

# A Brief History of Orthodox Evangelism IV, “Contemporary Coptic Missionary Work in Africa”

By Victor Beshir

## **5000 Joined the Coptic Church In South Africa:**

After fourteen centuries of virtually no missionary work done by the Coptic Orthodox Church, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a new dawn with a great light in evangelism. It began in 1950 by the joining of 5000 people from South Africa the Coptic Orthodox Church and the ordination of bishop Morcos as a metropolitan for South Africa and Nigeria. Unfortunately, this service did not last for long.

## **H.G. Bishop Antonius Markos:**

### **1- The Beginning of His Service:**

When he was a student in the Medicine College in Cairo, Egypt, he served as a Sunday school teacher in a small village. As he started serving people there, he recognized the needs of others in remote areas and in other cultures to hear about the Lord. So, he decided to go to evangelize in Africa. At that time the focus of the church was on the pastoral service only; therefore, he received no encouragement. However, he did not give up, but instead he continued to pray and communicate with those who could help him. On one occasion, he went to the airport at 2:00 AM to talk to two bishops were traveling to Ethiopia to ask their assistance in finding him a way to starting his missionary work in Africa. The call to evangelism was very strong in his life that it became his dream, his passionate desire, and his heart longing.

One of the two bishops obtained an agreement from the Department of Health in Ethiopia to let the new doctor work as a physician. He welcomed that offer based on the fact that St. Paul worked as a ‘Tent Maker’ and as an evangelist at the same time. However, a few days before leaving to Ethiopia an Egyptian presidential decree was issued, forbidding doctors from leaving Egypt. In his sadness he went to his room and cried to God for a long time. In the middle of his prayer, he saw a great vision, a luminous person standing in the center of the room looking at him. This person was dressed in white vestments, his face was shining, and a halo of light

surrounded his head. The person lifted his hands and said: **"You shall go to Africa and God will be with you and work through you."**

## **2- His Ordination as a Bishop:**

Afterwards he went to Ethiopia to work as a physician and at the same time to lead a revival in the ministry of children and youth that reached tens of thousands in a short period of time. The news of the revival done by the young doctor reached the emperor and his family. He was asked to teach the daughter of the emperor the same spiritual lessons he was giving to other youth. Since youth in the Ethiopian church at that time were prevented from partaking from the Holy Communion, thinking they are not deserved the mysteries, his call to get youth back to the heart of the church's services was shocking to many leaders of the church. Not before long, he returned to Egypt to become a monk. Then, in 1975 he traveled to Kenya to start his long missionary work that was full of tribulations and dangers. After having a back surgery, he returned to Egypt. In 1976, he was ordained as a bishop and was given the name of Bishop Antonius Markos.

## **3- Characteristics of Bishop Antonius Markos:**

Bishop Antonius Markos is one of the great missionary workers of the Orthodox Church. His name and his life should be recorded in the history of mission. I consider him as "The father of missionary work of the Coptic Church in the Twentieth Century." For the purpose of this quick study, I would like to summarize here what I have noticed about his characteristics, his evangelistic work, and what I think is very important for evangelists to observe. First, let us start with his characteristics:

1- **A man of prayer:** You always see that he retreats to pray before his service, during it, and after it. You read about his prayers for the conversion of Africans. His prayers intensify in times of tribulations.

2- He **has a passion for evangelism:** In many parts of his diary you feel this passion, you touch it, and hear it coming out from his heart. This passion gives him the energy to move around and to travel for long hours in unpaved roads to go to remote areas to evangelize, even when he is in great physical pain, since his back pain continued after the surgery.

3- A man who **finds in the Bible an answer to his questions** in hard times. Whenever he has a problem, he opens the Bible and considers what he reads as an answer from God. Although, I don't recommend this method to everyone, but definitely it is a great way for a spiritual person who truly believes that God will send him an answer through the verses he reads. Again, until you reach this level of spirituality do not use this method.

4- He has a **great ability to learn new languages**. The number of languages he mastered in Africa amazed me. He translated many prayers books into many African languages. He mastered these languages to the extent that he can read, write, and give sermons in these languages. In addition to his mastery of both English and French, he also mastered the following languages: Tigrenia, Amharic, Kiswahili, Kuso, Zulus, and Suto. He translated many prayers books into many African languages.

5- Through his **dynamic and loving personality**, he established many friendships, which he uses fully to promote evangelism.

#### 4- Characteristics of his missionary work:

**1. The concept of planting churches is very clear** in his mind. He wrote about a conversation with Fr. Morocs, in which he was trying to convince Fr. Moros to leave America and go to Africa. He gave him the example of "St. Mark who converted many thousands, out of whom the base of the church was formed, from which there could be chosen deacons full of Holy Spirit and wisdom to serve the people. Then from such deacons could be chosen those who are qualified and meet the criteria of priesthood, according to the conditions of the New Testament, to be ordained into the priesthood to serve the deacons and people. And then the church would be in need of a bishop to oversee the church's affairs. And the same can be observed in all the nations where the Coptic Church is to be established. All should be following the See of St. Mark in Alexandria." 1

In the above conversation you notice that **he has a complete understanding of the upbringing of new churches in Africa**. He speaks of spreading the faith among thousands. Then, out of the people of the local churches in Africa, he will choose deacons. Then, from the deacons, he will select priests, which means they are from Africa. In other words, **the deacons and priests should be children of the local church, and not borrowed from Egypt**. Then, he talked about a need to ordain a bishop. And later he mentioned: "the establishment of a General Bishopric of African Affairs opens the way for the **establishment of many national churches and bishoprics in many nations** of Africa."2

He said all of the above just a few days after he was ordained a bishop. This thought reflects a great apostolic view of planting of new churches. He sees clearly the future conversions of thousands of Africans in such a way that would spur high spirituality among the converts, out of whom deacons full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom would be chosen. Then out of those deacons, priests would be ordained according to the high level of competence that was practiced in the days of the apostles. He is a man who is having the apostolic church in mind while he is talking. His envisions of an evangelistic time that is in a way is similar to that of the days of

the apostles is remarkable, especially in a time when the evangelistic efforts by the Coptic Church was almost none.

He then talked about the national churches, where bishops would be ordained in those national churches. **National church (indigenous church) is a term used to refer to a church in a specific culture. It is great that he acknowledged the need to have churches whose Christian faith incarnated in the fabric of their national cultures.**

Finally, he mentioned that **all these national churches would follow the See of St. Mark in Alexandria**, as if he was recalling the great days of the Coptic Church when our missionary work extended to Nubia, Ethiopia, North Africa, and some parts of Europe.

**2.** He did not have this concept as a theory only, but he applied it in Africa. **He converted thousands in many African countries. Then he chose deacons from those countries; afterwards, he chose priests from the local deacons, taught them, sent them to a seminary in Egypt, then he ordained them. So, the churches he established are indeed national churches.**

**3.** **The concept of national church (indigenous church) was so clear in his thinking that it lead him to refrain from imposing any outside cultural influences.** For example, he knew that **music and melody is a culture product, so he did not try to impose Coptic music or melody on the indigenous churches that he established**, instead he **left them to use the drums in the churches, and the melody that comes out of their inner feelings, even he allowed clapping and religious dancing in the church**, which is out of the ordinary in the Coptic Church in Egypt. But he left some Coptic melodies in the Divine Liturgy. Watching the videotapes that were recorded during the Divine Liturgy in the Coptic Churches in Africa, you easily notice that the rites, words, and prayers of the Divine Liturgy and other services are still the same; yet, the majority of melodies is different from the traditional Coptic ones. As a courageous pioneer, some people would attack him for what he did to the Divine Liturgy and services there, accusing him of wasting the treasures of the Church. But, based on the bible, history, and theology of mission, he did the right thing. One of the reasons behind his success is what he did, and without it Coptic evangelism in Africa would not have attracted those thousands of Africans because it would sound foreign to them. He taught us a lesson that until we comprehend we will not have any success in evangelism.

**4.** At the end of his conversation, you noticed he said: "And the same can be observed in all the nations where the Coptic Church is to be established." 3

It is clear that **he thinks the same rules could be applied worldwide, and not only in Africa.**

**5. Using the language of the indigenous people is highly important in his agenda.** First thing he did when he arrived to any new tribe or country, he started learning the new language to use it in prayers, sermons, and in dealing with the people, a great lesson that we need to understand.

**6.** However, **he left some parts of the original Coptic melody alive.** For example, in some places in Africa, he left the Holy Week prayers using the Coptic melody. **This tradition lived in the church for a long time.** When you visit a Greek Church in the United States, you would hear a few Greek melody and hymns in the middle of all American melodies. Personally, I would rather to leave some Coptic melody in every service

**7.** In the beginning of his missionary work **he adapted the wonderful example of St. Paul when he used to make tents to pay for his missionary work expenses.** He used his profession as a physician in making living. Later on, he gave up using the medicine as a way of making living, however, when he visits any tribe, he examines the sick and gives them medical attention.

**8. He uses wonderful introductions to attract the Africans to the Coptic Orthodox Church.** He always **tells them that the Coptic Church is the mother of all African churches, since it was the first to be established in the content.** Then for those countries that are closer to the River Nile, **he tells them that we drink from the same water of the River Nile.** Finding a good introduction is very crucial to the success of any missionary worker. St. Paul, for example, uses the 'Unknown God' in his introduction in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), while our Lord Jesus Christ, always used parables and stories that represent everyday experience of the Jewish people at that time.

**9.** When the indigenous churches grew, he was ready to ordain deacons then priests from the local churches themselves. Others in similar situations could fear loss of control over the indigenous churches or fear of separation of these churches from the mother church. His apostolic manners were revealed in his actions. In South Africa, he chooses deacons from different churches to enroll them in St. Athanasius Theological Institution which he established in Johannesburg. Then later he sends them to a seminary in Egypt.

**10.** Soon after establishing indigenous churches he realized how poor the people are. So, he **started many social and educational projects to help them raising their economical levels.** For example, he established **vocational trainings** in Kenya, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In addition, he built many medical clinics in many countries.

**11.** He made many trips to USA and Australia to spread the awareness of evangelism among the Copts and to ask for their support for evangelism in Africa. Then he opened the door for the Coptic youth from USA and Australia to go to Africa to spend time in evangelism, which is a great idea.

**12.** In addition to establishing a **seminary in South Africa**, he built a **monastery in Zimbabwe and another in South Africa**, and **convention center** in Johannesburg. This reflects a vision of building a church that covers all the needs of its members, spiritually and educationally.

**13.** He **helped the other Orthodox churches in Africa** to make them stronger. He helped some in starting a church and others in getting tax exempt. His help was appreciated by higher hierarchy of these church. For example, he received a Patriarchal Award from H.H. Alexei II of the Russian Orthodox Church. He established a strong relationship with all Orthodox Churches. His vision is having a strong Orthodox existence in the content of Africa.

## **Conclusion:**

For Bishop Antonius Markos, November 1, 2007 marks spending of thirty one years in his evangelism in Africa. He started alone and stayed alone for years. He suffered a lot in the beginning of his service in Kenya. For many years he saw no fruits but he was patient. A good lesson in evangelism is patience. He offered himself as a good example of a Christian and an evangelist that attracted others. The one-man service resulted in great harvest. Now the Coptic Orthodox Church exists in nine African countries. H.G. Bishop Paul (Anba Bolus) helps in the service in Kenya, Tanzania, and Congo. In addition, there are many indigenous priests, and deacons. There are also Coptic priests and monks who serve in Africa. We need to support these churches with our prayers. Some of these churches are very poor and they need our financial support too. We also need to encourage our youth to go to Africa to learn the basics of evangelize there.

In addition to his missionary work, H.G. Bishop Antonius wrote the following valuable books in Arabic and English: "Story of Our Coptic Orthodox Church in Africa In our present time," "Come Across and Help Us (Three parts), and "An Introduction to the Theology of Missions,"

H.G. Bishop Paul also is a good example of missionary work in Africa. Since there are no publications about his service or about him, I will postpone writing about his service until there're references that I could use.

## Notes:

1- H.G. Bishop Antonius Markos, "Come Across And Help Us," and "The Story of Our Coptic Orthodox Church in Africa In our present time," book one, by, Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs, Cairo 1988, page 182

2- H.G. Bishop Antonius Markos , "Come Across And Help Us," book two, and "The Story of Our Coptic Orthodox Church in Africa In our present time," book two, Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs, Cairo 1996.

3- H.G. Bishop Antonius Markos, "An Introduction Into Theology of Mission," 1997, Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs, Cairo 1997

### References:

In addition to the above books, I used two Videotapes about the Coptic Church in Africa produced by the Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs and the following web page:

5- <http://www.geocities.com/copticafrika/>