

Coptic Orthodox Church History

Contributed by Fr. Marcos A. Marcos
 Wednesday, 15 August 2007
 Last Updated Tuesday, 05 May 2015

Name And Origin:

The Copts are the original Egyptians, and the word "Copt" itself is derived from the Greek word "Aegyptus" which means Egypt. The Copts are the descendants of the ancient Egyptians. They are considered one of the most anthropologically pure races in the world.

The Coptic Era:

When people think of Egypt, they usually think of ancient Egypt with its pyramids. Then they jump over to the Islamic period represented by the forest of minarets which a person sees in Cairo today. However, in between these two extremes, there is a modest bridge. This bridge does not pass over a valley of darkness where the Copts resided in complete isolation. On the contrary, this era is considered one of the luminous periods in the national and ecclesiastical history of Egypt.

Strictly speaking, the purely Coptic Christian period extends for about six centuries at the dawn of the Christian era. In Egyptian history, this is a tiny fraction but not at all insignificant. From the cultural standpoint, that short span was epoch-making in the development of Egyptian ideas and ideals. Indeed it stands for what is rightly called "Coptic Civilization".

THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Founder:

St. Mark, a disciple of African origin and the writer of the earliest Gospel, came to Egypt ushering in the dawn of Christian faith. The year of his arrival in the famous Capital of Egypt, Alexandria, cannot be established with certainty. Some sources put his entry in Egypt as early as 48 A.D. Others put it in 55, 58 and even as late as 61 A.D. However, the consensus of opinion puts the date of his martyrdom in Alexandria in 68 A.D. In that short period St. Mark was able to win many converts and to found the Church in Egypt. Since that time, Christianity spread like fire throughout the country. The main reason for this was the fact that the Egyptian has always been religiously minded. The ancient Egyptian searching mind was always exploring the domain of religion, and ultimately arrived at certain tenets and beliefs which were later identified with the theory and sublime teachings of the Christian religion.

Church Identity through Persecution:

The Egyptians or the Copts accepted Christianity so very rapidly to the extent that the Romans had to exercise a series of persecutions in an attempt to suppress the growth of a religion which openly defied the divinity of the Emperor. The edict of 202 A.D. decreed that Christian conversion should be stopped at all costs. The edict of 250 A.D. decreed that every citizen should carry at all times a certificate issued by the local authorities testifying that he had offered sacrifice to the gods. Those who refused to conform were tortured with unprecedented ferocity. Some were beheaded, others were thrown to the lions and others were burnt alive. All were subjected to even innovated veracious torture regardless of age or sex. The Catechetical School of Alexandria was closed by order of the authorities, though its members continued to meet in other secret places. At one time, the number of bishops was restricted by the State to three. The consummation of the age of persecution is considered by the Copts to be during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284-305). So severe was the mass execution and the savage torture of the Copts that they took the day of Diocletian's military election as Emperor to mark the beginning of the era of the Coptic martyrs. That very day marked the start of the Coptic Calendar known in the Western world as Anno Martyrum (A.M.) or the year of the Martyrs.

It was in the midst of this ruthless execution and torture that Egypt's Church flourished beyond recognition until it assumed its definitive form in the course of the second century. In other words, the third century saw the Coptic Church with a great hierarchy ranging from the Patriarch in Alexandria down to the modest priest and the monks who lived out in the Eastern and Western Deserts. The rise of this great hierarchy conterminously with the Roman persecution resulted in the identification of the Coptic people with their own Church in Alexandria. This tradition persisted and even became more prominent when, in a subsequent age and for other reasons, the Byzantines resuscitated Coptic persecution.

The Coptic Church in History:

All through history and particularly during the Coptic Era, the Coptic Church played quite a significant role in shaping and defining Christian thought and doctrines. The contribution of the Coptic Church to world Christianity can be briefly summarized in the following four movements:

(1) Theological Scholarship and the Catechetical School:

Before Christianity, Alexandria was famous for having the largest library and museum in the world. That compound was actually the headquarters of the well known School of Alexandria. It housed millions of scrolls of papyrus which were said to have held all the knowledge of ancient scholarship. It was established by Ptolemy Soter in 323 B.C. In that school, seventy legendary scholars from the Jewish community translated the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek in 270 B.C. It was a monumental work that stood the test of time and is known as the "Septuagint." Those scholars also established the order in which the books of the O.T., including the "Apocrypha", are arranged.

The school started as a predominantly scientific and literary institution. It then developed into a philosophical and theological university. The Catechetical School of Alexandria came in direct succession to it. This was the earliest important institution for theological education in Christian antiquity. Its deans, teachers, and graduates were responsible for what could be called the philosophization of Christian creed and for the most monumental works of exegesis. They defined Christianity in its final form for all generations to come.

The first known dean of the school was Pantaenus (died 190 A.D.), followed by Clement of Alexandria who made a real effort to successfully convert educated Greeks to Christianity. Next came Origen (about 215 A.D.) who was a biblical scholar and philosopher. He wrote lengthy commentaries on almost every book in the Old and New Testaments. His homilies are known to be the most ancient example of Christian preaching. Origen was succeeded by Dionysius of Alexandria (The Great) who later became the Patriarch of the Church (246-264 A.D.). Another distinguished dean of the School was Didymus the Blind. He lost his sight when he was four years old. However, this handicap did not deter him from acquiring the vision of the mind and the soul. He mastered grammar, rhetoric, poetry, philosophy, mathematics and music. He knew by heart both the Old and the New Testaments. Among his pupils were St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. Jerome, Palladius and Rufinus the historian. In his care for educating the blind, he became the first one in history to devise a system of engraved writing. By the fourth century, Coptic Alexandria had indeed become the seat of Christian Learning for the whole world.

(2) The Ecumenical Movement:

Early in the fourth century, and amid the fierce storm of persecution of the Copts by Diocletian, the Coptic Church was subjected to another storm rising from within. This storm was more dangerous to the Church than the first. It was the Arian heresy. The Coptic Patriarchs ex-communicated Arius successively stripping him from his priestly office. However, he continued preaching his heresy and, through his eloquence, he won many converts including two Libyan bishops and the Nicomedian bishop Eusebius.

The Arian heresy spread throughout all Egypt, Libya, Palestine and Asia Minor, and reached the ears of Constantine. The quarrel between the old patriarch and Arius was blazing furiously to the extent that there was bloodshed in the streets of Alexandria and Nicomedia. The Emperor summoned all of the bishops (about 1800) to meet in Nicea, Asia Minor to discuss the dispute and settle it once- and-for-all. It was the first Ecclesiastical Council with imperial authority and sanction. Because the heresy had not yet reached Europe, only six bishops represented the Western Church. The rest of the 318 bishops came from the East including the Metropolitan of India which was outside the Empire. It was difficult to overlook the signs of disfigurement and mutilation in many of these bishops who had been victims of the persecution of Diocletian, the predecessor of Constantine. The bishops of the Council represented all the varying traditions of Christianity.

The first order of business was to reach a verdict in the conflict between Abba Alexandros and Arius. Therefore Arius was called to present the nature of his beliefs. Having set them into chants and music, he unexpectedly started chanting accompanied by music and Alexandrian dance bands. Athanasius in turn, who was chosen by the Coptic Patriarch to reply, presented a close-knit argument, and in great eloquence stated step by step all the follies that result from the Arian folkloric lyric: "There was a time when the Son was not." Athanasius' argument swayed the Council members to the Orthodox position including the Emperor who commended him for the way he marshaled all his forces to present the Apostolic faith and to refute Arius' argument. After that heated debate a creed was called for. It was Athanasius again who formulated the text of the creed which was accepted unanimously by the Council.

The Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) was the beginning of an era in the history of the Church that could be defined as the age of the Ecumenical Councils. As mentioned earlier, those Councils set the basis of the Christian Creed. In all of them, the role of the Copts was supreme, and their theological and philosophical contribution to Christian doctrine and dogma was unsurpassed. The Ecumenical Movement ended with the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.)

(3) The Monastic Movement:

This particular movement is going to be dealt with in some detail as the general populace has very little knowledge of the roots of monasticism. Besides, there are some misconceptions about it in this day and age, especially in the Western world. Egypt is known to be the Motherland of Christian Monasticism. As Professor Atiya calls it "It is truly the gift of Egypt to Christendom" Monasticism sprang into existence in Egypt as early as the second half of the third century. In a few decades, it spread over the whole Christian world. The characteristics which shaped Coptic monasticism are:

- a) The urge to pray without ceasing,
- b) The hunger to meditate on the word of God, and
- c) The disciplining of one's self by fasting, vigils, celibacy, the subduing of fleshly desires, willful poverty and the renunciation of worldly concerns.

Most historians consider St. Antony (251-356) to be the first to renounce the world and retire to the eastern desert of Egypt. It is true that, as a movement, monasticism started by St. Antony. However, long before that, organized flights to the deserts of Egypt took place. Just as an example, "Acta Sanctorum" tells us that in the second century, wealthy Alexandrian Christian called Frantionius decided to reject the world. He was able to persuade seventy others to accompany him. They all went to the Nytria desert and there they led a life of prayer and contemplation.

The main motive behind Coptic monasticism could be summarized in one word "LOVE". When a person loves God with all his heart, he wants to be alone with him all the time. He would not concern himself with anything or anyone but Him (I Corinthians 7:32 - 35), In his love, he sacrifices all to enjoy his oneness with God, to attain the purity of heart and thus to reach perfection in God.

For some others, there might have been another motive, namely to suffer with Christ and for His sake. St. Paul taught: "for to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also suffer for His sake." (Phil. 1:29). As he retires to the desert, the monk seems to be saying: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." (Phil. 3:10).

Before the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, Christians were fought against, severely tortured and mass martyred for their faith. Now, after the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., the Christians took on the fight themselves. The monks, torturing their bodies in the burning heat of the desert, and practicing severe ascetic disciplines, became the successors of the martyrs. One can almost hear them saying: "For your sake, we are killed all day long." (Rom. 8:36). In this regard, St. John Chrysostom says that the "martyr is tortured for few days to win the crown of martyrdom, but the monk suffers severely from his self-inflicted ascetic torture all his life."

The Development of Coptic Monasticism:

There are three stages in the development of Coptic monasticism:

- a) Antonian Monachism: This is the first stage whereby a pious Christian lives in seclusion, a life of asceticism and austerity, disciplining the body to elevate the soul.

There must have lived many hermits in the deserts of Egypt before St. Antony. However, the one that is well known is St. Paul of Thebes (Lurer) who entered the desert in about 218 A.D. In a miraculous way, God fed him by means of a raven which brought him half a loaf of bread daily. St. Paul the hermit died a natural death at the age of 113 shortly after St. Antony met with him. This is a well-known story in monastic history. Nevertheless, the most defined monachism is that of St. Antony whose biography St. Athanasius wrote himself. While still a young man of 19 years of age, Antony took to heart the words of our Lord to the rich young man: "If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor... and come follow Me." (Matthew 19:21). He sold all his inheritance giving some to his sister and the rest to the poor. He then went to the eastern desert to attain perfection through a life of asceticism in complete seclusion. He kept pushing further and further into the desert with greater austerity and longer fasting. According to St. Athanasius, Antony's combat with demons grew more spectacular. All through his life in the desert, he descended to the Nile Valley only twice. The first time was in 311 A.D. It was enough for him to appear with his long beard and illuminated face among the tortured Christians during the time of Maximinus' persecution to strengthen their faith and vanquish their fear. The second time was in 338 A.D, to fight the remnants of the Arian heresy. St. Antony's fame spread far and wide. This brought him many disciples who sought his spiritual guidance, and it led to the second stage of development of the monastic life.

- b) Collective Ermitism or Semi-Anchoritism: St. Antony's disciples continued to lead solitary lives in the neighborhood of his cave. As their number grew larger, there was a great necessity to have many settlements of anchorites in that area of the desert. Each settlement congregated around one of those great and rare holy masters for reasons of security both spiritual and physical, These settlements multiplied not only to cover a large area in the eastern desert toward the Red

Sea, but they also spread westward and southward. However, the largest of them was the one around the cave of St. Antony who had attained the summits of personal holiness. In this development the solitary and communal lives balanced one another. During the week, each monk lived alone in his cave or cell. On Saturdays and Sundays, they all congregated in the church for common prayers, vespers, Eucharistic liturgy, agape and lessons in spiritual life. This type of monasticism allowed for both personal prayers, meditations and exercises in austerity, as well as corporate prayers and worship.

c) Pachomian Koinonia or Cenobitism: The third stage of development was not a natural evolution from the second. While the second stage was progressing, and the number of settlements was being multiplied, a new chapter in the history of monasticism was being written by St. Pachomius (290-346). His life story is a most fascinating one. He was born a pagan and as a young man, he served in the army of Constantine. During his combats, he was deeply touched by the communities of Christians. They, in dedication and love, served the soldiers, washed their feet and gave them food in spite of the harshness with which they were treated by them. The goodness of those Christians won Pachomius to Christianity. He himself became an anchorite, a disciple of the famous hermit Palamon. This abbot trained Pachomius vigorously in the art of self-inflicted torture of the body to attain the purity of heart. The combination of his training in army discipline and in spiritual austerity, coupled with his belief that the aim of a monk is continual prayer, were the factors which collectively led him to inaugurate the third and last stage in the development of Coptic monasticism, namely, the Pachomian Cenobitism.

By the time St. Pachomius died (346 A.D.), a large number of monasteries had been established accommodating communities of monks spreading to all other monastic centers and following the Pachomian rule. Hardy the historian estimates conservatively the number of monks in the Egyptian deserts at the end of the fourth century to be between 100,000 and 200,000 out of a population not exceeding 7.5 million inhabitants. The rule of St. Pachomius is indeed a landmark in the history of Christian monasticism. Professor Atiya, a distinguished historian writes in his book "History of Eastern Christianity: "The general trend of the Pachomian system showed the soldier and the holy man combined in one person. Every detail of the monk's activity by day or night was prescribed by the legislator: the brother's dress, his food, the hours and manner of his sleep, his travels, his hours of worship and a penal code to be rigorously enforced against the defaulters. Yet Pachomius was no inhuman giant who imposed a merciless regime on his followers ... A monk must curb the body, but it was unnecessary for him to destroy it in pursuit of heaven."

Coptic monasticism became known all over the world mainly because of the biography St. Athanasius wrote about St. Antony. As a result, pious men from many parts of the world flocked to these cenobite monasteries to sit at the feet of those great spiritual giants and learn from them the art of monasticism. Among those were Greeks, Romans, Cappadocians, Libyans, Nubians, Ethiopians and many others. Each nationality was designated a special quarter in each monastery with a fellow citizen as an abbot guide. There were no barriers based on race, culture, color or language. The vastness of the Egyptian desert became but one school of Coptic spirituality and mysticism for the entire world. Some of the greatest personalities of that era were attracted to the Egyptian deserts to see these terrestrial saints and to follow in their footsteps. Among these were St. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, Sts. Jerome and Rufinus the Italians, the Cappadocian father St. Basil the Great who introduced monasticism into Byzantia, St. John Cassian who carried Coptic Monasticism in France, and many others.

Someone said that monasticism for the Church is like the foundation for the building. The deeper and stronger the foundation is, the more the building can rise high and solid. Ecclesiastical history attests to this reality when it tells us that at times of monastic strength in Egypt, the Church was strong. Through their continual prayers, devotions and meditations, the monks make of their monasteries the powerhouse of the Church. It is a fact that the Coptic Church has suffered a great deal throughout its long history at the hands of Greeks, Romans, Muslims and western missionaries, but through God's grace, the strength of Coptic monasticism has kept the Church still standing as a monument to original Apostolic Orthodox Christianity.

(4) Coptic Mission:

In contrast to Judaism, Christianity is a missionary religion. The example and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, the preaching of the Disciples to Jews and Gentiles and the mere fact of St. Mark's preaching in Egypt spoke to the Copts very emphatically about the missionary character of the Church. Therefore, the missionary movement began in Egypt early in the first steps of Christianity through the first converts. It followed three channels simultaneously:

a) Individual and Group Witnesses and Missionaries: Here the Copts excelled. The accounts of such individuals from St. Athanasius the Apostolic to the simple nurse accompanying the Roman Legions attest to the zeal and dedication of the Copts to spread the good news.

St. Athanasius, the Pope of Alexandria was exiled five times because of his adamant opposition to the Arian heresy. Two of his exiles were in Europe, one began in Constantinople and ended in Trier and the second was in Rome. In each exile he preached Orthodox Christianity to both Christians and Gentiles, and he introduced to the West the highly developed

monastic rule as well as the spirituality of the Fathers of the Egyptian deserts.

The story of the Theban legion (from Thebes, present day Lur in Upper Egypt) is a spectacular example of witnessing to the Christian faith. Maximian, the second in command to Emperor Diocletian, ordered the legion to camp at the border of Gaul (France) in preparation to crush a rebellion there (285 A.D.) The legion camped in present day Switzerland. The night before the attack, Maximian ordered the legion to accompany him to the pagan temple to pray to the gods. The Coptic soldiers unanimously refused to obey and declared that they were Christians, a declaration that angered Maximian. He stood them in file and had them decimated (i.e. every tenth man killed) hoping to intimidate the rest. The remaining soldiers met together and wrote a letter to him which they all signed. They wrote:

"Great Caesar - we are your soldiers, and at the same time we are God's slaves. We owe you our military service, but our prime allegiance we owe to God. From you we receive our daily wages; from Him our eternal reward. Great Caesar, we cannot obey any order if it runs counter to God's commands. If your orders coincide with God's commands we will certainly obey; if not, 'we ought to obey God rather than man.' (Act 5:29) for our loyalty to Him surpasses all other loyalties. We are not rebels; if we were, we would defend ourselves for we have our weapons. But we prefer to die upright than to live stained. As Christians we will serve you. But we will not relinquish our faith in our Lord, and this we openly declare."

This steadfastness of the whole legion infuriated Caesar and he ordered the Roman soldiers to wipe out the whole legion, which they did. Pere Cheneau the historian described the event in this way:

"Thus they were martyred.... It was a mighty holocaust; an unparalleled massacre, the plains were drunk with blood and the bodies strewn to the winds. But by being willing to make the supreme sacrifice, the men of the Theban Legion proved that their faithfulness to their Heavenly Lord and King surpassed their valour as soldiers in the army of the temporal ruler."

An accompanying nurse named Verena witnessed all this. After a few days of prayers and meditation, she came to the realization that God, in His wisdom, had spared her to do His work as a missionary to those pagans. Therefore, she spent the rest of her life preaching Christ to the people of Switzerland. In addition, she taught them basic hygiene. To this day she is portrayed in her icon as having a water jug in one hand and a comb in the other.

Coptic missionaries reached as far as the British Isles long before the arrival of St. Augustine of Canterbury in 597 A.D. Stanley Lane-Poole the well known historian wrote:

"We do not know yet how much we in the British Isles owe to these remote hermits. It is more than probable that to them we are indebted for the first preaching of the Gospel in England, where, till the coming of Augustine, the Egyptian monastic rule prevailed. But more important is the belief that Irish Christianity, the great civilizing agent of the early Middle Ages among the northern nations, was the child of the Egyptian Church. Seven Egyptian monks are buried at Desert Uldith, and there is much in the ceremonies and architecture of Ireland in the earliest time that reminds one of still earlier Christian remains in Egypt. Every one knows that the handicraft of the Irish monks in the ninth and tenth centuries far excelled anything that could be found elsewhere in Europe; and if the Byzantine-looking decoration ... can be traced to the influence of Egyptian missionaries, we have more to thank the Copts for than has been imagined."

Ecclesiastical history is impregnated with captivating accounts of Coptic Christians who preached Christianity in north, west and south Africa, Arabia, Persia, India, and Europe. Archaeological findings support these accounts which were thought to be legendary tales by early historians.

b) Missionaries Appointed to Mission-Fields: Since the Church's inception in Egypt, some early Coptic Christian converts were commissioned to mission fields. Tradition tells us that St. Mark, in his missionary trip from Alexandria to Pentapolis (the five north-western nations of Africa), took with him some Copts to help him preach to the people of those nations.

Through the writings of the ecclesiastical historian Eusebins, bishop of Caesurae (260-340 A.D.) it becomes clear that missionary work was an organized movement in the Church and its Catechetical school. Missionaries were appointed and mission fields were assigned to them. He wrote:

"Now at that time there was a man of great zeal for learning named Pantaenus. He displayed such ardent love and zeal for the divine word that he was appointed as herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations of the East."

In the course of the third and fourth centuries, and with the rise of monasticism, many Pachomian monks in the southern parts of Egypt were sent to Nubia as missionaries. Those, along with some Coptic Christians who fled from the Roman persecution, went southward up the Nile Valley to win converts to Christ. It is intriguing to know that the whole kingdom was officially converted to Orthodox Christianity in 559 A.D.

However, the most spectacular event in Coptic mission work was the Christianization of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) at the hands of Frumentius. He and his brother Aedesius were Coptic Christians residing in Tyre. On one of their trading trips to India,

they had a ship-wreck near Axoum, the Capital of Abyssinia. They were taken to the king who appointed Aedesius as his cup-bearer and Frumentius as his personal secretary and the tutor of the young crown-prince Aeizanas. Frumentius taught Aeizanas the four Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic and religion- Christianity). When Aeizanas became king, he was converted to Christianity and decreed Christianity as the official religion of the land. Immediately Frumentius went to Alexandria, to St. Athanasius the Patriarch asking him to send a bishop to establish the Church there. St. Athanasius chose Frumentius and ordained him, giving him the name of Bishop Salama . Since then, the Ethiopian Church looks at the Coptic Church as its Mother-Church.

c) Pilgrims to the Alexandrian Church: As mentioned earlier, Christians from almost all the nations of the known world at that time, came to Egypt either to study or to sit at the feet of those spiritual giants, the Fathers of the Egyptian deserts. On returning to their lands, those students and pilgrims imported the spirituality, thought, dogma, practice and monastic rule of the Orthodox Alexandrine Church. There, they wrote books (like John Cassian) and established monasteries, churches, dioceses and even theological schools. In other words, those pilgrims became indigenous missionaries of the Coptic Church in their nations and among their people.

THE COPTS UNDER THE ARAB RULE

a) Between Chalcedon (451) and the Arab Conquest (642): The first schism in the Apostolic Church occurred at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The schism appeared to be the result of a theological dispute between the Eastern Churches (Orthodox) and the Western Churches (Roman Catholic) regarding the Nature of Christ. The Copts were branded as "Monophysites", Rome and Constantinople as "Diophysites." However, the real reason behind the dispute was more of a political nature rather than a theological one. The concealed reason was for the Western Church to transfer the Papacy from Alexandria to Rome. To be sure, the present dialogue between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox resulted in the agreement of the two Churches regarding the nature of Christ; although other theological developments are still being discussed (i.e. Purgatory, Immaculate Conception...etc.).

The aftermath of Chalcedon was one of the saddest periods in the history of Coptic Christian antiquity. The Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria was deposed and exiled by the Western civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The Byzantines installed an Imperial Byzantine Patriarch for the See of Alexandria. This infuriated the Copts and they retaliated by electing a native rival Orthodox Patriarch. Consequently, the See of Alexandria was split between two Patriarchs, the Melkite or the Royalist Chalcedonian from Constantinople, and the native Jacobite or Monophysite who does not recognize Chalcedon. The Byzantines, aided by the civil authorities, persecuted the Copts very severely massacring them even as they worshiped inside their churches. All attempts to reconcile the two lines failed until the Arab invasion of Egypt when a new chapter in the history of the Copts' oppression was about to be written.

b) The Arab Conquest (642 A.D.): Amr ibn al-As. the general of the Arab army during the Caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, after conquering Persia and taking over Syria in 636 and seizing Jerusalem in 638, turned toward Egypt to invade it. With 20,000 Arab horsemen, he was able to take over the Eastern cities and the Byzantine strongholds in the Delta reaching to the fortress of Babylon. At that time Byzantia had appointed a man called Cyrus to be both civil governor and a Melkite (Royalist) Patriarch. He took over the Patriarchate from the Orthodox Patriarch Anba Senjamin who fled to the desert. When Cyrus heard of the Muslim capture of the Eastern cities and found that the siege of Babylon was prolonged, he surrendered the fortress in 641. Shortly thereafter, the Arabs moved to the Capital city of Alexandria. Cyrus was reinstated by Byzantia as governor of Alexandria. Through treachery, he surrendered that city as well to the Arabs hoping that he would be rewarded and be instated by the Arabs as Patriarch of the Coptic Church of Egypt. His dream did not come true.

By 642 Egypt had passed from the hands of the Constantinople Emperors, into the hands of the Arab Muslims, neither was Egyptian. The city of Alexandria with its 4,000 palaces, 4,000 public baths, 400 theaters and 40,000 rich Jewish settlers, was briefly recaptured by Byzantia from the Mediterranean Sea, but then taken back by the Arabs. To avoid such incidents in the future, Amr moved his capital from Alexandria to al-Fustat (Old Cairo) and ordered the city of Alexandria to be burnt. With it, the great library and Museum of Alexandria went into flames. It is fair to say that this particular incident is a controversial subject among historians.

Throughout these thirteen centuries, the Copts had survived under Arab rule all kinds of treatment , from considerable tolerance to severe persecution, depending on the ruler at the time. In the beginning of the Muslim rule and for many centuries afterwards, Coptic Christians were given the choice of either adopting Islam, or unconditional surrender and payment of tribute, or the sword (i.e. to be killed). The Copts had seen many of their own being martyred, or converting to Islam. Still however, by divine grace they overcame their tribulations with a strong faith and a zeal for spirituality and the service of God. The twentieth century has seen quite a renaissance in all aspects of Church ministry.

c) The Coptic Church at Present: Today, the Copts number about six million, and the Coptic liturgy is still celebrated in its original form. Three liturgies are used in the Coptic Church, the liturgy of St. Cyril, the liturgy of St. Basil and the Liturgy of St. Gregory. According to tradition, the liturgy of St. Cyril is originally that of St. Mark. It was transmitted orally to the

following generations and finally recorded by St. Cyril the Great in the Fifth Century. It is regarded as the greatest, the oldest and the most complete liturgical text in existence. As a work of religious literature, it is supreme.

The Coptic Church is experiencing this century quite a significant revival in many aspects of its life; in its ministry both at home and abroad, in education and in ecumenism. Institutions have been erected in Egypt to present to the world facilities for research in the Science of Coptology. Youth movement and Sunday Schools have been working with great zeal to help both children and their parents to live in the world but not to be of the world. Two new bishoprics were established for these ministries, one for the youth, the other for religious and theological education. The number of the logical seminaries has increased tremendously all over Egypt and the curricula has been highly developed to reflect the advancement of research in the fields of Patristics, Religious Education ...etc. and to discuss the new trends in today's theology. St. Didymus institute for the Blind prepares chanters who constitute an important ministry in the celebration of the Liturgy. Moreover, other Coptic Orthodox theological seminaries were established in the USA and Australia. New ministries such as the "Diaconia" project have been introduced to cater to the needs of people in rural areas.

The Coptic Church's missionaries were sent in the past few decades to many African countries and a bishop was ordained to look after this ministry. It is noticeable that, with the fall of colonialism, the Africans look to Egypt for religious leadership and spiritual guidance, since it is the only indigenous African Church. Other churches are established in Kuwait, Libya, Lebanon, Europe, England, North and South America, the Caribbean Islands and Australia. At home new churches have been built and new monasteries and convents have been established. The number of monks and nuns has been on the increase in the past fifty years. The Church has come out of isolation to meet with other churches, both Catholic and Protestant in Ecumenical Councils. Dialogues between the Coptic Church and other Churches have been initiated and carried out by the Coptic Patriarch himself in brotherly love to work towards the achievement of the oneness of faith.

In conclusion, it is gratifying to note that many of the greatest universities of Europe and the USA have undertaken the study of many aspects of Coptic Civilization.

Bibliography:

Atiya, Aziz Suryal: A history Eastern Christianity. Krans Reprint, 1980.

Atiya, Aziz Suryal: The Coptic Encyclopedia. 8 Volumes. Macmillan, 1991.

El Masri, Iris Habib: The Story of the Copts, The True Story of Christianity in Egypt, 3 Volumes. End-Time Handmaiden, 1982.

Payne, Robert: The Holy Fire, Tire Story of the Fathers of the Eastern Church. St. Vladimir, 1980.

Eusebius of Caesaria: Ecclesiastical History (in Arabic) "Tarikh El Kaneesa"

A Monk at St. Pishoy monastery: The Story of St. Pishoy Monastery (in Arabic) "Qessat Deir El-Keddees El-Azeem El-Anba Bishoy".Anba Rowais Press, 1990.