

Start and Development of Coptic Monasticism

(by: Father Samaan Saint Paul)

† Christianity entered Egypt officially through the preaching of St. Mark the Evangelist and this was in the year 41 A.D. although it was already known by few people before that since the day of Pentecost when the apostles spoke with tongues of different languages and among them was the Egyptian language as illustrated in (Acts 2:10), so this means that Christianity was known in Egypt before St. Mark but not in a wide scale, and it began spreading widely by his preaching.

He instituted the theological school of Alexandria and it began to appose the pagan philosophy on Egypt at that time, and this caused many pagans to convert to Christianity which made the Roman Emperor at that time begin to resist the faith and persecute the believers and the 1st Martyr was St. Mark himself in 68 AD.

The success of the school of Alexandria drew the wrath of imperial Authorities and this lead to a series of persecutions lasted for about 300 years until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (307-337) to Christianity and he put an end to this persecution. Of course, until that time, thousands of Christians were killed and persecuted and tortured.

In 251AD St Anthony the great was born and in 270 he devoted his life to God in the desert, and he founded the first community of Christian monks and soon this style of life attracted many people and soon it spread inside and outside Egypt.

† During the period of persecution, martyrdom was known to be the highest state of grace, and after the conversion of Emperor Constantine, peace was brought to the church, but this didn't eliminate the Christian quest to spiritual perfection, and the church fathers stated that the ascetic life was equal to martyrdom. One of the saints said "every soul that has lived purely in the knowledge of God is a martyr both in life and in word, pouring out its faith like blood, throughout its whole life" and many saints believed that martyrdom could be of spirit as well as of the body.

† St Anthony founded this system of life and was the 1st one to put rules for a monastic community and these rules are still followed till now.

† He received the monastic uniform from an angel on day, and this angel taught him that he should practice the manual work beside the ascetic work and this is applied in all the monastic communities till this very day.

The monastic uniform that the angel delivered to St. Anthony consists of:

† A black long garment to illustrate that the monk is dead regarding the cosmic life.

† A cowl as a head cover resembling the cowls of babies and little infants to show the life of innocence and purity that the monk lives, and the back part of the cowl illustrates that the monk has left all the world and occupations of life behind him and he is going straight forward in his way to God. The separation in the middle of the cowl was made by St. Anthony because one day he was in a combat with the devil and the devil tried to take the cowl of his head but St. Anthony caught it tightly so it was torn and then St. Anthony sewed it and left this separation to remind him always by the devil temptations and that man can never be in peace with devil until death.

Then this cowl was developed and had 12 crosses symbolizing the 12 apostles and a 13th cross symbolizing Lord Jesus to show that the monk is bearing in his mind the commandments to Jesus and his apostles and living according to them.

† A belt made of the leather of dead animals roped around the waist to symbolize the mortification of natural desires and senses.

St. Anthony :

St. Anthony is considered as the father of all monks and one of the rulers of Christian Monasticism.

He was born around the year 250 A.D., in a city in Upper Egypt called Kamen-El - Aroos, a city of Beniswef. His father died before he reached the age of twenty. He heard the deacon in the Church reading this verse of the Bible: "If thou wilt be perfect go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (Matt.19:21). So, he distributed all his wealth among the poor and left to the desert to start his monastical life, near the coast of the Red Sea. Hearing of his good deeds, people started visiting him and asking for his prayers and blessings. A certain king, from a foreign land, sent messengers to him, asking him to come and heal his sick son. The messengers brought gifts to St. Anthony but he did not accept them and decided not to go to that foreign land.

On that day, St. Anthony prayed and with the power of Jesus Christ, he was lifted upon a cloud, and went to that foreign land, where he was invited to eat at a Minister's house. That minister had a pig whose youngsters were blind and limb, St. Anthony healed them. Hearing of this event, the king asked St. Anthony to heal his son. St. Anthony healed the son and then returned to the monastery. The following day, the messengers, who were unaware of St. Anthony's trip, asked him to accompany them to heal the King's son. St. Anthony asked them to return back and that he will follow them later. After several days of their long trip, they heard about the healing of the king's son. When they reached the King's palace, they realized that it was St. Anthony who did it, but that he didn't tell them to avoid falling into temptation. The messengers praised God for what they had witnessed.

St. Anthony passed away in the year 356 A.D. after a life full of good deeds and valuable spiritual experiences. We celebrate his departure on the 30th of January (22 Toubas of the Coptic calendar) every year.

May his prayers be with us all, and glory be to God forever, Amen