

So What's the Coptic Orthodox Church All About?

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“What Are You?”

“I’m Coptic” is the typical response I give when people ask me, “What are you?” Dressed in a black cassock with a unique one-piece black turban, that’s not an uncommon question. Usually, after giving that response, I get a nod, then a look of confusion once my inquirer realizes that he/she has no clue what that is. So, it may be best to begin by explaining what exactly is “Coptic.” The word stems from an ancient name of one of Egypt’s oldest cities, most likely Memphis. This name was Ha Ka Ptah which means “the house of the spirit Ptah,” who, for the ancient Egyptians, was a great deity. When the Greeks entered Egypt, they took that name and pronounced it as Hai-gy-ptos. Afterwards, upon the arrival of the Arabs in Egypt, they pronounced it as Qypt which is rendered in English as Copt. To make a long story short, after I get the look of confusion, I simply say, “It means Egyptian.”

“Who Are You?”

The more important question than “what are you?” is “who are you?” Who are the Copts? More specifically, who are the Christian Copts? To begin to answer this question, we can go back to Scripture, in the book of Isaiah. He says, “Behold, the burden of Egypt, the Lord rides upon a swift cloud, He shall come to Egypt, and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at His presence. In that day there shall be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt” (Is. 19:1).

Our story starts when the Lord Himself took flesh and rode on His cloud -- the Holy Virgin Mary -- to Egypt to escape the persecution of King Herod. He blessed Egypt as was prophesied by Isaiah when he said, “Blessed is Egypt My people” (Is. 19:25). Many sites in Egypt still bear names that reflect the Holy family’s visit. For example, Mostorod is also called el-Mahammah [bathing place] because the Virgin Mary is said to have bathed the Child Jesus in that place. In Belbeis, there is an ancient tree known as “Virgin Mary’s tree” because it is said to have given the Holy Family shade from the Egyptian sun. In the Valley of Natrun which later became known as Scetis -- one of the most ancient monastic settlements, there’s a salt lake. In the middle of the salt lake is a small area of fresh water! It is said that while crossing the lake the Virgin Mary needed to drink, and that small area alone became fresh while the rest of the lake is extremely salty (I know, I tasted it myself!). Many other places in Egypt were touched by the Holy family and became truly “an altar to the Lord ... and a pillar at its border” (Is. 19:19). Fast-forward to after Pentecost, when Egypt became white for the harvest (Jn. 4:35).

Making His “Mark” on Egypt

Alexandria, a first century bustling metropolis, known for trade, Hellenistic culture and philosophy, would have been intimidating for any evangelist. God sent it a literal Evangelist, Mark, who was one of the seventy apostles and author of the oldest gospel, entered Alexandria in the middle of the first century. As he walked into the great city, his sandal was torn. He found a cobbler by the name of Ananias who was happy to repair his sandal. However, as he fixed it, he injured himself with the needle and cried out in pain “O the One God!” Saint Mark healed Ananias and went on to preach to him the One True God. Ananias and his household were baptized and the great see of Alexandria was born.

Saint Mark continued preaching in Egypt and founded the first ever catechetical school in Alexandria to be able to reach the minds of the great philosophers of Alexandria and teach them the True Philosophy. This school became the greatest center for Christian learning in the world for the first four centuries after the Resurrection. It produced great saints and scholars such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen the scholar, Athanasius the Great, Cyril the Pillar of the faith, and many others. Saint Mark later ordained Ananias as his first successor and bishop of Alexandria. Saint Mark also composed one of the most ancient liturgies still in use today, known as the liturgy of St. Cyril (referring to Cyril of Alexandria, who translated this liturgy from Greek to Coptic). After much labor of love, St. Mark was captured in Alexandria while praying the Divine Liturgy on the Feast of the Resurrection. He was dragged around the streets of Alexandria until he gave up his pure soul. Saint Mark was one of the earliest martyrs in Egypt, but certainly not the last.

Champions of the Faith: Persecuted and Martyred

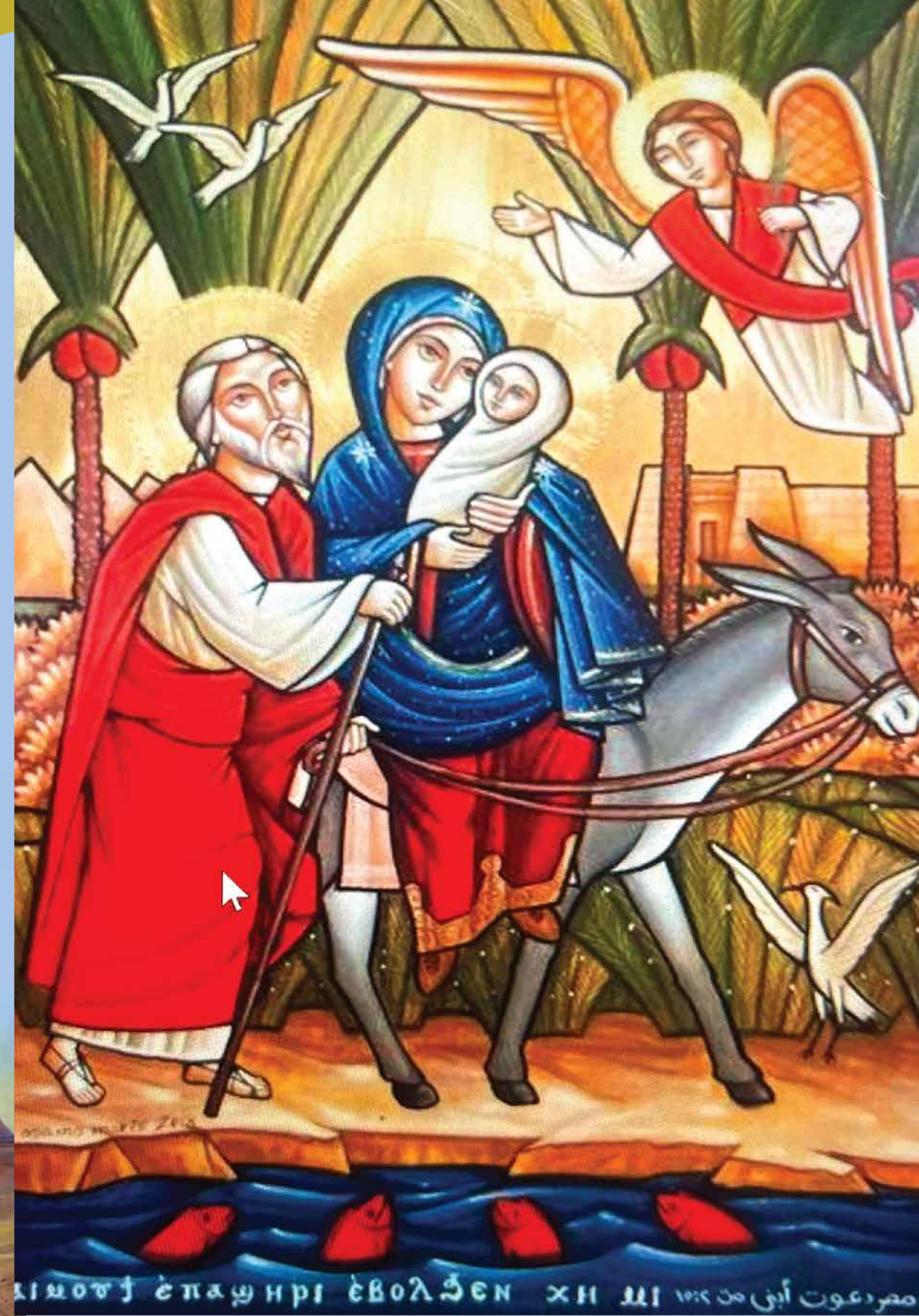
The Church of Alexandria, the Coptic Orthodox Church, is known as “the Church of the martyrs.” From the first century until the fourth century, Egyptians experienced various periods of intense persecution. The most significant of these was the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian from 284 A.D. During his reign, it is estimated that 800,000 Coptic Christians were killed in the Name of their faith in Christ. This period was so significant that the Copts decided to number their calendar from the beginning of Diocletian’s reign in 284 AD and call it the year of the martyrs (A.M.). As the promise of the Lord in His Beatitudes, the Copts cherish the opportunity to be persecuted for the Name of Christ, making the beginning of the Coptic year a festive time in which we celebrate all the martyrs who shed their blood for the Name of Christ. This view of martyrdom is seen even until now, perfectly exemplified in the families of those courageous heroes who refused to deny their Christ and were martyred on the shores of Libya just a few years ago.

“If You Want to be Perfect...”

Shortly after Constantine became emperor at the beginning of the fourth century, he issued his famous edict of Milan, which made Christianity a legal religion. This catalyzed a movement that had already started out of intense love for God. The monastic movement gained momentum, and people began selling their possessions and leaving the vanities of this world in order to become martyrs by will to completely dedicate their life to their True Bridegroom. The most well known of these was the great Abba Antony, who, as a young teenager, sought to consecrate his life to God. His parents had just passed away, and as he was contemplating about the fact that all the desires of this world are passing away, he entered a church and heard the gospel being read, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Mt. 19:21). Antony went out and did just that. He owned about 300 acres of fertile land! He sold everything and gave a little bit to his sister -- who went to live in what we would now call a convent -- and the rest to the poor. He began a journey that became a movement that affected the whole Christian world. Antony became known as the father of monasticism. Through the writing of his biography by none other than his disciple, St. Athanasius the Great, Antony and his way of life became known throughout the empire, and people began emulating his monastic way. Monasticism in Egypt flourished from the fourth century and into the seventh century. It is estimated that when monasticism peaked, there were approximately 3000 monastic communities dotted across Egypt! Today there are hundreds of Coptic monks and nuns living in monasteries and convents both inside and outside of Egypt.

Roots that Nourished Egypt... And the World

These major roots of Christianity in Egypt -- its apostolicity, erudition, martyria and asceticism -- formed what we see today as the Coptic Church. It is a Traditional Church, carefully following the teaching of Christ, the apostles and the church fathers. It holds fast to the liturgical life, and the spiritual struggle mingled with thanksgiving and praise is found vibrantly on the faces of her old men and pious women. There is much more to say about the Coptic Orthodox Church, but nothing can be said that will give it justice except, “Come and see!” (Jn. 1:39).



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