

PRIVILEGES DISTINGUISHING THE COPTIC CHURCH FROM OTHER CHURCHES OF THE WORLD

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In fact our Coptic Church has certain privileges distinguishing her from other churches of the world, which privileges are demonstrated in the Holy Scriptures and in history. The following is a demonstration of all this based on concrete facts:

.A Prophecy Concerning the Coptic Church:

The church of Egypt is the only one among the churches of the nations on which a prophecy has been given in the Old Testament concerning her foundation.

This prophecy has been recorded in the Book of Isaiah the Prophet. The divine inspiration, speaking about the foundation of our church, says, " In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. And it will befor a sign and for a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt Then the Lord will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering." (Isaiah 19:19-21)

This altar mentioned in the above prophecy is not a pagan altar, for it is an altar to the Lord; nor a Jewish altar, for the Jews were not allowed to sacrifice outside Jerusalem.

It is then the Christian altar on which the Egyptians offered sacrifice to the Lord when the knew the Lord and He became known to Egypt. And it is a sign and a witness to the Lord according to the Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah the prophet But for the importance of this altar, no prophecy would have been given on it However, the altar is denied in general by the Protestants, and we used to say to them: Many indeed are the biblical texts proving the existence of the altar in Christianity. But even if there is no altar in any Christian country, suffice at least that the Scriptures mention the altar in the land of

Egypt to the Lord according to the prophecy of Isaiah. And the Lord blessed Egypt for this.

The divine inspiration concludes this chapter of the Book of Isaiah with the words of the Lord, "Blessed is Egypt My people" (Isa.19: 25). What beautiful words are these "My People"! These words refute the claim of the Jews that they -alone- are God's people, whereas the Lord of hosts blesses Egypt, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people ".

But of course God does not bless the people of Egypt in their paganism, but in their faith. He blesses the Church of Egypt; the Coptic Church. Now we conclude this part highlighting the fact that the prophecy is not confined to the foundation of the Church of Egypt, but extends to the blessing given her by the Lord.

2. The Holy Family's Visit to Egypt: The only country visited by the Lord Christ – other than the country where He has been born – is the land of Egypt. Certainly there is some wisdom behind this, and a spiritual purpose as well. For there were other neighbor countries in the same continent, but the Lord chose Egypt in particular to have an altar to Him therein; a sign and a witness to the Lord. This visit has been recorded in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. The visit took place in compliance with the divine command given by the Angel of the Lord to Joseph in a dream, commanding him to take the Child Jesus and flee to Egypt, and to stay there till he receives word from the Lord (Mt. 2: 13).

And the Child stayed there until the death of Herod, then He returned so that the prophecy might be fulfilled: "Out of Egypt I called My Son" (Mt. 2:14).

Furthermore, the Lord's coming to Egypt fulfilled another prophecy in the same chapter in the Book of Isaiah, which said:

"Behold, the Lord rides on a Swift Cloud, and will come into Egypt" (Isa.19: 1)

These words are directly followed by a prophecy mentioned by the divine inspiration about the

eradication of paganism from Egypt; which said, "The idols of Egypt will totter at His presence, and the heart of Egypt will melt in its midst".

This literally happened throughout the holy family's visit, as whenever the Lord entered a country, the idols fell and the holy family were dismissed and moved to another country, thus many places in Egypt were sanctified.

In Egypt, the holy Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph the carpenter were with the Lord. Have any country, other than Egypt, enjoyed such a visit by the holy Virgin? It is a visit mentioned by the Holy Scriptures, and recorded in the history, which also named the places visited by the holy family where churches have been built afterwards and which tourists come to visit from the far ends of the earth.

Can any other church pride herself in that which distinguishes the Church

of Egypt?

Can we say that the holy Virgin has perhaps longed to visit the land of Egypt again, so she appeared on the domes of the church in Zeitoun in 1968, then in the Church in Babadoblo -

Shoubra twenty years later? Or is it that God willed the prophecy of Isaiah would continue or be remembered by the people that He may utter the words we love much, "Blessed is Egypt My people", "Out of Egypt I called My Son".

3. The First Theological Schools Established The first theological school in the whole world was the School of Alexandria founded by St. Mark.

It has been founded in mid first century to defend Christianity against the reputable Philosophical School of Alexandria with its famous library containing more than three hundred thousand manuscripts.

In that library, the Old Testament has been translated into the Greek language; the translation known as the Septuagint.

Hence, Egypt presented to the world - where the Greek Culture spread - the first Greek translation of the Old Testament with its prophecies and symbols on the one hand. Whereas the Theological School of Alexandria, on the other hand, presented to the Christian world a big number of scholars and still bigger number of Fathers Sayings.

Among those scholars were St. Pantaeus; St. Clement of Alexandria; Origen; St Dionysius (the fifteenth Patriarch- Pope of Alexandria); St. Didymos the Blind, the first person who invented the engraved writing fifteen centuries before Braille, and who was dean of the Theological Faculty in

the days of St. Athanasius the Apostolic.

Due to this great Theological School, the Fathers of Alexandria became famous for being

talented in theology and theological debate, as will be indicated hereinafter - God willing.

4. Our Church, the Mother of Monasticism: The first monk in the world, St. Anthony the Great, was a Coptic from Upper Egypt. St Anthony was born in 251 and departed 356. All the early fathers of monasticism were his disciples. His biography has been written by St. Athanasius in his famous book "Vita Antonii"

which he sent to Rome and was a cause of the conversion of St. Augustine. St. Anthony became

known as "the father of all monks". All the monks of the world are his children and owe gratitude to him as father and pioneer of asceticism. The first father who established monasteries in the whole world is St. Pachomius,

who was also Coptic from Upper Egypt.

He was the first to lay down laws/rules for monasticism, which laws were conveyed to France

by John Cassian. Based on these laws, the Catholic Benedict monastery laws have been laid

down. Furthermore, St. Basil the Great benefited from these laws in laying down the monastic laws.

At this point, we'd like to mention an important historical and spiritual fact, viz: The early monks

of Egypt lived monasticism rather than wrote about it. Their biographies and sayings have been

recorded by the tourists who visited them. The most important of those tourists are:

* Palladius, who wrote his famous book "Historia Lausiaca" addressed to a nobleman called Lausius. The English translation of this book is entitled "The Fathers' Paradise" and the Arabic

translation is entitled 'Bustan Al Rohban'. The book has its great impact as it presents to the whole world the biographies of the Coptic monks and their angelic life history, which make all people long to see them.

* There is also Rufinus who wrote about the desert fathers.

* John Cassian who wrote two famous books: "Institutes" and "Conferences". In these books he explained the monastic life of the monks of Egypt. He recorded his meetings and discussions with many of those fathers on various spiritual subjects.

* St. Jerome also wrote the life history of some Coptic fathers such as St. Paul the hermit, St. John of Assiut, and others.

Through these writings monasticism spread all over the world and many fathers became disciples of the Coptic monks of Egypt: Among those are the two Roman Princes Maximus and Domadius, the sons of Emperor Valentinus; St. Arsanius the teacher of the kings sons, who was the tutor of the two princes

Honorios and Arcadius; Princess Hilaria the daughter of Emperor Zeno, and many others Among those who became disciples of St. Anthony is St. Hilarion who spread monasticism in Syria. And among those who became disciples of other Coptic Fathers is St. Aucine who spread monasticism in Iraq. We remember also St. Mar Aphram the Syrian who visited the monasteries of Egypt, and St. Evagrius of Pontius who visited the Wilderness of Sheheit. Time is lacking to speak about all those who became

disciples of the Coptic
monasticism in Egypt, or abroad through reading the history and teachings
of our

fathers. Those spread monasticism afterwards in their countries. And this
reminds us of an important fact, which we like to record here:

Whenever you see a monk in any part of the world, you can say to him
assuredly: Certainly you have a Coptic origin in monasticism; for they all
are the children of the Coptic Anthony the founder of monasticism and
father of all monks.

5. The Early Heroes of Faith: It is sufficient here to mention two very
distinguished characters, namely:

* St. Athanasius the Apostolic from the fourth century, and St.
Cyril the First from the fifth century. The Christian Creed laid down by the
Ecumenical Council of Nicaea has been formulated by the Alexandrian
Deacon Athanasius. Athanasius is that genius Coptic person who defended
faith against Arius the heretic and refuted his claims. As a result, Arius was
ex-communicated by the holy ecumenical council in 325 AD. Athanasius
was the leading theological mind amidst 318 bishops representing the
churches of the
whole world.

When St. Athanasius became Patriarch, he compiled his famous book
"Contra Arianos" in four
parts, where he refuted the wrong concept concerning some verses of the
Holy Bible held by the Arian. Because of his defense of faith, councils were
convened, emperors resisted him, and he was exiled four times from his see.
When they said to him [the whole world is against you, Athanasius], he
replied [And I also am against the World].

Due to his steadfastness, faith has been kept for us, as St. Jerome said:
[There has been a time when the whole world was about to be Arian but for
Athanasius].

St. Athanasius was a Coptic Pope, but in fact he became the king of the
whole Christian world, and the father of all theologians.

The strong basis for our Christian Creed is St. Athanasius' book
"Incarnation of the Word",
which he wrote when yet a young deacon - probably in his twenties. All
theologians depend on this book as a strong reliable reference written by the
ecumenical scholar St. Athanasius the hero of faith. Athanasius steadfastness
encouraged the Fathers to be steadfast.

* St. Hilary of Poitiers who, when he wrote his book
"De Trinitate" refuting the Arians, was called Athanasius of the West. Thus

Athanasius became a symbol and a model.

* St. Cyril the Great is the hero of faith against the Nestorians. He exposed the heresy of Nestorius who was the Patriarch of Constantinople the Capital of the Eastern Roman Empire.

St. Cyril explained to him the faith, but as he disobeyed and continued in his heresy, St. Cyril

wrote against him twelve Anathemas which have become part of the Church Laws. Nestorius

was then ex-communicated by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus which was convened in 431

AD and headed by St. Cyril of Alexandria.

Thus Pope Cyril became one of the Fathers of the Apostolic Catholic Church, and his sayings an authoritative source of theology from which many learnt.

* A third example is St. Timothy of Alexandria

St. Timothy is the twenty- third Patriarch of Alexandria. When this Coptic Pope participated in

the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, he was asked about some church issues, and whatever answer he gave was deemed a church law for the Apostolic Catholic Church. This fact is mentioned in the Collection of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Vol. XIV. This part of

the Collection includes the laws set by many Father Patriarchs of the Coptic Church which were received as laws for the Catholic Church. Among these laws are:

* The laws of Pope Dionysius (the 14th Patriarch)

* The laws of Pope Peter the Seal of Martyrs (the 17th Patriarch)

* The laws of Pope Athanasius (the 20th Patriarch)

* The laws of Pope Timothy (the 22nd Patriarch)

* The laws of Pope Theophilus (the 23rd Patriarch)

* The laws of Pope Cyril (the 24th Patriarch).

6. A Church of Martyrs

It is true that martyrdom extended to the churches of the whole world, however, the Coptic Church is distinguished for two main things:

a. Martyrdom that extended to whole cities like the martyrs of Akhmime, the martyrs of Isna, and martyrdom that included thousands of people as the martyrdom of the whole Thebaea Legion.

b. Martyrdom that extended throughout ages, whereas other churches were either enjoying peace after the heathen era or suffering under oppressive authority.

The martyrdom movement that happened in Egypt in the Roman Era – especially in the epoch of Diocletian the Emperor – was so severe that the Church changed her calendar to start with the year 284 (the year when Diocletian started his reign) as the Martyrs Calendar Year. The Coptic Church suffered another period of martyrdom inflicted by her Christian brethren after the dissention of Chalcedon from 451-644 AD. During this period the Church offered tens of thousands of martyrs. This persecution extended to the Father Patriarchs whose churches were taken possession of by the Romans, and other Malakite Patriarchs were appointed in their places. The latter were given civil authority besides the Holy Orders authority. An example is

Mokawkas the Roman Governor who ruled at the time of the entry of the Arabs into Egypt when Pope Benjamin the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch was exiled from his see for 13 years.

Martyrdom continued, especially in the epoch of Al Hakem Bi Amr Allah and in the days of Memlouks and Ottomans.

The Coptic Church indeed has a distinct glorious history, but many historians do ignore the basic features while speaking about particular details and facts.