

Coptic New Year

Contributed by H.G. Bishop Youssef
 Wednesday, 12 September 2007
 Last Updated Thursday, 24 November 2016

Blessed is God! In our time as well martyrs have come forth, and we have been made worthy to see people sacrificed for the Lord Christ, people who shed their holy blood to irrigate the entire Church. We have been made worthy to see people, advocates of piety, who are victorious, who are crowned.....and we now have these crowned ones among us. St John Chrysostom

Wishing everyone a blessed Coptic New Year!

The first day of the blessed month of Thout marks the beginning of the Coptic New Year and is the day set aside to celebrate the Feast of El-Nayrouz. On this feast day we honor those who stood and confessed their faith in the Word of God with firmness and commitment and with the totality of their lives.

The risen Lord sent His chosen disciples throughout the world with this message, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The disciples were the Lord's WITNESSES. "MARTYRS" is the Greek word for "WITNESSES." The early church thought of death as the complete and final act of witnessing. Thus the term "martyr" has come to be defined as one who witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ by dying for His name.

During the first four centuries, the Coptic Orthodox Church produced an overwhelming number of martyrs whose steadfastness and perseverance was an inspiration to all Christian believers. Martyrdom was a fact of life for those who confessed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Egypt, known as "the land of the martyrs," counted more martyrs in its midst than any other country in the world. Our early saints became legendary examples on how to be a faithful member of the Church. As early as May 8, 68 AD, St. Mark was slain on Monday following the glorious feast of Resurrection after being dragged from his feet by Roman soldiers all over Alexandria's streets and passageways.

The Copts have been persecuted by almost every ruler of Egypt. Being abused, tortured and martyred under the Romans, Byzantines, and the Moslems has only instilled dedication and courage to believers to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Upon studying Coptic persecutions, many have asked, "Why did the early Christians have to suffer?" The suffering of the Christians can be addressed with four Biblical scriptures. First, Philippians 1:19-20 tells us Christians have to suffer to glorify God. "For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or death."

Secondly, they had to suffer to prepare for the eternal Kingdom. "Which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the Kingdom of God, for which you also suffer" (II Thessalonians 1:5). Also Matthew 5:10-12 confirms this stating, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in Heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Finally, the saints had to suffer to be closer to God. "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of Glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified" (I Peter 4:14).

Those before us not only suffered, but they rejoiced in their sufferings. They prayed and endured their suffering in a steadfast way. They thanked God for their sufferings. We are told in Acts 5:40-41, "And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name."

In remembrance of these great saints, the Copts adopted a calendar called the "Calendar of Martyrs". This calendar truly honors the sacrifices of the Apostles, the disciples, and other saints of the early church. The Calendar of Martyrs sequences the years "in the year of the martyrs". The calendar began its era on August 29, 284 AD in commemoration of

those who died for their faith during the rule of Diocletian the Roman Emperor. Today, this calendar is still in use in our Coptic Liturgies and commemorates saints in all historical eras.

It has often been said that the "blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church". All of the apostles were inhumanely tortured for their faith, and severely martyred. All but one. They died testifying of their faith in the Lord Jesus: of His Gospel, His life, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension.

I pray that we always hold dear those who suffered the dark ages of persecution. Always keep near to our hearts those Christians who dwelt on the earth but were not of the earth. Those who sustained hardships, persecutions, and tribulations but continued to increased more and more. St. John Chrysostom passionately summarizes the death and dying of the fallen martyrs in this manner: The death of martyrs is encouragement to the faithful, daring of the Church, confirmation of Christianity, destruction of death, proof of the Resurrection, mocking at demons, condemnation of the devil, teaching of true wisdom and a pious way of life, instillation of disdain for present material benefits and the path of striving for the good to come, comfort in the face of the misfortunes which befall us, an inducement to patience, instruction in courage, the root and fount and mother of all blessings... The blood of martyrs nourishes the Church much much more than the moisture of dew brings gardens in bloom.

The martyrs truly professed and declared their faith;

I BELIEVE. I BELIEVE. I BELIEVE UNTIL THE VERY LAST BREATH.

May the blessings of the Lord Jesus Christ and all the martyrs be with us in this upcoming New Year!

H.G. Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States