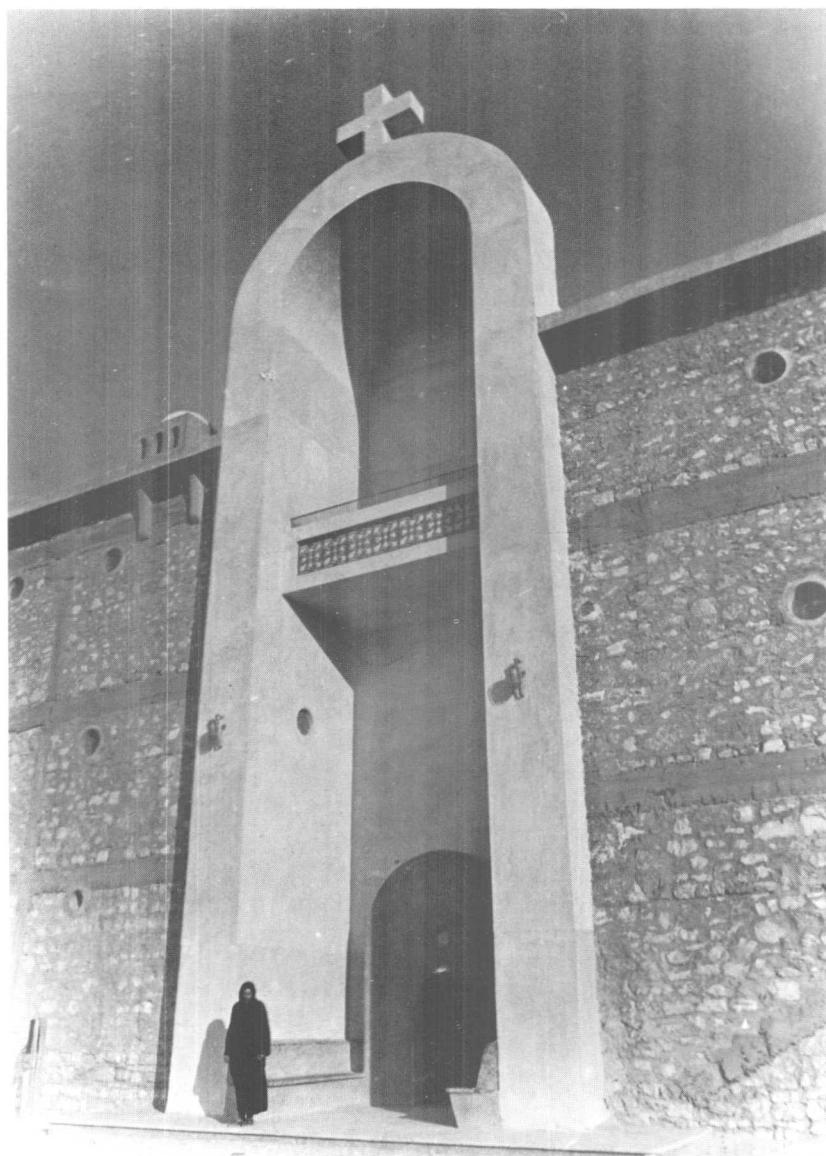
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Coptic Monks standing by the door of the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great at Scetis. The monastery has been totally reconstructed during the last decade.