



UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH & HER CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

Fr. Augustinos R. Hanna



In this synopsis we are going to state, briefly, the main facts about what distinguishes the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt and about its contributions to Christianity all over the world. Every Copt should know, keep in mind and be proud of these brief points.

1. It is the only church in the world that has prophecies in the Old Testament concerning its foundation. Isaiah the prophet, in chapter 19, verse 19 says,

2. “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.” Matthew Henry, one of the greatest Bible commentators in England in the 3rd century, said that Isaiah 19: 19 is a prophecy about Christianity being introduced into Egypt, and the Church being founded by St Mark the Evangelist, who wrote the Second Gospel, in the middle of the 1st century. It is well known that the Jewish altar exists only in the Temple at Jerusalem, An altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Pharaonic pagan Egypt can only be the Christian altar and the founding of the Church of Egypt.

3. Isaiah 19 includes two other prophecies about the Church of Egypt and its people, in the first and last verses of the chapter. In the first he says, **“Behold, the LORD rides on a swift cloud, and will come into Egypt; the idols of Egypt will totter at His presence.”** (Isaiah 19: 1). This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus visited Egypt with the Holy Family to escape the massacre by Herod (Matthew 2), St. Cyril the Great described that cloud carrying Christ as Virgin Mary. The last prophecy says, “Blessed is Egypt My people” (Isaiah 19: 25). This prophecy includes a blessing for Egypt as the people of God, after the whole of Egypt converted from paganism to Christianity in the third century AD.

4. The founder of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt is St Mark, Evangelist, who wrote the Gospel of Mark. This makes every son of this church proud of it, and more trustful of its genuine creeds and doctrines.

5. It is the church that founded the oldest theological school in the history of Christianity by Saint Mark in the 1st century. This was the school of Alexandria, the most famous deans of which included Clement of Alexandria, the scholar Pantanaeus, the scholar Origen and Saint Didymus **the Blind.**

6. It is the church which produced the greatest Bible scholars, like Clement of Alexandria, Pantanaeus, Origen, Didymus the Blind and Saint Athanasius the Apostolic, Pope St. Cyril (Pillar of Faith) and many others who taught the whole world the Holy Bible and its interpretation.

7. It is the church which produced the greatest theologians, like Saint Athanasius the Apostolic, defender of faith, who set the formulary of faith (Nicene Creed), without which the divinity of Christ doctrine would have been lost, and consequently Christianity would have been lost as well, and the whole world would have become Arian, and like the Saints: Cyril the Great, Pope Dioscorus, and others.

8. The Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt founded monasticism in the 4th century at the hands of Saint Anthony the Great, called the Father of Monasticism in the whole world.

9. It is the church that set the formulary of faith (the Nicene Creed), in the Ecumenical Council of Nicea AD 325 under the leadership and dictation of Saint Athanasius the Egyptian, who was still a young deacon with Pope Saint Alexander of Alexandria. This is still used in most churches of the world up till present.

10. It is the church that has suffered the horrors of persecution since its rise in the 1st century and up till now. It presented the largest number of martyrs in the history of Christianity, more than a million, killed at the hands of Pagan Romans and Muslims, especially during the reigns of the Roman Diocletian's, Decius, and Al-Hakem bi-Amr Allah, up to the reign of Anwar El Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, and Mohammed Morcy, and even El-Sisi. Persecution and martyrdom are still going on.

11. It is the church whose Popes were chosen to preside over the Ecumenical Councils, because of their great knowledge and virtue, the depth of their piety and spirituality, and their wise leadership.

12. The Coptic Orthodox Church contributed to formation of the Holy Bible. For instance, the Epistle of Jude remained the subject of doubts and controversy for two centuries until the Church of Alexandria settled the matter and convinced the churches of the world of its authenticity early in the third century AD, at the hands of Pope Demetrius the Vinedresser, Pope of Alexandria. It was included in the Canonical Books of the New Testament (Commentary on the Epistle of

Jude by William Barkley, Professor of the New Testament at Glasgow University).

13. It is the church which has the most and longest fasts, as the number of two thirds of the year, while the fasts of the other churches are almost lost and extinct, and have become scanty and superficial.

14. Translation of the Holy Bible (the Old Testament) from Hebrew to Greek, known as the Septuagint, took place in Egypt in the year 285 B.C. It is the translation that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself used, and so did the Apostles after Him (Simeon the elder, mentioned in Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Luke, took part in this translation).

15. It is the church that has the most and the longest prayers and liturgies. Some of its services, up till now, continue, nonstop, from 8 am to 6 pm; 10 continuous hours, followed by the Abu-Ghalamsis night service on the evening of Good Friday, with prayers continuing throughout the night, from 11 pm to Bright Saturday 6 am. All the hymns and praises of the Holy Bible are read and chanted, and the whole Book of Revelation is read that night. This is not practiced in any other church (total is 17 hours of worship and service out of 24 hours).

16. Egypt is regarded as the most religious country in the world. It was visited by the first patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, and Joseph spent most of his life there. Moses, the greatest Jewish prophet, was born in it, and so was Joshua. And Prophet Jeremiah came to it. From it came Apollos of Alexandria (Acts 18). The greatest visitor was the LORD Jesus Christ Himself, the Holy Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, who stayed for almost three and a half years in Egypt.

17. In Egypt is found the Church where Virgin Mary appeared numerous times in Zeitoun, and also in Shoubra, in the period from 1968 and 1994, and then in Assiut and El Warrak, and performed miracles in Port Said and other places up till now.

18. It is the church that spread Christianity in Africa, Switzerland, Germany and Ireland. In Africa, Pope Athanasius the Apostolic ordained Bishop Fromentius for Ethiopia in the 4th century. He was known there as Anba Salama. At present we have four bishops and dioceses in Black Africa. We have numerous Coptic Orthodox churches in Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Nigeria, Congo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, and Johannesburg, in addition to Nubia,

the Sudan, Atbara, and Eretria.

Missionary work of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt took place in the 4th century too, at the hands of St. Maurice, the Theban Legion, and St Verena. Besides, some Coptic monks undertook missionary work in Ireland in the 4th century too.

19. It is the church that was assigned by the world churches to determine the date of celebrating Easter, and specified it as the Sunday following the Jewish Passover.

20. It is the only church in the world that has preserved its heritage, traditions, creeds, and Sacraments, besides “its faith, passed once to its Saints and Patriarchs” through the Apostles, for twenty-one centuries without any change to form or subject. This persistence has had its cost: sacrifices and terrible persecutions amounting to shedding of blood of its congregation and Popes. Pope Shenouda III called it “The Living Museum”.

21. It is the church that has presented multitudes of saints, monks, known as the Fathers of the Desert, and female saints, whose sayings and wise experiences fill huge books and volumes that are still a source of inspiration to Christendom and seekers of perfect conduct up till now (so much so that these days a thousand of Protestant pastors of Illinois’ Wheaton University graduates joined it when they read the sayings of its Patriarchs, prior to and following the Ecumenical Council of Nicea).

22. The oldest copies of the Holy Bible, dating back to the second century, such as a manuscript of the Gospel of St John in the Coptic language, was found in the Fayoum Desert in Egypt in the year 105 AD.

In the 3rd and 4th centuries, manuscripts of the Scripture were found in Egypt in the Coptic and Greek languages on papyrus plants that grow on the banks of the Nile in Egypt. Moreover, there are the parchments, some of which are found in the Coptic Museum in Egypt and in Museums of the Vatican, London and Moscow and others.

23. The Rosetta Stone, by means of which the scholar Champolion solved the mysteries of the Hieroglyphic language, was found in Egypt. It is that stone that threw strong light on the monuments which support authenticity of the Holy Bible and its incidents stated in the books of Genesis, Exodus and Kings.

24. *The greatest library in the ancient world, which enlightened the whole world with knowledge and connected the ancient world with the new world was the library of Alexandria,* which was burned in the 7th century AD at the hands of Muslim invaders, Amr Ibn El Aas at the orders of Caliph Omar Ibn El Khattab. Through this infamous ignorance the greatest source of knowledge in the ancient world was lost.

25. *Egypt is the second most mentioned country in the Holy Bible after Israel. The Garden of the LORD was likened to the land of Egypt:* “like the Garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt” (Genesis 13: 10), the second river of the Garden of Eden was the River Nile, with its old name “Gihon” (Genesis 2:13). It was stated in St. Ephraim (Ephrem) the Syrian’s commentary on the Book of Genesis that the four rivers of the Garden referred to the four Gospels, which watered the whole world with the water of life, and it was meet that the writer of the Second Gospel (Saint Mark) should undertake missionary work in the country of the second river “Gihon” (i.e. River Nile).

Pope Shenouda III aroused renaissance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The period of his patriarchy (41 years) is considered one of the greatest golden epochs of the Church in modern history. He aroused a great renaissance in education, preaching, authoring, construction, watchful pastoral care, missionary trips to all continents of the world, ordination of thousands of bishops, priests, monks and deacons, and foundation of churches, seminaries and satellite channels. He was a rare extraordinary phenomenon, who revealed, kept and sprad the great heritage of the Coptic Orthodox church; and these lines are not sufficient for writing about him. Many have written large books about him.

That was a bird’s eye view of the unique characteristics that distinguish the Coptic Orthodox Church, and how it influenced Christianity in the world, and what every Copt should know and hold dear and be proud of.

St. John Coptic Orthodox Church

Covina, California

Tel. (909) 592-8847 - (562) 900-2695

Email: frhanna@mystjohn.org - Website: www.mystjohn.org