

# **The Coptic Church's Contribution to Christianity**

## **Objectives**

To know Coptic history and to be proud of our beloved church

## **References**

- ❖ Coptic Contribution to Christianity (Dr. Aziz Suriel Atteya)
- ❖ His Holiness Pope Shenouda (Web Site of Anba Takla Church of Alexandria)

## **Scriptural Verse**

“In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord.” **(Isaiah 19: 19)**

## **Lesson Guidelines**

### **The Catechetical School of Alexandria**

- ❖ The fiery activity which flared up in the field of Biblical and theological studies must be identified with the foundation and development of the Catechetical School of Alexandria ( Primitive Christianity came to the world without formal dogmatization)
- ❖ Created as a rival to the ancient pagan Institute, which survived till 415 AD, the Catechetical School became the first great seat of Christian learning in the whole world.
- ❖ Its Scholars introduced the most illustrious divines of all time. The title of “Pope” was introduced for the first time in history long before the Bishop of Rome claimed it.
- ❖ The well-known pillars of the faith, and theologians were all graduates of this School, like Didymus the Blind (strong theologian who combated Aryanism), St. Athanasius, St. Cyril, St. Gregory, St. Basil, St. Jerome, St. Rufinus and many others

In summary, the foundation of an institutionalised system of Christian divinity was laid down within the walls of the Catechetical School of Alexandria and in the deliberations and massive writings of its theologians.

### **The Ecumenical Movement**

- ❖ This movement began with the reign of Constantine the Great, the 1<sup>st</sup> Christian Emperor who inaugurated the Ecumenical Movement against the heresies and called for a Council in Nicea in 325 AD with the Coptic leadership writing the Nicene Creed.
- ❖ The Nicene Creed Composed by St. Athanasius, and authorized by the Council, remains a triumph for Alexandrian theology to this day.

- ❖ The Council of Constantinople (381 AD) and the two at Ephesus (431 AD and 449 AD), were heavily influenced by the Coptic Church. They dealt with heresies about the Holy Spirit and the Nature of Christ.
- ❖ Again under the influence of Dioscorus, a Coptic patriarch, the formula of Cyril the Great was accepted and the heretics and their heresies were condemned.
- ❖ Theodosius II was succeeded by Marcian (A Nestorian) who condemned and exiled Dioscorus to the island of Gangra, where he died a few years later. The Copts did not recognize Chalcedon and lost their leadership and underwent a wave of merciless persecution with disastrous results on the eve of the Arab Conquest.

## **Monastic Rules**

- ❖ Monasticism is a purely Coptic gift to Christianity. After many isolated cases, like St. Paul the Hermit and others, St. Anthony the Coptic pious founded the 1<sup>st</sup> definable phase of Monastic life. Though a solitary, his fame had spread. Constantine wrote asking for his blessing. Athanasius spent two years with him and composed his biography that attracted many like St. Augustine to the life of Godliness.
- ❖ A new stage of communal life founded by St. Pachomius the Copt. Its fame spread far and wide throughout the world. Monks came to live with the fathers from many nations and St. Pachomius devised groups for each nation within every monastery.
- ❖ The planting of the Coptic system in Europe and abroad was achieved by the greatest saints like St. Athanasius who, during his exiles spoke about Coptic monasteries.
- ❖ Many other scholars and royal families resided for years in Pachomian establishments then wrote and translated many books about the rules of the Coptic and Pachomian Monasticism that has been adopted by many Monastic regimes in the west.
- ❖ The Rule of St. Pachomius continued to influence European monasticism beyond the middle Ages and persisted until the modern age.

## **Missionary Enterprise**

- ❖ All royal people who spent years in the Coptic monasteries became missionaries for the Coptic Christianity which they had experienced among Coptic religious leaders.
- ❖ Coptic relations with North Africa, notably with the Pentapolis (means five western cities), took place with the introduction of Christianity. Alexandrian helpers accompanied St. Mark there. The patriarch of the Coptic Church to this day includes the Pentapolis in his title.
- ❖ The winning of Ethiopia for the Gospel is crowning the labor of the Copts in Africa. The Copts emerged in the missionary field in Palestine, Syria, Cappadocia, Caesarea, and to some extent Arabia and Asia.

- ❖ The role of the Copts in Europe may be illustrated from the first two exiles of St. Athanasius to Constantinople and Rome where he introduced into Roman religious life, the highly developed monastic rule of the Fathers of the Egyptian deserts.
- ❖ The stream of pilgrims who came from the west to visit the Egyptian wilderness with its hermits and monks included many who may well be regarded as missionaries of Coptic religious culture, since they transplanted Coptic teachings to their native countries.
- To Switzerland a mission from Thebes, in the year 285 AD was led by St. Mauritius, who earned the crown of martyrdom for refusing to sacrifice to the heathen gods. His statue stands today in one of the public squares of Saint-Moritz.

## **Coptic Music**

In 1927 the great English musicologist Ernest Newlandsmith spent several months in Egypt listening to the old native chanters of the Coptic Church and reducing their tunes to notation. He declared that the results of his pursuit exceeded his wildest expectations and said: "This music, which has been handed down for untold centuries within the Coptic Church, should be a bridge between East and West, and place a new idiom at the disposal of the western musicians. It is a lofty, noble, and great art, especially in the element of the infinite which is lacking today."

## **Coptic Art and Architecture**

In recent times, however, the discovery of Coptic art has aroused a great deal of excitement and interest among historians, archaeologists, and modern artists. There is hardly a notable museum in the world which has not devoted a special section or department to exhibits of Coptic Origin. Coptic art has earned for itself a position of independence in Christian antiquity in originality, depth of feeling, and unusual vigour.

## **New Impact of the Coptic Church**

### **Pastoral Activities**

H. H. Pope Shenouda ordained bishops and priests to serve outside Egypt and attracted many people outside the church to Christianity. He made tens of pastoral visits and His Pastoral care extended across all of Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea besides the States, Canada, Europe and Australia.

### **Ecumenical Relations (Steps towards Unity)**

- ❖ 1971, Bishop Shenouda (H.H.) attended the first ecumenical consultation between theologians of the Oriental Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches, in Vienna.
- ❖ 1973, H.H. visited H.H. the late Pope Paul VI in Rome.
- ❖ 1974 the International Week of Prayer held at Saint Mark's cathedral in Cairo

- ❖ 1989, H.H. opened the conference of the International Commission for Inter-Orthodox theological Dialogue.
- ❖ Until now, His Holiness initiates and closely monitors theological dialogue and he is one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches.

## **Conclusion**

The Copts have been forgotten after the tragedy of Chalcedon (451 AD) until 1860 AD, when a Presbyterian mission came to convert them to Christianity and the Coptic Archbishop of Assiut told them “We have been living with Christ for more than 1800 years, how long have you been living with Him?”

Scholars of all creeds were stunned at the pages of Coptic history and began to reveal the massive contributions of the Copts to Christian civilization in its formative centuries.

## **Discussion Points**

Discuss the position of the Coptic Church now. Is it still hidden?