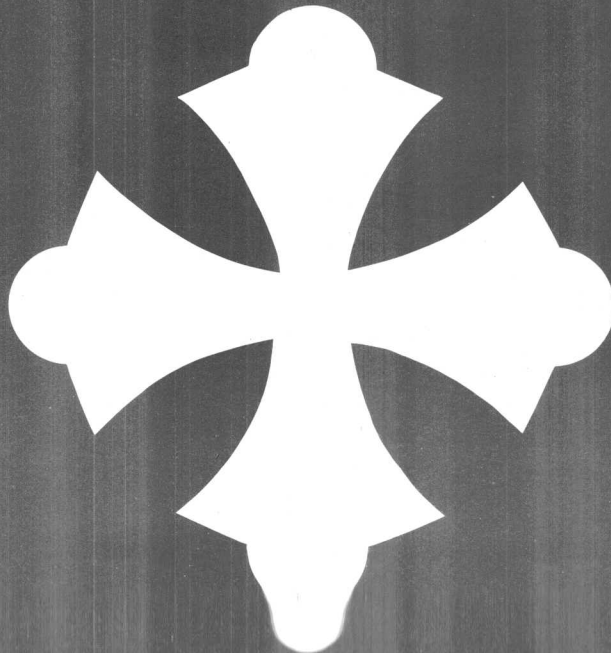


# COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW

Volume 2, Number 2 ..... Summer 1981

- *The Holy Virgin in Church Theology*
- *A Desert Father : St. Moses the Ethiopian*
- *On the Sacrament of Baptism*



*Society of Coptic Church Studies*

# ***COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW***

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## ***A Quarterly of Contemporary Patristic Studies***

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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

### *The Church Year*

The reader may have to start this issue by reading the section in the Book Reviews commenting on seven articles by Father Matta El-Meskeen that deal with the theological meanings of the main feasts in the Church year. Four of these are celebrated in this season: *Ascension*, June 4; *Pentecost*, June 14; *Martyrdom of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul*, July 12; *Assumption of the body of Virgin Mary*, August 22.

*The Holy Virgin in Church Theology* is a translation of a sermon delivered by *Father Matta El-Meskeen* on the eve of the Virgin's Feast, August 22, 1977 in the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great at Scetis. It was originally published in Arabic in St. Mark Monthly Review, September 1977. The Church considers St. Mary a powerful intercessor, higher than any prophet or any angel. This theology is not alien to the Bible; it is discussed here by Father Matta through his comment on the words of the Virgin to the Archangel Gabriel, and on her canticle (Luke 1:38 & 46-55).

In this issue we have the biography of two of the saints whose feasts the Church celebrates during this season. *Father Tadros Malaty*, the member of our editorial board, gives the life of the ***Modern Coptic Saint—Anba Abraam of Fayoum*** (Feast day is June 10). The other is ***Saint Moses the Ethiopian*** whose feast day occurs on June 18.

### *The Desert Fathers*

When the Journal introduced its 'Symposium on Coptic Monasticism' in winter 1980, we felt that it was only an introduction for a wide and an essential subject. In this issue we are reviewing two recent books dealing with the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, '***Prayer of the Heart***' by Fr. George Maloney; and '***The Way of the Heart***' by Fr. Henri Nouwen. The two books are highly recommended to the reader because they treat the spiritual life at a deeper level than most other books on spirituality do. However, we feel that we need real studies of the lives and spirituality of the Desert Fathers. Such an attempt is made by the Journal in the article on ***Saint Moses the Ethiopian***. This saint quickly gained the love and respect of his contemporaries in fourth century Egypt, and we feel that he has a lesson for everyone of us in the twentieth century. The Desert Fathers have left their impact upon all the ages of Church history; ours cannot be excluded.

***Currents in Coptic Church Studies***

In this issue the Journal gives the highlights of the Arabic book '***On the Sacrament of Baptism***' by His Grace *Anba Gregorios*, bishop for higher theological studies in the Coptic Church.

*Editor*

# ***THE HOLY VIRGIN IN CHURCH THEOLOGY***

***Father Matta El-Meskeen***

## ***1—The Virgin and Humanity—Servant and Mother***

*'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word'.*

The first phrase the Virgin utters, records to us awesome depths in her personality. Unfortunately, on account of our impression of how young and simple a girl she was, and our superficial reading of that phrase, we have missed the deep meanings it carries.

Here, the Virgin takes a serious, decisive stand towards herself, the world and God. After she was convinced of the angel's announcement, and after she truly felt that by this heavenly declaration, she was actually chosen to carry in her womb a child through God and without marriage, God being his direct father, thus he is called Holy—one of God's very special and very superior qualities, also called Son of the Most High, and 'God is with us' (Emmanuel)—when the Virgin was convinced of this, she dedicated herself to God as a handmaid, i.e., a slave in the sense of complete self-dedication—in body, soul and spirit. By this pledge, which came in the form of a vow or an everlasting commitment, the Virgin consecrated herself in celibacy to God all her life after this mystery took place within her. The Virgin took upon herself this pledge to remain a virgin, to the world a testimony of indescribable purity, and to God a handmaid—i.e., fully and wholly owned by God and living for God and for Him alone, through her heart which He possessed by the Holy Spirit and which since then had been only pulsating for the sake of the Word of God Who was born of her.

We can never overlook the feeling and emotions shared between the Virgin as a mother and the Holy born of her as a son. The Virgin has given the Christ born of her all her tenderness and love as a mother, and Christ has reciprocated the same feelings, tenderness and love as an obedient son as the gospel says. It is true she is a handmaid, but the handmaid of God became the mother of the Son of God. In spite of all this, the mother continued to be a servant through the vow of total submission and obedience which is very amazing.<sup>1</sup>

When the Virgin knew, after the annunciation, that she became the mother of the Holy, Son of God, she vowed to become a servant of God all her

life. How is the Virgin here as compared to Adam and Eve who disobeyed the word of God and actually, insistently and with foreknowledge, ate of what God had forbidden, greedily hoping by this to become equal to God Himself?

By saying, '*Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word*', the Virgin carried Adam and Eve back to the time before their fall. Adam and Eve rejected the living life-giving word of God, thus bringing upon themselves the sentence of death, while the Virgin accepted God's word—the word of life and so the Word descended in her womb and lifted the curse of death from her, '*Blessed art thou among women.*'

The Virgin's insistence on saying, '*Behold the handmaid of the Lord*', even after God had raised her to the level of mothering his Holy Son, Who was born of her, is in truth an insistence on returning to the time before the fall and publicly renouncing the sin of Adam and Eve.

Here, the Virgin is a representing icon and an impressing model of the ability of man on whom the Holy Spirit has bestowed the dwelling of the Word of God to humbly return to eternal life, to the state before the fall.

The promise of the descent of the Word of God into the womb of the Virgin through His striking kenosis for the sake of the incarnation, is the secret of the Virgin's astonishing humility and it is and always will be forever the only secret of our humility which will qualify us to union with God.

Paul the Apostle follows in the Virgin's footsteps by being filled with the Holy Spirit. After accepting the freedom of the children of God and after God had mercy upon him and had declared to him the hidden secret of all ages, which no one knew but the Apostles, and after he had been elevated because of the abundance of the revelations to see the spiritual heaven with all its glory, and after he had personally seen Christ and received from Him complete freedom "*Am I not an apostle? Am I not free?*", after all that, he firmly and insistently proclaimed that he is Paul '*the servant of Jesus Christ*'. Here, slavery to God is the happy exchange offered to God by man, because the person who enters the freedom of the children of God, is only able to offer this freedom once more back to God as a sacrifice of love, thus becoming the slave of the fatherly love that overflows with compassion.

Slavery here is the slavery to the love of God. It is the fruit of freedom because no one can freely worship God in full spirit, heart and mind, except him who has been freed from the corruption of this world and the whims and pride of self through the dwelling of the purifying effective Word of God within the innermost thoughts and heart of man.

## **2-The Virgin Above the Prophets**

*'You are exalted above the heavens, and you are more noble than humans and all the creatures of the earth, because you have become mother of the Creator'.<sup>2</sup>*

In Church Theology, the Virgin is on a level nearer to God and subsequently her holiness and intercession are higher than those of the prophets, because the mystery of the Virgin is higher than the gift of prophecy. While the prophets accepted the Holy Spirit in intellect and speech, to utter the words of God for a period of time, the Virgin accepted the Holy Spirit to unite with her whole being so that the Word of God might take from her body and blood a body of His own.

The word of God which was uttered by the prophets, was only temporary for reproach and was subject to change, every word suitable for its generations, but the Word of God who came out of the womb of the Virgin, is the person of the Son of the Eternal God—the life-giving Word—that speaks within us with love and life, to the end of times.

Here, the Virgin gave us the Word of God unlike the prophets; the relation between the Virgin and the Word of God Jesus Christ was an everlasting relation. The prophets were like pots that carried the divine word for a time, after which it departed from them and they returned to their original status, strangers to the word of life, but the Virgin was tied to the Word of God as a mother as much as the Word of God was tied to her as a son. The Virgin will forever carry the title of mother to the Son of God in the same manner the Son of God carries the title Son of Man.

### ***The Virgin—A Prophetess***

The proof of the soundness of the Church's belief that the Virgin is higher in rank than the prophets, is that the Virgin is a prophetess in the first place; secondly, that the Virgin prophesies something higher than what was prophesied by the prophets. Did this actually take place?

Logically, it was impossible for the Virgin to carry the Word (the Word of God) without a prophecy. No sooner did the Word, the living Word of God the Father, settle in the Virgin's womb, than was she filled with the glamour of salvation and opened her mouth praising the Holy God and uttering many of God's great wonders. Thus Mary said, *'My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.'* (Luke 1:46-49)

Here is a prophetic hymn which contains a superior prophetic proclamation and which covers in time all the ages. If we examine this prophecy, we find that it has actually and truly taken place for two thousand years until the present day.

In fact this verse *'from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things'*, is considered one of the most serious words uttered by the Virgin because no prophet was ever heard to say

this. On the contrary, we hear Isaiah the greatest of the prophets say, '*Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips.*'

By her marvelous words the Virgin reveals a state of proximity to God that surpasses all human levels. She proclaims with both courage and humility that the Almighty God has granted her a state of eternal glory on earth and in heaven after her death. It is true that any human can be glorified by God as a reward for a specific act, but for a person to be granted the grace of being continually glorified by all generations—i.e., all humanity, throughout the ages—not as part of the Virgin's act or behavior but as a surpassing worthiness to be glorified from God because of great things the Lord has done for her—this has never been heard of in human history.

Thus: We are faced with a surpassing prophecy which sheds a brilliant light on the personality of the Virgin and which places her on a level higher than all the prophets and all other members of humanity.

The blessing here is a state that surpasses all humanity, which the Virgin receives from God through her humility and her worthiness to carry the Word of God. But what is marvelous and bewildering to us is that the blessing of the generations seems to be like a spiritual bond between us and her in which the Virgin stands in heaven as a means of joy and happiness for humanity. Hence, blessing the Virgin is in itself the mystery of entering into joy and glory.

### ***Glimpses of the Inner Life of the Virgin***

A—The Virgin lived in continuous thirst for God's justification. This was revealed by the Virgin herself when she said in her prophetic song, "*He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.*" Here the Virgin speaks of herself and of the eternal blessings which she was worthy to enter upon as a reward for her continuous hunger for God's justification.

B—The Virgin lived in a state of continuous piety which is revealed by her words, "*And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.*" The Virgin has felt the great mercy of God which He bestowed on her. She thus instantly realized that God's mercy was hindered by the lack of piety of the previous generations. But the Virgin, having completed all the requirements of piety, beheld and experienced God's mercy as it poured down on her and on all the later generations. Therefore, the Virgin came out of experience with this decisive statement that God's mercy goes hand in hand with piety.

C—The Virgin has been exalted by her humility to sit on the throne of nobility and this is also revealed in her words, "*He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.*" Here the Virgin describes herself as she is exalted by the hand of the Almighty to sit in humility on the throne of glory instead of the mighty. The Virgin in this instance does not brag of the honor which she acquired but rather she proclaims a sure truth which



she feels within her and which she cannot help but proclaim as good news; while guided by the Spirit she speaks of facts that concern all humanity. It is thus not out of nothing that the Church believes that the Virgin sits at the right hand of her Son, *'Upon thy right hand did stand the queen. . . .'* (Psalm 45:9) The Virgin confirms this herself in all modesty and humility when she says, *"He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree."* Who are those mighty whom God brought down from their thrones but all the previous kings? And who is the humble person whom God has exalted to sit on the thrones in place of those kings but the Virgin herself?!

### **3—The Virgin above the Angels**

*"Thou are highly exalted over the Cherubim, and more honorable than the Seraphim"*<sup>3</sup>

Paul the Apostle talks about the rank of the angels as a rank of ministers, *"Are they not, all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"* (Heb. 1:14), and regarding their nature he also says, *"Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire."* (Heb. 1:7)

By choosing the Virgin when she accepted conception by God's Word and by giving birth to the 'Word' Son of God becoming man from her body and blood, God has revealed to us how lofty human nature can be when it regains its purity and becomes able to unite with the divine nature. We are thus assured that the Virgin's purity managed to cross over the state of helplessness to which humanity has descended through sin; and raised it to a level higher than that of the angels, to the extent that she became worthy of having the Word of God dwell in her.

Thus, if human nature has been lowered to a level below that of the angels because of sin, disobedience and acceptance of the curse of death, the Virgin through her purity, humility and surpassing submission to the will of God, accepted a promise from God, Son of the Most High. In this acceptance, human nature has been exalted in the person of the Virgin, to a glorious state which made her worthy of the incarnation of the Son of God from her. Thus by the Holy Spirit and by the power of the Most High, the Virgin has overcome the weakness of human nature and has reached a level higher than the angels.

It is thus not without reason that Church Tradition dares to exalt the Virgin's honor above that of the angels and all the archangels, even the Cherubim.

Though the angels are fiery spirits, yet they have not reached a state suitable enough to receive the fiery nature of God; but this blessed maiden has harbored within her weak flesh and blood the fiery nature of God whom the angels fear and this was possible because of her great chastity and humility.

#### ***4—Intercession of the Virgin***

##### ***The Virgin's intercession is a gate to the encounter with Christ:***

When the Virgin intercedes on our behalf for help, healing or repentance, she brings us within the range of her relationship with Christ.

In Orthodoxy, intercession exalts us to the level of the intercessor so we encounter Christ on the basis of deleting the mediator. Therefore, intercession is a conjunction with grace, the Virgin offers us all the charismata bestowed on her so we can proceed with them to Christ. We proceed like a Virgin, with the spirit and grace of purity and piety as a gift.

##### ***Validity of Orthodox Intercession***

1—The Orthodox concept of intercession is correct because in the end it cancels all differences between the intercessor (i.e. the Virgin) and us when we take from the Virgin the courage of her purity and the expression of her motherhood and the uniqueness of her love for Christ, all of which are considered to be charismata given to her on our behalf and which through the greatness of her favor she can transfer to us.

2—Thus, intercession lifts all boundaries between us and Christ so we come before Him with no obstacles or boundaries caused by our weakness and so we can receive from Him any aid, any request, a greatly needed cure, or a delayed repentance.

I believe that such is the true intercession because the interceding servant should be ready to take the place or position of the servant requesting his intercession, or rather, he should be ready to give up all he owns to make for the deficiency in his fellow man. It is impossible for the intercession to be completed unless the person is able to proceed with the spirit of the intercessor and is ready to take or borrow his charismata, otherwise the mediation would not take place.

In truth then, the Virgin portrays to us the first qualification or the positive way through which we encounter God. Those who deny the role of the Virgin in the incarnation or intercession, or the role of chastity, do actually deny it only in their minds because this cannot be practically denied or abolished. God cannot be incarnated except in purity as regards His birth. God also does not work or be manifested except within the range of purity as regards intercession.

The least defilement, even though it be in a passing thought, is enough to hide the face of God, because impurity is darkness and it is the work of the devil. Thus it is impossible for man to enter in God's presence, through prayers or meditations, while his heart, conscience or body has the least inclination for impurity. Man cannot reach this state except by a resolution in mind for fervent prayer and adherence to grace on the basis of the blood of Christ, then

instantly he acquires from God the charismata of holiness and the grace of purity of the mind and thought, as well as the body.

Intercession requires a personal presence, and the Virgin for our sake and during our lives, appears before Christ through her purity, and thus opens for us a new field to enkindle in us the spirit of purity and awaken our attention to piety.

Virgin Mary is considered a successful human experience that has reached the depths of contact with God in superb purity by the Word. She has taken from God superior purity and God has taken from her a body and hence the Virgin has become a true example of the union with God. The intercessor's only talent remains to be that he should offer all he has. Blessed is the Virgin and blessed are those who bless her.

(Translated by Lily H. Soliman)

#### *Footnotes*

1. The Church here takes these two titles, in their contradictory position, and weaves out of them a hymn that becomes harmonious through the Spirit and inspires man to feel the great joy and hope which the Virgin brought to the humanity which had fallen into the misery of slavery, "*Rejoice, O Mary, the handmaiden and mother; for He Who is on Thy lap, the Angels praise.*" The Virgin, and with her all humanity, has been here exalted by the glory of motherhood. For us she has transformed slavery into a road that prepares us to accept the dwelling of the Word of God within us.

2. A verse from one of the first hymns in the Divine Liturgy of the Coptic Church, sung by the congregation during the 'Preparation.'

3. From the Psalia of Sunday (Spiritual Insights into the Daily Office. Coptic Church Review, 1980; 1:53-59).

# ***THE DESERT FATHERS***

## ***Saint Moses the Ethiopian. His Life and Spirituality***

*Rodolph Yanney, M.D.*

### ***Early Life***

Had Saint Moses the Ethiopian written his autobiography, he would have given us similar words to what St. Augustine gave in his Confessions,

‘What evil is there that I have not wrought by my deeds, or if not by my deeds at least by my words, or if not by my words at least by my will? . . .<sup>1</sup>  
For thou hast forgiven in me so great and so many wicked deeds, and hast dissolved my sins like ice . . . for what sin could I not have committed? . . .  
All these sins I acknowledge to have been forgiven; both those which, by my will, I have committed, and those which, by thy help, I have not committed.<sup>2</sup> . . . I fell from thee, O my God, and wandered far, too far from thy stability in that youth of mine; and I became unto myself thereby a land of want and misery’<sup>3</sup>

But Moses who lived to become one of the fourth century Desert Fathers did not leave an autobiography. We have some sketches of his early life from Palladius. He was born about 332 A.D. In his youth he was the slave of a high government official who could not tolerate his dishonesty and his violence. It was said that he even went so far as to commit murder. Finally his master drove him out of his house. Moses became the head of a gang of seventy robbers. He was a strong and fierce man of huge stature. Once he wanted to kill a shepherd who pastured his sheep on the other bank of the Nile, which was then in full flood and more than a mile across. Moses put his sword between his teeth, placed his clothes on his head and swam across the river. The shepherd was able to hide by burying himself in the sand. The sheep were left for Moses, who chose four of the best rams, slew them, and tying them with a rope he took them with him back across the river. He then came to a small village where he skinned the rams, ate the best portions of them, and sold the rest for wine.<sup>4</sup>

### ***With St. Macarius at Scetis***

We do not know the circumstances of Moses' conversion. But the wind blows where it wills, and every night should have an end. It was mentioned that he used to address the sun saying, "If thou art the god let me know, and thou the God whom I know not lead me to Thyself."

When next seen he was in Scetis in the western desert of Egypt. An elder found him and led him to St. Macarius the Great at Petra in the northern end of Scetis. It was about the year 365 A.D.<sup>5</sup> when Moses arrived there. Thousands of monks had followed St. Macarius after he came to the area about 340 A.D. They first settled in the northern part of the valley. There they dug a well and built a church. It is now the area of the Monastery of Our Lady, Al-Baramus. Soon Scetis extended to the south, and when St. Cassian visited it in 385 A.D., he found there four flourishing monastic settlements with four churches. These early monasteries were not localized places surrounded by walls as we see the monasteries now, but each monk had to build his cell or live in a cave which he roofed with palm branches. Monks only met in church on Saturdays and Sundays every week where they celebrated the Eucharist and heard the teaching of St. Macarius or of one of the elders chosen by him.

### ***Moses and His Spiritual Director***

Moses was received by the priest of Scetis, St. Isidore.<sup>6</sup> He was fortunate enough to have such an experienced and pious elder as his spiritual director. Had St. Isidore done nothing except leading Moses safely during a very turbulent period of his life, he would have proven himself a great saint. St. Rufinus<sup>7</sup> and St. Jerome<sup>8</sup> consider him, one of the great elders of Scetis. He was one of the early Fathers who moved from Cellia with St. Macarius when he came to Scetis in 340 A.D. Although we have only a few of his sayings in the 'Apophtegmata Patrum', yet they are enough to show us a very loving Father who was strict with himself, but knew how to be tolerant to his brethren and spiritual sons. He used to say, 'When you are working in a certain place, the strength is not in departing from there because of too much labor; as for me, I wrap myself up in my cloak and I go to the place where labor is, and labor becomes unto me a pleasure.<sup>9</sup> Till his old age he used to plait a bundle of palms every night. When the brethren advised him to have some rest, he answered, 'Even if Isidore was burned, and his ashes thrown to the winds, I would not allow myself any relaxation, because the Son of God came to the earth for my sake'.<sup>10</sup> Actually his main labor was not the manual work, but prayer to which he set no time limit whether by day or by night.<sup>10</sup> According to him sanctity is reached by denying oneself and denying one's own will for the sake of following God's will.<sup>10</sup>

His brotherly love was reflected in the one teaching he often repeated when he addressed the monks in the church, "My brethren, it is written, 'Forgive thy brother that thou mayest be accounted worthy of forgiveness.'" (Matt.

6:14, Luke 6:37)<sup>11</sup> From the day he became a monk, he never allowed himself to be angry with anybody. Once he went to sell some goods in the market place and was about to lose his temper; he simply left his goods and fled.<sup>12</sup> When any of the elders wanted to dismiss a brother who was sick, or careless or abusive, St. Isidore used to take charge of him, and by his long suffering he would lead him to salvation.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Baptism***

As a catechumen, Moses received the basic Christian teachings from St. Isidore. The light was too much for the newly converted Moses, heavily burdened with sin. Frequently he exploded in tears and had to find relief in kneeling before his director and confessing his sins. When time for his baptism came, he confessed all his past evil deeds publicly in the church. During his confession, St. Macarius saw a tablet which was all black representing the sins of Moses. An angel was wiping off every sin when it was confessed till finally all the tablet became white.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Struggle with the Flesh***

For Moses, the white robe of baptism and the monk's habit did not mean that he entered into a paradise of contemplation. On the contrary he had in front of him many years of strife and fierce struggle with the flesh, the devil and the world. Although he was surrounded by giants of the spiritual life whose counsel he could seek any time, and he was aided by the Church mysteries and means of grace, yet it was with utmost difficulty that he won the long, successive and violent battles of the flesh. After he came to the desert, he still enjoyed his former bodily strength; but also his old evil passions were as powerful as before. Of the former, Palladius mentioned how after a seven day fast, he could overpower four thieves who went into his cell. He tied them all together with cords and lifted them up on his shoulders like a bag of straw and brought them to the church and said to the monks, "Since I have not the power to do evil to any man, what do you want me to do with these who rose up against me to slay me?" When the thieves knew that he was the former robber, they were quickly led to repentance.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Palladius described how the saint was tempted against chastity to such an extent that he nearly failed in his resolution,

"And whilst fasting often, and during the time of prayer and silent contemplation, that devil of error, who bringeth back to the remembrance of the mind the wickedness of former habits, would come to him, and tempt him to such a degree that even as he himself hath told us, it wanted exceedingly little to make him fall from his covenant."<sup>16</sup>

He used to go to St. Isidore asking his advice. At first the saint advised him to stand firm and continue his fastings and prayers; his temptations would finally be subdued. He told him that these were only the beginnings, and he

gave him the example of a dog that is accustomed to go to a meat market. Once it finds the market closed up and no one gives it anything, it stops going.<sup>17</sup>

Moses multiplied his disciplines. He ate only ten ounces of dry bread daily and had to recite fifty prayers every day. But the more he dried up his body, the more he was vexed and consumed by dreams.<sup>18</sup> On one occasion it came to the point that he could not endure being in his cell. St. Isidore advised him to return to it, but he refused. The old man then took him up to the roof of his cell where Moses could see many devils on one side and innumerable angels on the other side. He was convinced that he had much more heavenly help as compared to the power of the enemy. He took courage and returned to his cell without fear.<sup>19, 20</sup>

Once more he went to another one of the Desert Fathers and asked him, "What shall I do, for thoughts of lust which arise from my former habits attack me?" He was advised to increase his prayers, vigils and fasts in order to dispel those images from his mind. Moses took the advice literally, went back to his cell, and plunged for seven years into more severe ascetic practices. Was he mistaken in leaving his regular spiritual director and, contrary to the desert tradition, asking the advice of another Father?! He spent whole nights standing for prayer and would not lie down or even bend his knees or close his eyes. After this he used to get out during the nights, go to the cells of the old monks, take their water pitchers and fill them with water without their knowledge. The monks lived far from one another and those cells were two to five miles away from water. Moses consumed his body doing this for years, with long vigils and strict fasts, till one night he lost his consciousness and fell beside the water well. Palladius attributed this to the devil who gave him a blow across his back. The next morning he was found half dead by one of the brethren and he was carried to the church. During his sickness that lasted for one year, he was taken care of by St. Isidore. He advised Moses to give himself rest, because "there is moderation in everything, even in the works of ascetic life." Still Moses argued with his director and insisted on continuing to wage war with the devils till they departed from him. The wise and experienced Abba Isidore gave him his conclusive answer,

"In the Name of Jesus Christ, from this time onward the devils shall cease from thee. Draw nigh then, and participate in the Holy Mysteries, and thou shalt be free from all impurity both of the flesh and of the spirit".<sup>21</sup>

With this, Moses returned to his cell. Abba Isidore came to him after two months and asked about his condition. Moses said he no longer suffered anything. He even had power over the demons as Palladius adds,

"Now he was also held to be worthy of the gift of Divine Grace, and he could chase away the devils from many folk . . . , and as flies take to flight before us so did the devils depart from before him".<sup>22</sup>

# ***THE DESERT FATHERS***

## ***Saint Moses the Ethiopian. His Life and Spirituality***

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### ***Early Life***

Had Saint Moses the Ethiopian written his autobiography, he would have given us similar words to what St. Augustine gave in his Confessions,

‘What evil is there that I have not wrought by my deeds, or if not by my deeds at least by my words, or if not by my words at least by my will? . . . ! For thou hast forgiven in me so great and so many wicked deeds, and hast dissolved my sins like ice . . . for what sin could I not have committed? . . . All these sins I acknowledge to have been forgiven; both those which, by my will, I have committed, and those which, by thy help, I have not committed.<sup>2</sup> . . . I fell from thee, O my God, and wandered far, too far from thy stability in that youth of mine; and I became unto myself thereby a land of want and misery’<sup>3</sup>

But Moses who lived to become one of the fourth century Desert Fathers did not leave an autobiography. We have some sketches of his early life from Palladius. He was born about 332 A.D. In his youth he was the slave of a high government official who could not tolerate his dishonesty and his violence. It was said that he even went so far as to commit murder. Finally his master drove him out of his house. Moses became the head of a gang of seventy robbers. He was a strong and fierce man of huge stature. Once he wanted to kill a shepherd who pastured his sheep on the other bank of the Nile, which was then in full flood and more than a mile across. Moses put his sword between his teeth, placed his clothes on his head and swam across the river. The shepherd was able to hide by burying himself in the sand. The sheep were left for Moses, who chose four of the best rams, slew them, and tying them with a rope he took them with him back across the river. He then came to a small village where he skinned the rams, ate the best portions of them, and sold the rest for wine.<sup>4</sup>



### ***With St. Macarius at Scetis***

We do not know the circumstances of Moses' conversion. But the wind blows where it wills, and every night should have an end. It was mentioned that he used to address the sun saying, "If thou art the god let me know, and thou the God whom I know not lead me to Thyself."

When next seen he was in Scetis in the western desert of Egypt. An elder found him and led him to St. Macarius the Great at Petra in the northern end of Scetis. It was about the year 365 A.D.<sup>5</sup> when Moses arrived there. Thousands of monks had followed St. Macarius after he came to the area about 340 A.D. They first settled in the northern part of the valley. There they dug a well and built a church. It is now the area of the Monastery of Our Lady, Al-Baramus. Soon Scetis extended to the south, and when St. Cassian visited it in 385 A.D., he found there four flourishing monastic settlements with four churches. These early monasteries were not localized places surrounded by walls as we see the monasteries now, but each monk had to build his cell or live in a cave which he roofed with palm branches. Monks only met in church on Saturdays and Sundays every week where they celebrated the Eucharist and heard the teaching of St. Macarius or of one of the elders chosen by him.

### ***Moses and His Spiritual Director***

Moses was received by the priest of Scetis, St. Isidore.<sup>6</sup> He was fortunate enough to have such an experienced and pious elder as his spiritual director. Had St. Isidore done nothing except leading Moses safely during a very turbulent period of his life, he would have proven himself a great saint. St. Rufinus<sup>7</sup> and St. Jerome<sup>8</sup> consider him, one of the great elders of Scetis. He was one of the early Fathers who moved from Cellia with St. Macarius when he came to Scetis in 340 A.D. Although we have only a few of his sayings in the 'Apophthegmata Patrum', yet they are enough to show us a very loving Father who was strict with himself, but knew how to be tolerant to his brethren and spiritual sons. He used to say, 'When you are working in a certain place, the strength is not in departing from there because of too much labor; as for me, I wrap myself up in my cloak and I go to the place where labor is, and labor becomes unto me a pleasure.'<sup>9</sup> Till his old age he used to plait a bundle of palms every night. When the brethren advised him to have some rest, he answered, 'Even if Isidore was burned, and his ashes thrown to the winds, I would not allow myself any relaxation, because the Son of God came to the earth for my sake'.<sup>10</sup> Actually his main labor was not the manual work, but prayer to which he set no time limit whether by day or by night.<sup>10</sup> According to him sanctity is reached by denying oneself and denying one's own will for the sake of following God's will.<sup>10</sup>

His brotherly love was reflected in the one teaching he often repeated when he addressed the monks in the church, "My brethren, it is written, 'Forgive thy brother that thou mayest be accounted worthy of forgiveness.'" (Matt.

6:14, Luke 6:37)<sup>11</sup> From the day he became a monk, he never allowed himself to be angry with anybody. Once he went to sell some goods in the market place and was about to lose his temper; he simply left his goods and fled.<sup>12</sup> When any of the elders wanted to dismiss a brother who was sick, or careless or abusive, St. Isidore used to take charge of him, and by his long suffering he would lead him to salvation.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Baptism***

As a catechumen, Moses received the basic Christian teachings from St. Isidore. The light was too much for the newly converted Moses, heavily burdened with sin. Frequently he exploded in tears and had to find relief in kneeling before his director and confessing his sins. When time for his baptism came, he confessed all his past evil deeds publicly in the church. During his confession, St. Macarius saw a tablet which was all black representing the sins of Moses. An angel was wiping off every sin when it was confessed till finally all the tablet became white.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Struggle with the Flesh***

For Moses, the white robe of baptism and the monk's habit did not mean that he entered into a paradise of contemplation. On the contrary he had in front of him many years of strife and fierce struggle with the flesh, the devil and the world. Although he was surrounded by giants of the spiritual life whose counsel he could seek any time, and he was aided by the Church mysteries and means of grace, yet it was with utmost difficulty that he won the long, successive and violent battles of the flesh. After he came to the desert, he still enjoyed his former bodily strength; but also his old evil passions were as powerful as before. Of the former, Palladius mentioned how after a seven day fast, he could overpower four thieves who went into his cell. He tied them all together with cords and lifted them up on his shoulders like a bag of straw and brought them to the church and said to the monks, "Since I have not the power to do evil to any man, what do you want me to do with these who rose up against me to slay me?" When the thieves knew that he was the former robber, they were quickly led to repentance.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Palladius described how the saint was tempted against chastity to such an extent that he nearly failed in his resolution,

"And whilst fasting often, and during the time of prayer and silent contemplation, that devil of error, who bringeth back to the remembrance of the mind the wickedness of former habits, would come to him, and tempt him to such a degree that even as he himself hath told us, it wanted exceedingly little to make him fall from his covenant."<sup>16</sup>

He used to go to St. Isidore asking his advice. At first the saint advised him to stand firm and continue his fastings and prayers; his temptations would finally be subdued. He told him that these were only the beginnings, and he

gave him the example of a dog that is accustomed to go to a meat market. Once it finds the market closed up and no one gives it anything, it stops going.<sup>17</sup>

Moses multiplied his disciplines. He ate only ten ounces of dry bread daily and had to recite fifty prayers every day. But the more he dried up his body, the more he was vexed and consumed by dreams.<sup>18</sup> On one occasion it came to the point that he could not endure being in his cell. St. Isidore advised him to return to it, but he refused. The old man then took him up to the roof of his cell where Moses could see many devils on one side and innumerable angels on the other side. He was convinced that he had much more heavenly help as compared to the power of the enemy. He took courage and returned to his cell without fear.<sup>19, 20</sup>

Once more he went to another one of the Desert Fathers and asked him, "What shall I do, for thoughts of lust which arise from my former habits attack me?" He was advised to increase his prayers, vigils and fasts in order to dispel those images from his mind. Moses took the advice literally, went back to his cell, and plunged for seven years into more severe ascetic practices. Was he mistaken in leaving his regular spiritual director and, contrary to the desert tradition, asking the advice of another Father?! He spent whole nights standing for prayer and would not lie down or even bend his knees or close his eyes. After this he used to get out during the nights, go to the cells of the old monks, take their water pitchers and fill them with water without their knowledge. The monks lived far from one another and those cells were two to five miles away from water. Moses consumed his body doing this for years, with long vigils and strict fasts, till one night he lost his consciousness and fell beside the water well. Palladius attributed this to the devil who gave him a blow across his back. The next morning he was found half dead by one of the brethren and he was carried to the church. During his sickness that lasted for one year, he was taken care of by St. Isidore. He advised Moses to give himself rest, because "there is moderation in everything, even in the works of ascetic life." Still Moses argued with his director and insisted on continuing to wage war with the devils till they departed from him. The wise and experienced Abba Isidore gave him his conclusive answer,

"In the Name of Jesus Christ, from this time onward the devils shall cease from thee. Draw nigh then, and participate in the Holy Mysteries, and thou shalt be free from all impurity both of the flesh and of the spirit".<sup>21</sup>

With this, Moses returned to his cell. Abba Isidore came to him after two months and asked about his condition. Moses said he no longer suffered anything. He even had power over the demons as Palladius adds,

"Now he was also held to be worthy of the gift of Divine Grace, and he could chase away the devils from many folk . . . , and as flies take to flight before us so did the devils depart from before him".<sup>22</sup>

But why did Abba Isidore advise St. Moses that it was time to put a limit to his ascetic disciplines? The Apophthegmata, or the Sayings of the Fathers, later addressed itself to this question,

“Because at the beginning Abba Moses was ignorant of the rule of the ascetic life, and because he was healthy of body, he worked overmuch, and he thought that he would be able to prevail mightily against devils by the multitude of his works alone, and that he would be able to vanquish them. Therefore, because the devils perceived his object, they attacked him more severely with frequent wars, both secretly and openly. But Abba Isidore, wishing to teach him the truth, and to make him acquire humility, said unto him, *‘Without the power of the Spirit which our Lord gave us in baptism for the fulfilling of His commandments, that which is confirmed in us each day by the taking of His Body and Blood, we cannot be purified from the passions, and we cannot vanquish devils, and we cannot perform the works of spiritual excellence.’*”<sup>23</sup>

#### ***Life of St. Moses in Scetis and His Ordination***

St. Moses enjoyed great fame among the Fathers of Scetis because of his humility, his meekness and his love for strangers. His solitude was frequently interrupted by the influx of visitors. He went to complain to St. Macarius, ‘Father, I desire to live in silence, but the brethren never leave me.’ The saint advised him to move to an isolated cell in Petra. Petra (literally ‘rock’) is the northern rock of Scetis, known also as Calamus.<sup>24</sup> It was a far area and difficult to reach with scarce water. Moses became tired on his way to Petra, and he said to himself, “How can I bring water for myself into this place?” Then he heard an assuring voice, “Go on and fear not.” One day, a large number of visitors came to see him and his small supply of water ran out while he was boiling some lentils for them. But through his prayer a great amount of rain poured from heaven and filled all the water vessels.<sup>25</sup>

St. Moses lived in Petra for six years in a cave which he dug for himself in the rock. He came to be known as Abba Moses of Petra. The cave remained at least till the eleventh century when it was mentioned by a Coptic historian, and a monastery named after the saint was established around it.<sup>26</sup>

St. Moses was later chosen to be a priest in Scetis—either to assist the old Isidore or in his place in the church of northern Scetis, when he moved to the south with St. Macarius to the new monastic settlement which became the nucleus of St. Macarius’ monastery. This must have been after 384 A.D., because it was Pope Theophilus who laid his hand on him. On the day of the ordination the Pope wanted to prove the sanctity of Moses. He ordered the priests to drive Moses out of the sanctuary once he came. When he came, the priests abused him and drove him out saying, “Outside, black man.” When he went out he was heard saying to himself, “They have treated you rightly, O you whose skin is dark and black; and since you are not human, why do you come

to meet men?" The saint passed the test beyond all expectation. When after his ordination he was dressed in the white priestly ephod, the Pope addressed him, "Behold Abba Moses, now you are entirely white." He answered, "I would that this is also from the inside as it is from the outside."

### ***Spirituality of St. Moses***

Like the other Desert Fathers, St. Moses based his spiritual life and teaching upon Scripture. One of his famous sayings,

"Four virtues aid the young monk: Continuous meditation on the word of God, watchfulness, fervent prayer, and considering himself as nothing."<sup>27</sup>

One of his other sayings may summarize for us his spirituality,

"Humility of heart precedes all virtues, and the desire of the belly is the source of all passions. Pride is the basis of all vices, and love is the origin of all goodness."<sup>27</sup>

### ***Humility***

Once the Fathers in Scetis were holding a council, and they treated St. Moses with contempt in order to test him, saying, "Why does this black man come among us? We don't want a thief in our midst." The saint kept silence, and when the council was dismissed, they asked him, "Father, were you not troubled in your heart when you were reviled?" He answered, "Although I was troubled, yet I said nothing."<sup>28</sup>

We can understand his attitude from some of his sayings in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,

'If you bear disgrace and affliction in the name of the Lord, you become a martyr. If you show your feebleness and poverty before Him, He sustains you. If you become foolish for His sake, He makes you wise.'

'Accepting rebuke and scorn will lead you into humility.'

'Whoever denies himself lives in peace, and whoever thinks that he is without fault, has already in himself all faults.'<sup>27</sup>

When the sanctity of Moses became well-known, he had to flee away from fame. The governor of the region came once to Scetis to see him. When Moses heard he fled to the marsh. But there he was met by the governor and his companions who asked, "Old man, tell us where the cell of Abba Moses is." The saint said, "What do you want with him? He is a fool who has no place to go to." The governor then went to the church and told what happened to the monks. They were offended and asked, "What kind of an old man who dared to speak like that about the holy man?" The governor described him saying, "A big black old man wearing old clothes." They knew then that it was none other than St. Moses himself. The governor went away greatly edified.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Fasting***

St. Moses knew how fasting helped him in his early spiritual combats. He used to say,

“You should not yield to gluttony, otherwise Amalek may surround you.”

“These four lead to fornication: eating and drinking, oversleeping, negligence and decoration of clothes.”

“If you want to repent to God, beware of living in luxury, for this stimulates all passions and dispels the fear of God from the heart.”

“Control of the body diminishes the effects of other desires. Desire of food awakens the passions and emotions; they are controlled by fasting.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Love*

The grace of God worked in Moses to the extent that as much as he hated mankind before his conversion, in Scetis he came to love everybody. He received all his visitors with joy. The Apophthemata mentions the story of a brother who came to visit St. Arsenius. Offended by the cold reception he received, he then asked to see St. Moses who did not fail to welcome and refresh him.<sup>30</sup> On another occasion a private fast was declared in Scetis. During the week fast some brethren came from Egypt to Abba Moses. While he was preparing some food for them, the neighboring monks saw the smoke of his fire rising up and wondered how St. Moses did not keep the fast. They told the clergy who promised to settle the matter with him in church. The clergy knew the habits of the saint, and when he came to church on Saturday, they spoke to him before the whole assembly of monks saying, “O Abba Moses, though you break the commandment of men, you establish that of God.”<sup>31</sup>

Love of the neighbor was one of the main virtues he stressed to his disciples. Lacking this leads us to judge one another. Among his sayings,

“Let us love all with sincere love in order to get rid of jealousy and envy.”

“We must always honor our neighbors, in order to escape judging them.”

“Never suffer yourself to hear about the fall of a brother lest you should judge him without knowing it.”

“Four things darken the mind: Hating a brother, despising, envying or suspecting him.”<sup>27</sup>

Once a brother in Scetis committed a fault and a council was called to discuss it. Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to come. The priest went to him saying, “Come, for all the people are expecting you.” He rose up, took a basket with a hole in it, filled it with sand and carried it upon his shoulders. When the monks saw him coming in this shape, they asked, “What is this, Father?” He said to them, “These are my sins which are running down behind me, and I have come today to judge the errors of another.” When they heard this, they forgave the brother and the matter was not further discussed.<sup>32</sup>

*Solitude*

A brother went to Abba Moses and asked him for a word of advice. The old man said to him, "Go, and sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything." Of his other sayings, "Discourse with men of the world and mixing with them darken the soul and make her forget contemplation."

*Watchfulness*

The Desert Fathers were strict in disciplining themselves everyday till the last day of their lives. We can learn this in the life of St. Moses from his sayings which were collected in his last years and kept by St. Poemen. He asked the saint to write them for him. Poemen went to Scetis about 390 A.D. Among these sayings,

"Be prepared to meet the Lord so you may do His will. Examine yourself here to detect what you lack so as to escape trouble at the time of death."

"Do not think that you have reached any good till the end of your life. Do not be proud . . . for you can never trust your enemies. Never trust yourself as long as you are in the flesh."

"Salvation of the heart is in continual watchfulness. Too much sleep gives birth to improper visions, but vigil with knowledge makes the mind blossom and bear fruit. . . . Whoever lies down with knowledge, is better than whoever keeps vigil in vain discourse. Mourning dismisses all types of sins."<sup>27</sup>

*Crown of Martyrdom*

About 370 A.D. St. Moses, St. Evagrius, St. Cronius, St. Pambo and three other Desert Fathers went to visit St. Macarius the Great in the southern rock of Scetis. When he saw them he said, "My brethren, I see one of you worthy of the crown of martyrdom and he is going to shed his blood in this wilderness." St. Moses answered at once, "Probably I am the one, in order to fulfill the words of the Lord 'all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.'"<sup>33</sup>

The prophecy of St. Macarius was fulfilled in 407 A.D. when the Berber, the desert tribes, made their first raid over Scetis and destroyed its four churches. St. Moses was seventy-five years old and he had under him seventy disciples.<sup>34</sup>

On the day of the raid St. Moses was sitting with seven of his disciples and he told them, "Behold, today the barbarians are coming to Scetis; rise up and flee." They asked, "Will you not flee, Father?" He said to them, "I have been waiting for this day to come for many years past, so that the words of our Saviour may be fulfilled, 'Those who take the sword shall perish by the sword'" (Matt. 26:52). The monks preferred to stay with their Father. After a while he said, "Behold, the barbarians have drawn near to the door," and the barbarians entered and slew them. One of the monks fled and hid behind the palm leaves, and he saw seven crowns coming down and crowning them.<sup>35</sup>

The monks of Dair Al-Baramus at Scetis have faithfully kept the body of St. Moses, which remains till this day beside the body of his spiritual father, St. Isidore inside the main church of the monastery. Even in death, the disciple was not separated from his director.

The Church calls him in the Divine Liturgy, *'the mighty Saint Abba Moses*.<sup>36</sup> The Coptic Church commemorates him on June 18 (Bawunah 24), when her hymns rise in his praise saying,

"The first saint and martyr who was better perfected in the mount of Scetis is our Father and saint Abba Moses.

"For he became an athlete and was feared by the demons. He stood upon the rock (Petra) as if on the cross.

"With his great patience and travail of tortures he was given the crown of martyrdom.

"He went in spirit to heaven, to the places of rest which the Lord had prepared for those who love His holy name.

"And for us he left his body and his holy cave where we may fulfill his blessed commemoration.

"In which we cry saying: O God of Abba Moses and of those perfected with him, have mercy upon our souls.

"And let us gain the promises prepared for the saints who satisfied Him from the beginning by their love for Him.

"Ask the Lord for us, O my master and Father Abba Moses and his sons the crossbearers, so that He may forgive us our sins."<sup>37</sup>

### References and Footnotes

1. Confessions of Saint Augustine 9:1.
2. Ibid; 2:7.
3. Ibid; 2:10.
4. Palladius: The Lausiac History (Ancient Christian Writers, No. 34; London, 1965); 67.
5. I am here following the dates given by Fr. Matta El-Meskeen in 'Coptic Monasticism in the Age of St. Macarius' (Cairo, 1972). He gave the time of the death of St. Moses as 407 A.D., during the first raid at Scetis. According to Palladius he was 75 years when he died. This gives his birthdate as 332 A.D. He was one of the seven elders of Scetis who accompanied St. Pambo in a visit to St. Macarius. St. Pambo died in 373 A.D.; hence a date of 365 for the conversion of St. Moses seems very appropriate.
6. Before the establishment of the other three settlements with their churches, St. Isidore was the only priest of Scetis. Although St. Macarius himself had been ordained before he went to the desert, yet he loved solitude and used to live away from the monastery, leaving the priest of Scetis to take care of the needs of the brethren.



7. Fr. Matta El-Meskeen: Ibid.; 235.
8. St. Jerome: Letter 22:33 (N & PNF, second series, Vol VI; 37).
9. E. A. Wallis Budge: The Paradise or Garden of the Holy Fathers, London, 1907. Vol II P. 52.
10. Benedicta Ward: The Sayings of the Fathers, London, 1975; 83.
11. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 99.
12. Ward: Op. Cit.; 82-3.
13. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol. II; 49 & Ward; 82.
14. Arabic Manuscript No. 357, rites; library of the Coptic Museum at Cairo. Mentioned by Fr. Matta El-Meskeen. Op. Cit.; 263.
15. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol I; 216.
16. Ibid.; 216.
17. Palladius: Op. Cit.; 68-9.
18. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol I; 216-7.
19. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 126-7.
20. Ward: Op. Cit.; 117.
21. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol I; 217-8.
22. Ibid.; 218.
23. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 289-90.
24. Fr. Matta El-Meskeen: Op. Cit.; 263-4.
25. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 143.
26. Fr. Matta El-Meskeen: Op. Cit.; 264.
27. From the Arabic Version of Paradise of the Monks.
28. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 325 & Ward; 117.
29. Ward: Op. Cit.; 118.
30. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 8,9.
31. Ibid.; 102-3.
32. Ibid.; 122-3.
33. Amel: A.M.G. XXV; 186. Mentioned by Fr. Matta El-Meskeen, Op. Cit.; 266.
34. Palladius: Op. Cit.; 70.
35. Budge: Op. Cit. Vol II; 165-6.
36. Fayek M. Ishak: A complete translation of the Coptic Orthodox Mass, Toronto, Ont., 1973; 100.
37. Translated from 'The Holy Psalmody (in Coptic and Arabic), printed in Cairo, 1960; 393-5.

## **MODERN COPTIC SAINTS**

### **ANBA ABRAAM<sup>1</sup>**

***Father Tadros Y. Malaty***

In France, the English writer “Leeder” heard about an Egyptian and saintly bishop. He hastened with his wife to visit Egypt in order to meet him, and then wrote a special chapter concerning the bishop’s life in which he said that this old saint whose power was known all over the eastern world was the direct and unbroken succession of those early Christians.<sup>2</sup> His wife expressed her feeling during the meeting saying, “We had been in the presence of Christ, and were filled with the Spirit of God.”<sup>3</sup>

This saint was born in 1829 in Galda, a village in the diocese of Deirout. His name was Boulos Ghabriel. His parents were righteous and loved God. He recited the psalms and the Holy Scriptures from his childhood. As his heart was filled by the divine love, he joined the Monastery of the St. Mary the Virgin known as El-Meharrak.

Anba Yakoubos, the bishop of Minieh, then called him to serve God. Father Boulos soon changed the bishop’s home to a shelter for the poor, and remained in this service for four years until ordained as a presbyter in 1863.

At the end of this period of service, his desire for monasticism urged him to return to his monastery where he was chosen to be in charge of the monastery. Many young men heard about him and asked him to be their guide. But as he opened the door of the monastery to the poor, offering all that he had for Christ’s brethren, some monks rebelled against him, took away all his authority and asked him to leave the monastery. Father Boulos and his disciples were dismissed for their love of the poor, so they went to the Monastery of St. Mary the Virgin, Al-Baramus at Wadi—El—Natroun, where they devoted their lives to worship of God and study of the Holy Bible.

In 1881 he was ordained as the bishop of Fayoum, Beni-Souef and Giza, by the name of “ANBA ABRAAM.” Once again he converted his home into a shelter for the poor.

#### ***The Friend of the Poor***

The bishop assigned the first floor of his home to the poor, the blind and the sick and gave them his personal attention to see that they received proper care.

Whenever a poor man entered his home, he stretched his hand under the pillow to give him all that was there, and when he did not find any money, he gave him his shawl or his robe. . . . There are many wonderful stories such as this one pertaining to the bishop.

#### *A Bishopric in Heaven*

It was said that the nobles of the bishopric realized that the bishop's home was not convenient for this ministry so they decided with his consent to renovate it. Every time they collected a sum of money they gave it to him to keep. Eventually they came asking him to make an appointment with the building contractor to discuss what was to be done. He looked at them saying, "My sons. It is already done; I have built you a house in the Eternal Life."

#### *A Misuse of His Loving Kindness*

One well-known story was told about three young men who plotted to take advantage of the bishop's love for the poor. Two of them approached him saying that the third had died and that they had no money to bury him. He asked them, "Did he die?" they answered, "Yes, he died." Then he nodded his head and gave them an offering saying, "Take it and bury him." They left laughing, but soon laughter was turned into terror when they found their friend had actually died.

#### *A Man of Prayer*

Many persons who slept in the room next to Anba Abraam related that he used to rise up at midnight to pray the psalms and often stayed until dawn. He used to zealously repeat the words, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

All who met him testified that his prayers were very deep in spirit until his old age. Mr. Leeder said, ". . . I never heard a prayer which seemed to establish such a link with the throne of Grace with such instant security; it seemed as if earth fell away, to leave this man speaking in the clear presence of God Himself."

We would not be exaggerating if we said that not just hundreds but thousands of miracles happened through his prayers.

#### *His Abstemiousness*

Anba Abraam's life style was simple as seen in his clothing and eating. He lived on virtually nothing, controlling every desire. Once he desired to eat chickens, so he asked his disciple to prepare one for him. When the table was prepared he prayed and asked his disciple to take the chicken away and to bring it the next day. The same thing happened on the second and the third days. On the fourth day the chicken was spoiled, so he looked at it saying to himself, "O myself, eat what you have desired."

*His Modesty*

Mr. Leeder says, “He was distressed that I felt obliged to kneel. . . .” One of his best habits was that he never permitted any of the deacons to say in his presence the statement of respect that is usually said for bishops prior to reading the Gospel. He absolutely did not distinguish himself from his people, but sat on a similar chair as his sons. He was also pleased when his congregation called him, “Our Father, the bishop,” and never permitted anyone to call him, “Our Master.”

When prince Sergius—uncle of Nicholas, the Tzar of Russia—and his wife, heard about him they came to visit him in 1898. They were received officially by the government, and the Coptic noblemen of El—Fayoum tried to buy new furniture for the bishop’s home, but the bishop refused completely. The visitors came and bowed in front of him on the floor and he prayed for them. When they offered him a bag full of gold pounds he apologized and did not accept it, but at last took one pound and gave it to his disciple Rizk. The prince said that he never felt such an inspiring awe all his life as at that moment when he was standing in front of that great saint.

*A Man of Scripture<sup>4</sup>*

Anba Isidorus said that he was a master in the study of the Holy Scriptures to such a degree that he learned the texts by heart and repeated them from memory. It was said that he read all the Bible once every forty days. He used to gather his people every evening for praying and studying the Holy Bible.

*His Power of Exorcism*

The English writer Leeder says, “The bishop’s power in the exorcism of evil spirits has perhaps brought him more visitors from distant parts than any of the other gifts for which he was famous.”<sup>5</sup>

*His Departure to Heaven*

Before his death he called Fr. Abd-el-Sayed and some deacons and asked them to pray the psalms outside his room, and asked them not to open his door before half an hour had passed. When they opened the door they found him resting in Christ.

It is well known that Mr. Selim Saeb, the governor of Fayoum, called his wife and said to her, “Oh, it seems that the bishop of the Nazarenes has died. . . . Look at those horses. The people who are riding them are around the bishop crying. “Eqouab, Eqouab.” Afterwards he went out and asked one of the Christians about the meaning of the word, “Eqouab.” He told him that it means, “Holy” and it is the hymn of the heavenly creatures.

Until this day his monastery at Fayoum where his relics are present, is a source of blessings for many.

*Footnotes*

1. Fr. T. Y. Malaty: ANBA ABRAAM, the friend of the poor, Alexandria; 1974.
2. S. H. Leeder: MODERN SONS OF THE PHARAOHS, London; 1918: P 265-305. A previous article in Coptic Church Review, Anba Abraam Bishop of Fayoum (1980; Vol. 1, No. 2) dealt mainly with Mr. Leeder's visit to the saint.
3. Archpriest Michail Saad: Saint Abraam (in Arabic), Alexandria; 1965, p. 172.
4. Bishop Isidorus: Church History, (in Arabic) Volume II, Cairo; 1969. p. 521.
5. Leeder: P 286-9.

## **CURRENTS IN COPTIC CHURCH STUDIES**

### ***On The Sacrament Of Baptism***

*By His Grace Anba Gregorios, bishop for Higher Theological Studies in the Coptic Church, Cairo, 1965*

This book was the second in the series 'Spiritual Values in the Doctrines and Rites of the Orthodox Church.' The idea of this series has been to discuss the dogmata of faith, not as abstract mental theories, but through their action in giving life to the faithful (John 10:10 & 20: 30, 31), assisting them in their everyday work, and benefiting them in this world and in the next.

Although the titles of most chapters spoke about the spiritual effects of Baptism, yet much of the theology of the sacrament and sometimes its liturgical aspects were discussed with a lot of biblical and patristic references.

#### ***Baptism and the forgiveness of sins***

Baptism is the way prepared by God for the faithful to receive the merits of the redeeming Christ, "*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.*" (Mark 16:16) Sins are forgiven in Baptism, they are washed away (Baptism was called 'washing' in Scripture and in the early Fathers.)

*"And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptised and wash away thy sins. . . ."* (Acts 16:16)

*" . . . but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."* (Titus 3:5)

(See also Acts 2:38; I Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:25, 26; Heb. 10:22; & I Pet. 3:20, 21)

*"We descend into the water full of sins and dirt, and we ascend bearing the fruit of fear in our hearts, and hope in Jesus in our spirit."* (Letter of Barnabas 11:11)

*"Every sin is forgiven in Baptism"* (St. Ambrose: The Sacraments)

*"Baptism erases all sins—original sin and actual sins"* (St. Augustine: On the Creed, 10)

#### ***New Nature in Baptism***

In Baptism we crucify—we take off—the old man and put on the new man by sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. (Rom. 6:3-7; Col. 2:11-14 &

3:9,10) Doing away with the old nature is circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29) The change of nature is represented in the rites of Baptism by taking off the old clothes and wearing new white ones. The white robe (Rev. 3:18 & 7:9, 13) is a symbol of the new nature. It is the best robe (Luke 15:22), and the wedding garment (Matt. 22:11,12) needed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

*“For when we immerse our heads in the water, the old man is buried as in a tomb below, and wholly sunk forever; then as we raise them again, the new man rises in its stead. As it is easy for us to dip and to lift our heads again, so it is easy for God to bury the old man, and to show forth the new”* (St. John Chrysostom: Homilies on St. John 25:2)

*“In Baptism, man is released from the power of Satan. He becomes born without the seed of man like Christ, because the Holy Spirit purifies him from his human birth. Satan then is left powerless over him, so long as the Spirit of Christ is in him* (Anba Sawiris, bishop of Ushmunin, 980 A.D.)

### ***Baptism is a seal***

Baptism is a permanent sign and a fixed seal for the soul, as circumcision was for the flesh (Rom. 4:11; 2 Tim. 2:19; Col. 2:11, 12; Rom. 2:29; Philippians 3:3)

*“Baptism is a blessed seal”* (St. Clement of Alexandria)

*“Great is the Baptism . . . a ransom to captives . . . a holy indissoluble seal. . . .”* (St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Pro catechesis: 16)

### ***Baptism is a new birth***

In Baptism we are born again from above (John 1:12, 13 & 3:3-7; Titus 3:5; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:3, 4, 23) We become the adopted sons of God and have the right to call him Father. (Matt. 6:9; Rom 8:15; Galatians 4:5; Eph. 1:5)

*“Baptism then is a purification from sins, a remission of trespasses, a cause of renovation and regeneration.”* (St. Gregory of Nyssa: On the Baptism of Christ.)

*“There are two births. . . . One is of the earth, the other of heaven; one of the flesh, the other of the Spirit; one of mortality, the other of eternity; one of male and female, the other of God and the Church.”* (St. Augustine: On the Gospel of St. John 11:6)

### ***Baptism an Illumination***

The New Testament calls Baptism ‘enlightenment’ or ‘illumination’ (Heb. 6:4 & 10:32). This term was used and explained by the Fathers:

*“When we are baptized we are enlightened”* (St. Clement of Alexandria: The Instructor 1:6:26)

*“This washing is called ‘illumination because it enlightens the intelligence. . . .”* (St. Justin: First Apology, 61)

***Baptism and Eternal Life***

Baptism is essential for salvation. It opens for us the gates of paradise and of the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3,5) The Church recites the gospel of the man born blind (John 9) on 'Baptismal Sunday' to remind us that man is born blind because of sin, and cannot see the Kingdom unless he is washed in the baptismal font.

*"The Holy Spirit, as God, regenerates us in Baptism. . . . He gives us heaven instead of earth . . . and makes us more honorable than the angels. He puts out the fire of hell which is not put out in the holy waters of Baptism."* (St. Didymus the blind: The Trinity 2:12)

*"Great is the Baptism that lies before you: a ransom of captives; a remission of offenses; a death of sin; a new birth of the soul; a garment of light; a holy indissoluble seal; a chariot to heaven; the delight of Paradise; a welcome into the kingdom; the gift of adoption!"* (St. Cyril of Jerusalem; Pro catachesis, 16)

***Baptism of Children***

Because Baptism is essential for salvation, the Church has always taught to have infants baptized. *"Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not."* (Luke 18:16) Infant Baptism was stressed in the writing of St. Irenaeus (2nd century), St. Cyprian and Origen (3rd century) and other early Fathers.

*"The Church received from the Apostles the Tradition of giving Baptism even to infants."* (Origen: Commentaries on Romans 5,9)



## ***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.**

### ***IS COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW BIASED?***

#### ***To the Editor:***

I congratulate you on completing your first year in print and I wish you many more fruitful years in spreading our heritage, culture and theology to the West.

I would like to respectfully make a comment about the journal. Some of the articles that appear in the review are generally, although not extremely, biased. For example, the book review of "The Story of the Copts" in the third issue of Vol. I is not accurate. I read the English version and to me it was uncritical of various stages in our history when we, the Copts, were wrong. Also the article on Coptic Monasticism is an admirable work but it ignores the fact that various Catholic Theologians throughout the ages claimed monasticism to be a product of the West. These issues should be examined so as not to portray the journal as being partial.

In closing, I like to say that I await the arrival of "our" journal eagerly so I can learn more and appreciate greater the heritage of my ancestors.

Samer Gabor, Hackensack, NJ

*We thank Mr. Gabor, as well as all readers who take the time and effort to write to us criticizing the journal. This is how we may discover our faults and how we may get to know the opinions of our readers.*

*We share the view of Mr. Gabor that 'The Story of the Copts' is uncritical, although it occasionally mentioned a deviation of the Copts from their Tradition (as for example in the succession of Popes Yoannis XIX, Macarius III and Yusab II, page 529). However, in our review we did not say that it is the perfect book on Coptic Church history. It has its drawbacks, but in that issue we "could only introduce the book to the readers;" as we mentioned, "more effort is needed to fully evaluate the book, and all its positive and negative aspects." Yet, in spite of its drawbacks, it is still the best available book on its subject.*

*On the other hand, this is the first time we hear about “the fact that various Catholic theologians throughout the ages claimed monasticism to be a product of the West.” We know of none of the Church history books or articles by Catholic authors that stated this. A few examples may be sufficient here:*

- “St. Antony of Egypt (c.356) was the first of an army of such hermits who not only led a holy, solitary life but also guided and instructed a multitude of followers. . . . These solitary ascetics . . . soon came, in their pursuit of the spiritual life, to dominate the life of the Church of the East. . . . The link between East and West was Abbot John Cassian (c.435) . . . St. Benedict of Nursia (c.547), called the “patriarch of Western monachism” completed the process of transferring and adjusting desert and Near East monasticism to the Latin world.” (Colman Barry, O.S.B.: ‘Readings in Church History,’ Vol. 1, 1960, Newman Press; page 153)
- “A monastic rule, which bears St. Antony’s name, may very possibly preserve the general features of his system of ascetic training. In any case, his example and instructions have served as a trustworthy rule for the monastic life to all succeeding ages.” (H. Thurston, S. J. and D. Attwater: *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, Vol. I, 1980, Christian Classics; pages 107 & 108)
- “For two centuries monasticism is to be strictly an Eastern phenomenon. When found in the West, it is found as an Eastern export. A good two hundred years separate Antony the Hermit from Benedict of Nursia.” (Robert Barr, S.J.: *Main Currents in Early Christian Thought*, 1966, Paulist Press; page 73.)

*In fact, from the mail we received as well as from our personal contacts, we found that the Symposium on Coptic Monasticism’ (Coptic Church Review, Vol. 1, No. 4) has been highly appreciated in the Roman Catholic circles.*

*Editor*

## **SUPPORT AND PRAYERS FOR THE JOURNAL**

### ***To the Editorial Board:***

On behalf of our growing congregation in Mississauga, Ontario, I take this opportunity to express our highest regards to your professionalism in producing such valuable material.

In recognition of how valuable this material is to us and to our children (in the future) I took the liberty to publicise for it among our congregation and at

our new church in Mississauga; to ensure that every Coptic family has it for today's need and for the future as well.

In our youth meetings we encourage our youngsters to obtain it, read it and discuss it. And we will be more grateful if you could provide us with more materials in that direction or even references that we can refer them to.

We also would like you to know that we are all here supporting your publication wholeheartedly.

God bless you all, we pray for you to continue, succeed and grow with this great task.

*Samuel Fanous*

*Sunday School & Youth Service, Coptic Church of Virgin Mary and St. Athanasius, Mississauga, Ontario*

*Coptic Church Review came to life in order "to fill a serious gap in English theological studies and magazines," by offering "the biblical and liturgical spirituality, as lived in the Coptic Church through the centuries since the Apostolic time." (From the editorial of our first issue.) However, in spite of the work of our Lord in the journal which we have felt since the publication of its first issue, yet we know that such a gap can never be filled by the journal alone. We are trying to give references for further study in three ways:*

- 1. Book Reviews. Unless otherwise stated, all the books we review should be valuable additions to any church or youth group library.*
- 2. Except for few scholarly articles, we try to give references to available English books in the bibliography of most articles.*
- 3. Readers who ask about references for certain subjects receive their answer directly. Questions of general interest are answered on the pages of the journal.*

*Editor*

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***Liturgical Feasts in the Works of Father Matta El-Meskeen***

Why does the Church observe certain days and feasts? Origen gave this answer early in the third century,

“To the perfect Christian, who is ever in his thoughts, words, and deeds serving his Lord . . . , all his days are the Lord’s, and he is always keeping the *Lord’s day*. . . .

. . . Again, he who considers that ‘Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us,’ and that it is his duty to keep the feast by eating of the flesh of the Word, never ceases to keep the paschal feast; for the *Pascha* means a *Passover*, and he is ever striving in all his thoughts, words and deeds, to pass over from the things of this life to God, and is hastening towards the city of God. And, finally, he who can truly say, ‘We are risen with Christ,’ . . . is always living in the season of *Pentecost*. . . . But the majority of the believers are not of this advanced class; but from being either unable or unwilling to keep every day in this manner, they require some sensible memorials to prevent spiritual things from passing altogether away from their minds.’<sup>1</sup>

The beauty of the Orthodox Church lies in its worship. It is a joyful and thrilling experience to follow the re-enactment of the plan of salvation in its liturgies throughout the year. However, the Coptic Church has accumulated for every feast a heavy tradition of Scripture readings, prayers, chants and acts of its martyrs and saints. As a result, the modern worshipper, who is separated from the early Church Tradition by a gap of time, culture, language and even difference in spiritual level, may feel bored with the long hours of the liturgy which sometimes takes whole nights, even a whole week before Easter. He gets tired by the long fasts which amount to more than half the year. You have to live with the spirituality and the mind of the Church Fathers in order to enjoy following their footsteps. Father Matta leads his readers and those who hear his sermons to this state of spirit and mind during every Church season. Most of his sermons and a substantial part of his writings deal with the liturgical cycle of the Church. Only a fragment of these has been translated and published in English. In this review we are concerned with the articles published in booklet

form in 1980 by the Monastery of St. Macarius the Great at Wadi El-Natroun (the old Scetis).<sup>2</sup>

**(1) *The Original Calendar of the Coptic Church* (16 pp, 50¢)**

The Coptic Church follows the same pharaonic calendar which was organized back in the year 4280 B.C. According to Herodotus, it is a solar calendar which was adjusted by observation of the stars. It is divided into three seasons, of four months each: the season of the Nile flood, the season of cultivation and the season of harvest. This division is still reflected in the liturgy where we find a special prayer for every season.

The Church has reset the calendar in order to start it on 284 A.D. (the year when the Emperor Diocletian came to power) in honor of the extensive number of its martyrs who shed their blood during his persecution. The year became the 'Anno Martiri' and the Niruz, or the New Year's Day, became the feast of the martyrs. This is celebrated by the Church in addition to the special commemoration of every martyr in the day of his martyrdom, when he is honored by the various Church services in terms of hymns, prayers, recitals, and sermons; and finally the peak of the celebration is the Holy Communion. Veneration of the martyrs is an early Church practice. Father Matta gave examples from the Church at Smyrna who started celebrating the martyrdom of its bishop St. Polycarp in the year 168 A.D., and from the testimony of the first bishop of Canterbury, Bishop Austin (d. 604 A.D.) who said, "We actually set up sanctuaries and altars in the names of the martyrs. . . . It never happened that the priest stood to present to the body of the martyr lying underneath the altar worship or oblation. . . . Rather what was presented of worship and oblation was presented entirely and solely to the Lord God who venerates His martyrs. . . ."

The Church services which commemorates the martyrs were described by Tertullian, Eusebius, St. Cyprian and St. John Chrysostom. The Council of Carthage instituted a legislation regulating the writing and reciting of histories of the martyrs. A rare manuscript found in the library of the monastery of St. Macarius includes a preface in the Bohairic Coptic dialect as to what the patriarch or bishop should recite before the reciting of these histories. There is a different preface for the priest to recite in absence of the bishop. The article gave a replication of this manuscript together with an English translation.

**(2) *Epiphany* (8 pp, 50¢)**

In this article Father Matta discusses the theological significance of Christ's baptism, and consequently the sacrament of Baptism in Christianity.

1—Christ's baptism was a *new creation*, a *spiritual creation*. "*Anyone who is not born of the water and the Spirit will not enter the Kingdom of God*" (John 3:5) The elements of the spiritual creation (water and Spirit) were present even before man was created, when, "*the Spirit of*

- God was moving over the face of the waters.*" (Genesis 1:1-3) With Christ's descent into the waters of Jordan, we find the factor of fertility acting between the Spirit and the water, Christ as creator and head of a new creation, "*bringing many sons to glory*" (Heb. 2:10)
- 2— *The way from earth to heaven was opened*, as signified by the opening of the heavens at the baptism of Christ, and the rent of the temple veil when He was crucified. By the death of Christ, God raised the curtain that intervened between Himself and mankind.
- 3— The appearance of the Holy Spirit in the visible form of a dove has its type in the story of the flood when we also find the water and the dove. It is as though the entire period of human history from Adam to Christ was a continuing flood; and as the dove symbolized the lifting of divine anger, *the Holy Spirit gives a new life to man*.
- 4— 'The appearance of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is in truth the consecration of *the first baptism on earth in the name of the Trinity*.'

**(3) *Resurrection and Redemption in the Orthodox Concept*. (10 pp, 50¢)**

In this small article Father Matta gives a comprehensive summary of the Christian doctrine of redemption. There are two popular erroneous concepts about salvation. The first is that redemption was consummated on the Cross. The second concept "severs the Cross from the Resurrection, considering the Cross an area of grief and disgrace which we shun and apprehend, while making Resurrection a cherished exultation and glory." (p. 7 & 8) The Church's faith closely links the mystery of the Last Supper, the mystery of Crucifixion and the mystery of Resurrection. This is very clear in Scripture, in the Liturgy and in the writings of the Church Fathers, and is repeatedly stressed in the article.

- During the Last Supper the Lord revealed for the first time, the meaning and the reality of His Crucifixion, and at the same time declared the mystery of His Resurrection.
- At the Last Supper, the declaration of the Death and Resurrection was not by mere intention or illustration, but Christ actually offered to the disciples His slain and risen Body.
- The sacrifice of Christ is both an atonement offered to the Father for our sins, and a sacrifice of personal love where atonement is only accomplished by actual sharing in it.
- Resurrection is the backbone of atonement "*if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins*" (I Cor. 15:17) Christ's Resurrection turned the disgrace and curse of the Cross into grace, salvation, joy and glory.
- Redemption includes more than the forgiveness of sins. Man distorted God's image in him and needed a new creation, a new birth from

water and the Spirit. In Baptism, we participate in the Death, and Resurrection of Christ.

—The Eucharist accomplished by Christ in the Supper and by the Church in the Liturgy is the same mystery which explains the secrets of the entire act of redemption: Crucifixion, Resurrection, and even Ascension.

In every Eucharist we live the whole mystery of redemption as Father Matta explains,

“Christ still practises in every Church and among His beloved the mystery of His Supper. Just as He did at the Thursday Supper, He offers on every altar with His own hands His Body and Blood to communicants for remission of sins and life eternal, for the Eucharist has come to convey to us all the Thursday Supper power of infinite love, of the pains endured by the flesh on the Cross, and of Resurrection in which the Body rose and left the grave empty” (p. 4)

**(4) *Ascension & Pentecost*** (16 pp, 50¢)

This booklet contains two articles, which were originally sermons delivered by Father Matta at the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost in 1973.

***The Ascension of Christ***

The best I can do to review this article is to translate its Arabic introduction when it was first published by the Monastery of St. Macarius in July 1973.

The article is concerned with the Ascension of Christ and its role in the economy of salvation. The Ascension of Christ gave us the right to be where He is in order to behold His glory and be present in it. Therefore we should at least ask, and persist in asking, to live always in the presence of God through union with Christ. This is the secret of the happiness which Christ prepared for us amidst all the miseries of the world, and in spite of all the handicaps of humanity and its sad and painful failure. In our ascension and our sitting in heavens with Christ lie the utmost hope and joy and even the ultimate aim of all creation, old and new.

But for us monks to whom this speech was delivered—and this necessarily includes every man in Christ—Ascension is not only a feast, but it is where we see ourselves soaring above the cares, the delusions and the vanities of the world. It is our work and our life. . . . It is our daily occupation in regard to this world and the only life left for us.

***Pentecost***

If Christ accomplished by His Ascension the redemption which He started on the Cross, and thus secured salvation for all those who believe in Him, the Father, on Pentecost, accomplished the economy by pouring the Holy Spirit upon humanity in order to unite it to Himself in Christ. Where the Son's role

of salvation and reconciliation ended, the Father's role of love and adoption began. (John 16:26, 27) "*God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. . . .*" (Rome. 5:5); it is a fatherly love which makes us cry, "*Abba! Father!*" We are no more orphans but we live in the house of God as sons forever. The Father's promise of the Holy Spirit is an unction of sonship that bears imperishable life; it is a new birth into eternal life. Its fire is always alive in the soul and needs only to be blown into by vigil, self-sacrifice, meekness, poverty, fasting, and ceaseless prayer.

The sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost depended upon the return of the Son to the Father, conveying in Himself the completion of His mission—a new redeemed and perfected humanity which He placed at the right hand of the Father. "*Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear.*" (Acts 2:33; see also Eph. 4:10 & Heb. 6:20)

Father Matta gave the patristic answer to an inquiry about the relation between Christ's breathing of the Holy Spirit on the disciples on Easter Day and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. According to St. Gregory the Theologian, the former was a divine inspiration, while the latter a more perfect manifestation. The Holy Spirit is no longer present only in energy, but is substantially associating with us, and dwelling in us.<sup>3</sup>

**(5) *The Martyrdom of the Two Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul.* (12 pp., 50¢)**

Directly after Pentecost, the Coptic Church starts the Fast of the Apostles which ends on Abib 5 (July 12), when it commemorates the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul. About the Apostles Fast, Father Matta writes,

"The whole fast of the Apostles may be regarded as a continuous feast commemorating the work of the Holy Ghost in the Church. It is the feast of ministry and frequent prayers for the provision of laborers for the harvest and the consecration of the priests promised by the Lord through the mouth of Jeremiah, "*And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.*" (Jeremiah 3:15)."

The martyrdom of the two apostles, the witness which they sealed with their blood, is an immediate effect of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. "*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me. . . .*" (Acts 1:8) Hence this article continues the same theme of the Holy Spirit discussed in the previous article, and is in fact the translation of a speech given in the same year. Father Matta elaborates on the work of the Holy Spirit in martyrdom. Martyrdom is not an act of bravery, heroism, or a mere power of faith. It is a direct work of the Holy Spirit in the martyr whom He prepares by self-denial and a sense of humiliation and rejection of all worldly glory. The Holy Spirit grants us to see the cross and death as glorification with Christ.



The martyrdom of the two Apostles is an act of glorification by the Church to the person of the Lord. He foretold it, "*Even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me; and ye also shall bear witness*". (John 15:26,27). When He spoke to St. Peter about his crucifixion, the Evangelist added, "*This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God.*" (John 21:19)

"It is noteworthy that the shedding of the blood of the two great Apostles together and on the same day is the highest love doxology offered by the Church to the person of Christ, not at the level of melodies and hymns, but at the level of self-denial, self-hatred and the acceptance of the sentence of death, rejection, torture and banning from the land of living, without fear, dismay or regret. . . . This is the melody of our feast today, and our resolution for the glorification of God and Christ—always to be prepared for witness to Christ in all sincerity, decision and readiness to deny ourselves unto death, which we can only attain by the fullness of the Holy Ghost. Amen." (P. 10 & 11)

**(6) *The Assumption of the Body of Virgin Mary.* (50 cents)**

The Coptic Church celebrates the feast of the Assumption of the Body of Virgin Mary on August 22. Father Matta sees in the event 'a supreme act of reverence on the part of heaven' and he takes the occasion to discuss the Orthodox doctrine of honoring the bodies of the saints which does not stem from a vacuum, but has its biblical and historical basis:

**1. *The Body of Moses and the body of the Virgin***

Commenting on the words of St. Paul, "*But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance: which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the Spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.*" (2 Cor 3:7-9), Father Matta asks,

"For if the face of Moses shone when he received mere words written by the finger of God, . . . how much more was the glory which came over the body of the Virgin when she received in her womb the very Word of God, the Son of God Himself. . . .?"

"If God had taken such care to undertake personally the burial of Moses and to assign to the Archangel Michael the task of guarding the body . . . how much greater care was given by God and Christ Himself to the body of the Virgin after her death—the body which obtained a permanent descent of the Holy Spirit, a fullness of grace, a special overshadowing by the power of the Most High, and finally the dwelling of the Word of God for nine months in her womb?"

2. *Honoring the body of the Virgin is part of our belief in eschatology.*

Its assumption is "a state of transfiguration in which the body was carried on the hands of angelic powers in preparation for a resurrection fulfilled or to be fulfilled there." Since the transfiguration day, Christ continued to pour out His light on the bodies of saints. Father Matta gave examples of this heavenly light in the lives of the Saints Macarius, Sesoës, Pambo, Arsenius and Joseph the Great. By commemorating the assumption of the Virgin's body and by honoring the bodies of saints the Church is truly glorifying the Lord in His saints.

*Footnotes*

1. Origen: Against Celsus, VIII:22 (ANF, vol IV, p. 647)
2. *Coptic Church Review* has been translating some of the works of Father Matta El-Meskeen starting with its first issue. The following articles dealt with the liturgical year:
  - Resurrection. Vol 1, No. 1
  - Feast of the Martyrs. Vol 1, No. 3
  - Epiphany or the Day of the Lights. Vol 1, No. 4
  - The Holy Fast and its Desirable Fruits. Vol 2, No. 1
  - The Holy Virgin in Church Theology. Vol 4, No. 2
3. Homily on Pentecost. In: N & PNF, second series, Vol VII, p. 383.

*Books of Father Matta El-Meskeen may be obtained from:*

St. Mark & St. Pishoy Coptic Orthodox Church  
P.O. Box 291  
Roselle, Ill. 60172

## ***PRAYER OF THE HEART***

*By Fr. George A. Maloney, S.J. 206 pp. Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana; 1981. \$6.95 (Hardcover)*

The last decade has witnessed a tremendous influx of new books dealing with prayer. Although this may reflect a widespread hunger for a deeper spiritual life, the huge number itself means that this hunger has not been satisfied. It is a pity that most of the modern spiritual books have tried to work on the psychological structure of man, giving him a mental picture of spiritual life, or leading him into an empty aimless meditation. In either case the human soul is left with the same old cry of St. Augustine, 'Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it may repose in Thee.'

The problem with the modern spiritual writers is that they try to search for and lead people to a God whom they do not know. God is known through His revelation. It is upon Scripture that the early Church Fathers based their life of prayer. Father George Maloney is one of few Catholics recognized for basing their spiritual teaching on the early Fathers, particularly the Desert Fathers. This is evident in all his books. In 'Prayer of the Heart' he deals mainly with the spirituality of those early Fathers.

After giving a historical review of the development of contemplative prayer among the early Fathers and the Eastern churches (Chapter 1), Father Maloney concentrates on the elements essential for a life of prayer. Faithful to the tradition of the Desert Fathers most of the elements he gave are actually steps in the ascetic discipline which is the basis for every spiritual life. Under the title 'Instant Nervana,' he describes how the Fathers cautioned against psychic phenomena like visions, voices and levitations. 'They were very wary that such phenomena never be construed as a sign of sanctity or even of progress in prayer . . . Poverty of spirit and humility should be the true test of growth in prayer, not how "high" one gets in prayer.' (Chapter 7)

The ascent towards God begins with a descent into oneself. The Desert Fathers started by flight into the silence and solitude of the desert. Father Maloney states that we also are called to flee away from the vain cares of the "world, the flesh and the devil" and enter into an interior desert; we must learn to carve out some segment of our busy days for silence and solitude. Silence will lead us to spiritual poverty, or humility, where we stand emptied before the richness of God.

In order to reach the state of constant prayer, which the Fathers called 'prayer of the heart', they had to obtain purity of heart, and that they obtained through ascetical practices aimed at uprooting evils and developing the Christian virtues. (Chapter 5). Christ promised that those who are pure of heart will see God. But the ascetical practices act only in synergism with the Holy Spirit, or as Father Maloney puts it, 'All the ascetical practices, handed down to us by these Desert Fathers, have meaning only insofar as they are aids to bring out true love of God in our hearts.' (Chapter 3).

One of the basic ascetic practices which was stressed by Father Maloney, because most of the desert Fathers spent their whole lives dwelling on it, is the cultivation of a lively sense of compunction, a feeling of deep sorrow for sin which culminates in the gift of tears. As the Cross has been essential for Resurrection, compunction is an aid to remain reverently and lovingly in the presence of God in constant prayer (Chapter 4).

Although the whole book deals with Jesus Prayer as an aspect of the Prayer of the Heart, Chapter 6 deals specifically with it, and I wonder how the author successfully managed to give in a short chapter the scriptural, historical and theological basis of the Jesus prayer. In the Old Testament the Jews had a

special reverence for the name of God, which abided in the Temple and was frequently called upon in the Psalms. In the New Testament, there was no other name than 'Jesus Christ,' by which men could be saved (Acts 4:12), the name before which every knee should bend in adoration (Phil. 2:9-11). What was known later as the Jesus Prayer had its origin in the cry of the blind man (Luke 18:38) and in the humble prayer of the publican (Luke 18:13). The Kyrie eleison of the Christian liturgies throughout the ages is a form of this prayer. The Desert Fathers advised their disciples to have the name of Jesus always on their lips. Father Maloney then elaborated on the renaissance of the Jesus Prayer in the Byzantine monasteries of Mount Athos in the 13th, 14th and 18th centuries till it was finally known to the whole world through the *Philokalia* and *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Although the Byzantine Fathers gave the prayer its fixed formula, '*Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*,' they emphasized techniques for the prayer related to posture and breathing, in which was seen an influence of Muslim mysticism and spirituality of the Far East and which led to misuse of the prayer. But the book failed to follow the history of the Jesus Prayer where it originated, in the desert of Egypt, and where it has always survived without interruption. Its survival was ensured by its incorporation into the liturgy of the Divine Office.<sup>1</sup>

After the historical review of the Jesus Prayer, Father Maloney moves to what is actually a contemplative prayer on the name of Jesus and how the reverent pronouncing of the sacred name, preceded by self-purification, can bring Christ alive to our hearts, our streets, our work and our families, and is no longer experienced only as an object in heaven, in the Eucharist, or existing outside of us. The name of Jesus leads us to the Holy Spirit who pours in our hearts His gifts and fruits (Gal. 5:22), and to the Father because 'he who sees me, sees the Father.' (Jn. 14:9)

Referring frequently to Scripture and to the Fathers, and trying to give modern application to these teachings in order to aid the modern man in reaching a deeper life of prayer, I think the main value of the book is to point towards the richness of the sources and to prove that the heights of spirituality reached by the Desert Fathers can, by the grace of God, be ours in the 20th century.

#### Footnote

1. For more detailed study of the Jesus Prayer and the Divine Office, see: Fr. Matta El-Meskeen: *Spiritual Insights into the Daily Office of the Coptic Church*; in Coptic Church Review, Vol. 1, No. 2, 53-59.

## ***The Way of the Heart***

### ***Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry***

*By Henri Nouwen, 96 pp. The Seabury Press, New York; 1981. \$7.95 (hard-cover)*

The fact that two famous spiritual authors are writing, nearly simultaneously, about the Desert Fathers means that their spirituality has started to gain ground in the West. Although it is much smaller and contains less material than Father Maloney's book, the 'Way of the Heart' is arranged in a more systematic way which is easy to follow. Commenting on the lives of St. Anthony and Arsenius, Father Nouwen summarized the spirituality of the desert in three virtues—solitude, silence and prayer. He took them from the words heard by St. Arsenius at the beginning of his desert life, 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, and pray always . . .'

Father Nouwen managed skillfully to detect our modern vices in the light of the desert spirituality. He showed how their solitude can be a treatment of anger and greed; how silence can guard the fire of the Holy Spirit within; and how both solitude and silence find their true meaning in unceasing prayer. One of the worst enemies of modern 'spiritual' man which Father Nouwen unmasked is the 'prayer of the mind', where prayer is reduced to speaking to or thinking about God. He contrasted this type of prayer to the 'prayer of the heart' which was practised by the Desert Fathers. This is characterised by short repetitive prayers, and by an unceasing and all-inclusive prayer.

Father Nouwen writes, "The Desert Fathers, who lived in the Egyptian desert during the fourth and fifth centuries, can offer us a very important perspective on our life as ministers, living at the end of the twentieth century." The book dealt artfully with the three virtues discussed, yet alone they cannot be a summary of desert spirituality. We cannot ignore the other ascetic disciplines, especially humility and fasting which all the Fathers without exception practised and which were basic in the spirituality of St. Anthony and St. Arsenius in particular. The modern reader who tries to follow their life of prayer without these disciplines may end in a self-centered spirituality.

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### ***RAISING OF INCENSE***

*114 Pages. Coptic Orthodox Publications, P.O. Box 42689, L.A., CA 90042; 1980, \$2.00 (add 10% for postage).*

The book which is printed in three columns (Coptic, English and Arabic) includes the Saturday Vesper Praise, the Raising of Incense for Vespers and Matins and all frequently used doxologies. Intended to be of use for the Saturday evening worship, but it contains a wealth of material for those interested in the study of the Coptic Liturgy.

### ***COPTOLOGIA: STUDIA COPTICA ORTHODOXA***

*133 Pages. A publication of St. Mark's Coptic Canadian Cultural Center, Agincourt, Ontario; 1981. \$4.50.*

This volume contains the full text of 'The Copts and Christian Civilization' by Professor A. S. Atiya (reviewed in the Journal Vol. 2, No. 1), several articles on ancient monasticism, Coptic art and heritage, and the recent accomplishments of the Copts in North America.

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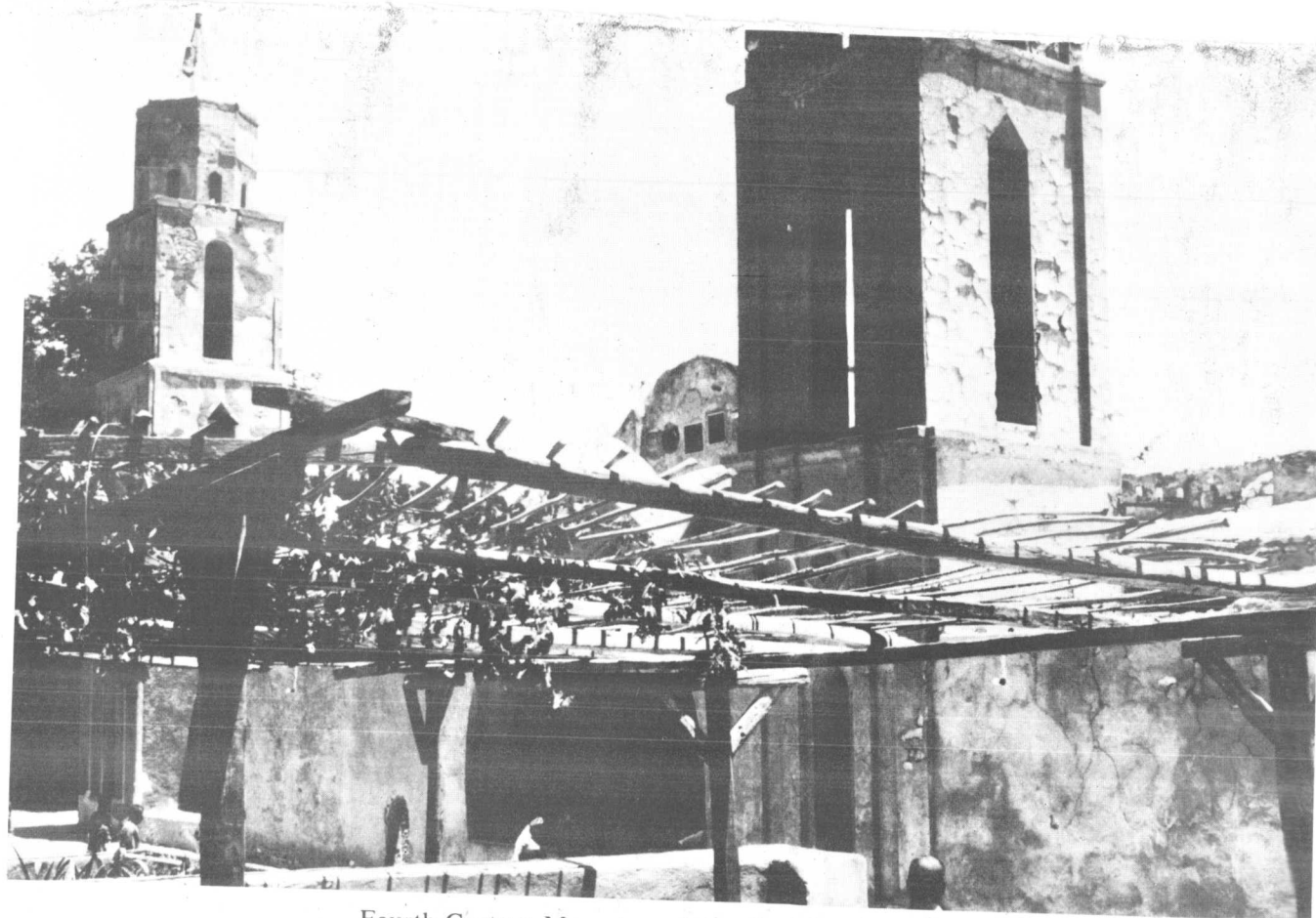
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