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WITH THE DESERT FATHERS OF EGYPT: COPTIC CHRISTIANITY TODAY



Dr. George Bebawi

Born in Egypt in 1938, Dr. George Bebawi graduated from the Coptic Orthodox Theological College in Cairo after a rich spiritual youth spent in the company of contemporary 20th-century Coptic Egyptian desert fathers of Cairo and Scetis. He went on to attend Cambridge University on scholarship, where he studied Theology, Patristics, and Biblical Criticism, receiving an M.Lit and Ph.D at Cambridge University in 1970. Dr. George taught Theology, Patristics, Church History, and Islamic studies at Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant seminaries in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. His hopes for Christian unity also motivated him to serve on various committees of the World Council of Churches and in the Secretariat for Christian Unity at the Vatican. During this period he was also an advisor on Christian Affairs for Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat before Sadat's assassination in 1981, and in 1982 served as director of the Red Cross in Beirut during the First Lebanese-Israeli war.

Dr. George returned to England in 1984 where he taught at St. John's College, Nottingham University until 2000. From 2000-2002 he was the Director of Studies at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, England, and lectured on Islam and Judaism for the Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges. He also served on a project for the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies, "The Jewish Roots of Christian Worship" at Cambridge University's Faculty of Divinity. Recently retired from Cambridge, *Road to Emmaus* staff was privileged to spend several warm and illuminating mornings speaking with him about his life and work.

RTE: Dr. George, you've had an extremely rich and eventful life. To begin, I understand that you were raised in Egypt, neither Muslim nor Christian. How did you become Christian?

DR. GEORGE: I became Christian because I met a very saintly man, a hermit who settled on the eastern side of Old Cairo. People helped him to build a hermitage and a small chapel dedicated to St. Menas, after whom he was named. He later became the Coptic Patriarch, Kyrillos VI.¹

I first met Father Menas when I was eighteen, in the Church of St. Menas, where a Coptic Christian friend took me. It was Saturday evening vespers, and when I walked into the church, I saw this very tall man with a long beard.



*Patriarch Kyrillos VI
(Father Menas)*

He looked at me and said, "You are not a Christian." I felt as if his eyes penetrated my being. He said, "I will baptize you." I replied, "Never." He said, "Come here." Of course, you know the custom of kissing the priest's hand to receive a blessing – he offered his hand, so I hit it. He laughed and said, "I see...You know that you put your one-year-old brother in a suitcase and hid him under the bed, right?" I looked at him stunned. That was an event known only in my family, which had happened when I was about five years old. I said, "Who told you that?" He said, "No one. Christ told me everything about you and I've been praying for three years to meet you." I looked at him. He continued, "And you didn't kill the cat." This was true – when I was a boy my mother had come home to find the cat hung by its neck from the kitchen door. She and my brother had said I had done it. "It was the maid who did that, but your mother never believed you." (This was the one innocent moment of my youth.) I kept saying to myself, "My goodness, who is this man?"

Then he said, "Do you remember your teacher, Laura?" When he said, "Laura," I became very frightened because Laura was an Irish nun who had taught us English. She was very keen on beating us. One Friday I couldn't carry my schoolbag home because my hands had been beaten so hard, and my cousin said, "We have to punish Laura." "How?" He said solemnly, "As David punished Goliath!" So he went and bought a slingshot and some metal marbles and we trained together. A week later, I hid in the hedge behind the school and aimed at her head. The marble hit her on the side of the head

and blood came gushing out. She fell on the ground screaming. No one ever knew about this except me and my cousin. Of course, we were shocked, and we even took flowers to the hospital, although we couldn't admit our guilt. Years later, I made a trip to Ireland to try to find her. I wanted to confess and ask her forgiveness, but I was too late. She had already died.

After that, I lived with Fr. Menas for three years. He taught me Coptic, taught me the prayers, and he baptized me, and soon I began noticing unusual things about him. He served the liturgy and received Holy Communion every day, and people would come from different parts of Cairo, from Alexandria, and from the south of Egypt for healing, exorcism, and confession.

One Friday, as I was holding a candle beside Fr. Menas while he gave Holy Communion to the people, he quietly said to me, "Do you see that woman with a black shawl on her head? I said, "Yes." He said, "Ask her to leave the Communion line. She is a Muslim." So I went to her, and it turned out that she was a maid who had come to church with her Christian family. After the liturgy, when he was cleaning the chalice and the paten, I asked him, "How did you know that she was a Muslim?" He looked at me and said, "Are you blind?" "Blind about what?" He said, "The light of the Holy Spirit wasn't shining in her face." I replied, "You see the light of the Holy Spirit?"

He didn't answer me then, but after he gave the final benediction and was taking off his vestments, he said, "Come here." He was very tall and his hands were large. He laid his hand on my head and he said the prayer that Elisha said for his servant, Gehazi – "Oh Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see." That was it. Nothing happened, nothing unusual, nothing... and I forgot about it until about a month later during a Saturday vespers. The church was packed with people, when I suddenly saw a face that was very dark. I told Fr. Menas and he said, "Yes, that woman is a Muslim, and that other woman is a Jehovah's Witness. Go and stand next to the Jehovah's Witness. You will smell the smell of death in her." When she came forward for the final kissing of the Cross, he looked at her and said, "When are you going to repent of your heresy and believe in the divinity of Christ? You smell of death." And I tell you, there was truly a strange aroma coming out of her – like the smell of a dead body. Up until now, I can smell Jehovah's Witnesses. They have a very distinctive odor.

This was at a very early point of my Christian journey, and sometimes at confession Fr. Menas would tell me what was in my heart before I uttered a word. And he did this not only to me. Once a young boy about ten years

¹ Patriarch Kyrillos VI of Alexandria served as the Coptic Patriarch from 1959 to 1971.

old came to receive Communion and Fr. Menas said, "You haven't fasted. You ate some baked beans and drank tea this morning." The boy said, "No, I didn't." Fr. Menas replied, "And so you lie also?" "No, no, I did, I did...." (I groaned inwardly, "Oh Lord, is anything hidden from the eyes of this man?") He said to the boy, "You know, because you're young, I'm going to give you Communion although you haven't fasted, but next Sunday you come fasting. And don't lie anymore."

I stopped asking him anything after that. I was a subdeacon at the time and he had taught me how to make the Eucharistic bread. Whenever I'd take him coffee or tea, or bring him some food he would stare at me, and every time he stared at me, I trembled with fear. Even in my room, if a filthy thought entered my mind, I was afraid to entertain it because he would know. I was frightened of him, but I loved him, and on many occasions he would hug and kiss me. He always called me, "My beloved son." "Beloved son, come here... what's troubling you?" Sometimes after I confessed, he would say, "The Holy Spirit will make you clean. Don't give the devil time to make you feel sorry for yourself."

There were three basic things he taught me at that time. First, before I looked at a canon, I had to look at the doctrine behind it. If one of the old Coptic canons contradicted Church doctrine in an obvious way, Fr. Menas would say, "This is an opinion, we can disregard it completely." From him I learned to discern what was behind the canons.

Second, he introduced me to Isaac the Syrian. Fr. Menas was a faithful disciple of Isaac the Syrian and I too read Isaac the Syrian day and night. Although St. Isaac the Syrian was certainly from the Oriental Church and possibly from the part of the world we usually consider Nestorian, he was a very great teacher. Third, he said to me, "You must find the answer to any doctrinal question you have in the services, in the liturgical prayers of the Church. If it's not there, think about it, read the Fathers, but if it isn't in the services, this could be a matter of speculation. Put it aside until we talk."

On one occasion, during the Nativity Fast, we were in the Church of St. Menas, and some people from Alexandria brought grilled fish, wrapped in nice clean white paper. It was a Friday. He gave me a piece, and I put it aside. Watching me, he opened one of the wrappings and began to eat. He said, "Have a piece." So, I took the bit he held out and ate it. He said, "You're a hypocrite. Why did you put the other piece aside?" I said, "Because of the canons." He said, "What canons? The Church can't stop us from eating any

food because that is Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Fasting is a tradition of the Church, but these people came, and brought an offering of love. Would you shame them and not eat? Eat!" So I ate, and as a result of that he asked me to do my first historical work on the history of fasting in the Eastern Church. Sometimes we even had red wine and chocolates during fasting periods. He would say, "This is God's gift. If you say no, I'll apply the canons."

At one point, I contracted tuberculosis, partly from being a strict vegan, and I had to eat meat. I was very ill and when Lent came Fr. Menas said, "You're not allowed to fast." I really wept, and he said, "Heh!" and took down a volume of the desert fathers and read me a story: "Father Silouanos was walking along the road in Sinai with one of his disciples during Lent. Around midday, they entered a monastery where they talked to the brothers and ate. Afterwards, they walked on to another monastery to visit the brothers, who also gave them food, which they ate. As they approached a third monastery, the disciple said, 'I must go drink some water.' Silouanos said to him, 'We're fasting.' The disciple said, 'Abba, you forgot, we have eaten twice.' He said, 'Yes, the brothers out of their love for strangers fed us, but believe me, we're still fasting.' The disciple asked, 'How can we still be fasting?'" Now the Coptic text builds on the Greek. The Coptic says, "Whatever you do out of love does not break a fast." That, I think, is discernment.

I love this story because legalism is a real enemy and sometimes you have to rescue converts from it. They enter the Church eagerly – this is good – but if they mistakenly think that in being legalistic, they are becoming good, holy Orthodox, the opposite is true.

In the stories of the desert fathers, there are three lines where I laughed and wept all at the same time. 'A call went out to Scetis that Lent had begun, and one of the hermits came out and said, 'I have been fasting here for forty years, and I've never known when the Fast starts or when it ends, but you novices came here to spoil everything for us.'

Fr. Menas was full of discernment, full of unusual gifts and would tell people what was wrong with them when they came for healing prayers. There wasn't a single day that passed without matins, vespers, and the midnight prayers. Even when he became patriarch, he would never celebrate liturgy without them. If no one else was there, he did all of the prayers by himself. If another priest served with him, fine, but otherwise, Fr. Menas was quite happy to take the whole service from the beginning to the end, until the last day of his life.



On one occasion, I went to see him when I was in great turmoil. He was in the baptistry, and when I walked in he looked at me and said, “The demons are torturing you, aren’t they?” He laid his hand on me and said, “From now on, you have to do the Jesus Prayer instead of the psalms, until I tell you differently.” As he gave me absolution I looked at him. Before my eyes, his physical presence vanished and he became a flame of fire. I was terrified, but he caught hold of me with both hands and hugged me, and then he returned to looking as he usually did. He said, “Now you know what happens to us when we are in the heat of temptation. The Lord has shown you something in me, but it is also in you.” I looked at him and said, “I’m very tired.” He said, “Yes, ...the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence and the violent take it by force (Mt. 11:12).

So, it wasn’t philosophic or historical arguments that drew me to Christ. It was that man.

Father Philemon of St. Macarios Monastery, Scetis

Now I will tell you about Fr. Philemon, who was a hermit in St. Macarios Monastery, where I also lived for some time after my years with Fr. Menas.

When I was getting ready to leave for England to take up a scholarship at Cambridge, Fr. Menas had already become Patriarch Kyrillos VI. I went to see him and asked, “Where should I receive Communion?” He said, “If the Greeks allow you to receive Communion, go. If not, receive Communion in your own heart.” I said, “What does it mean to receive Communion in my own heart?” He said, “Are you going to St. Macarios tomorrow?” (I was, actually.) I said, “Yes.” “Well, give my greetings to Fr. Philemon and ask him to pray for me.”

So, I went to the Monastery of St. Macarios, which is in Scetis, the old Scetis of the desert fathers, between Cairo and Alexandria.² Philemon was waiting for me at the gate – he was a tall man, very thin. He said, “How are you Brother George? How is our patriarch?” I said, “He is fine and he sends you his greetings.” He said, “Yes, but he told you something else.” There was no telephone in the monastery, so I asked, “And how do you communicate with each other?” He said, “That’s a matter of curiosity, and not for you to know.”

² Monastery of St. Macarios: Monastery in the Nitrian Desert of Egypt founded by St. Macarios the Great and continuously inhabited since the fourth century. Now a monastery of the Coptic Church.

Opposite: The Hanging Church in Old Cairo.

Then he said, “The time will come when you will receive Communion in your own heart, by intention. After our patriarch dies, you will have a hard time with the Coptic Church and you will be excommunicated.” I said, “Why?” He said, “I don’t know why. Ask the Lord – He will tell you.”

He said, “I’m telling you because when it happens, don’t despair, don’t give up. Say the prayers of the Church, follow the liturgy in your own heart and mind, and the Lord will feed you His Body and His Blood.” I said, “Without going to church?” So, he took some sand and put it in my hand, and he said,



Father Philemon

“Who is carrying the sand? You say ‘your hand,’ you say ‘the desert,’ you say anything, but in the letter to the Hebrews, Paul says that Christ carries everything by the power of His Word. If you have physical sight, you see your hand holding the sand. But if you have this deeper understanding, you see that Christ carries everything.”

I said, “Yes, but how can I receive Communion without being at the liturgy?” He said, “Well, Our Lord said that if you look at a woman and lust after her in your own heart you have committed adultery. If evil can do that, what do you think good can do?” “But why do we need the liturgy then?” He said, “You’ll have to go back and ask the patriarch, but you have to be

content that when you are deprived of the eternal food, you shouldn’t despair, but pray that the Lord will give it to you mystically.” I said, “I don’t understand,” and he said again, “Let the patriarch explain.”

Fr. Philemon had a custom that he would sit on the floor to talk. When he stood up it meant that this was the end of the talk. He stood up then, so I left and went back to the Coptic patriarchate in Cairo. After vespers, the patriarch said, “What did Fr. Philemon tell you?” I said, “He told me sad things.” He said, “Well, everything is in the hand of the Lord, George. Come here, I want to show you something.” He took me to his office and he pointed to the reading lamp on his desk and said, “Plug it in and switch it on.” I did. “Do you understand?” “No, understand what?” He said, “The liturgy has been in the heart of God from eternity. We have the liturgy in time, but it has been in the will of Christ before the foundation of the world.”

I said, “Philemon said something like that.” He said, “Ah, then he passed primary school.” I said, “Look, I’m not a ball to be passed from him to you. What’s going on?...” But he didn’t answer.

Later, Philemon said to me, “The Lord has a plan for all of us, George. You don’t understand, I don’t understand, but it is from all eternity that the Son of God has offered Himself for the salvation of the world. Eternity manifested itself in time.” I said, “Yes, but we live in time, and Holy Communion was instituted on Holy Thursday in the upper room.” He said, “Yes, but the eternal will of the Son of God was behind it. You communicate with that eternal will, and ask the Lord to give you His Body and His Blood mystically.” I said, “I still don’t understand.” “Never mind. One day you will.”

Once, Philemon said to me as a test, “What is the difference between receiving Christ through the word of the Scriptures and receiving Christ in Holy Communion?” I said, “You have to tell me, I don’t have the mind to begin to explore that.” He said, “Well, when you come on your next visit, we’ll talk about it.”

The question bothered me a lot, so I read St. John Chrysostom all in one go, especially the sections in which he speaks of the Lord’s Supper. I still couldn’t reason this out, so I went back to Philemon and said, “I don’t understand. You have to tell me.” He said, “George, Christ comes to us in many ways. He comes to us during temptations as the Good Shepherd. He comes to us as a light in the word of the Scriptures. He comes to us as God incarnate, crucified and risen, in the Eucharist. All of these are manifestations of the same Christ. Which one would you like to have?” I said, “Of course, the Eucharist.” “Of course, the Eucharist contains everything, but suppose this is not possible for you? Suppose you are in the hospital, suppose you are traveling, suppose you are in prison – will the Lord deprive you of His presence? No. Recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Lord will come to feed you, to raise you up, to give you His strength, as He would do in the Sacrament.” So, I said, “So, you are talking about necessity here, not common practice.” He said, “You aren’t far from truth, but this is not the whole truth....” Then he stopped.

Philemon died, and I was excommunicated in 1984, thirteen years later, for publishing about theosis (deification) from the Orthodox patristic view. When I was in Egypt, I couldn’t receive Communion in any church, so I used to sit, as he told me, and go over the liturgy – I knew it by heart – and pray to the Lord not to deprive me of His Body and Blood. I never received anything

material, nothing to taste or swallow, but every time I did that I used to feel tremendous strength and energy.”

But, you know, Philemon was very stubborn. He would say something that was like an earthquake, and it would go on for a week, two months, three months, maybe a year, and I'd go back each time with the same question, and he would say to me, “I think I told you enough. You are just very curious. You are greedy for knowledge and that is a sign of pride.” When he would mention pride, I'd look at him and said, “I'm sorry, Father, forgive me.” “And he would say, “May the Lord forgive us, George.”

Father Philemon refused to become a priest, by the way. He said, “I can't stand in the sanctuary doing all these things. It needs very special concentration, and I am weak. I need to just stand and pray. To have to do this and do that – it's too much for me. It takes someone like an angel.” He was finally ordained a deacon, but he created such havoc in the service – really, he disturbed everything – so the abbot stopped him from serving. He did that deliberately, and in the five years before he died, he pretended to be mad. He became a real fool-for-Christ. You would ask him a question and he'd say, “You're asking me? Who told you that I'm God Incarnate? Go talk to Christ!” And then he would burp or break wind. (*Laughing*)

But when he could see a real desire for truth in someone, he would speak. After he died, I got to know the brother who had looked after him, and we put together our memories of him. I'm now translating every conversation with him from Arabic to English. And there are letters also that he wrote in Arabic while I was in England. When I feel low in energy, I just sit and open the Arabic, and begin to translate his letters. I feel that I enter into the heavenly realm while trying to work out the best English text for his very simple colloquial Arabic.

Philemon used to sit outside his cell. There was a tree outside the Church of the Forty-Nine Martyrs of Scetis. One day I saw him sitting in the shade of the tree, moving as the shade moved with the sun. He used to recite the text from Psalm 118, “I am like a shadow that is fading away.” He said to me, “All my life, I wanted to become like a shadow, to pass over the sand of the desert and not to disturb anything. Even when I walk in the desert, I say to the sand, ‘I'm sorry, I am very heavy for you.’”

Now, Philemon was not just vegetarian, he was a very strict vegan. On one occasion, he asked me to bring him some dates, and so I brought him two kilos of the most expensive dates to be found in Cairo. As I was sitting in

the library, the abbot came and said to me, “Come and see what your friend Philemon is doing with the dates.” So, I went out with the abbot and found Philemon feeding the dates to the donkey. He was patting its head, and talking to it. When he saw me he said, “Well, if you give someone a present, it becomes his personal property, doesn't it?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Are you sad that I'm feeding my brother donkey the dates?” I said, “No, I'm not.” He said, “He needs to be fed with some good food from time-to-time. Look at his eyes. You can see the meekness of Christ in the eyes of this donkey. For me he is a mini-icon of Jesus Himself.” And actually, as I looked into the eyes of the donkey, who was beaten and cursed by the monastery workers, yet didn't complain, I also saw this.

Another story about Philemon is told by the monks who were eyewitnesses. During World War II, a German airplane was shot down by the Allies and was about to crash straight into the Monastery of St. Macarios. Philemon was standing on the wall, and when he saw it coming straight down on them, he shouted, “Abba Macarios, drive it away with your stick!” It suddenly shifted in its descent and crashed about 35 meters from the monastery. The pilot died in the crash, and the Bedouins quickly stripped everything – only a little of the skeleton remained, and even that was taken away by someone. That was when Philemon's reputation for sanctity started among the brothers.

Philemon also had piles [hemorrhoids]. After arriving at the monastery at the age of fourteen, he never left, but because he was bleeding, the two doctors who came from time-to-time to examine the monks told him that he had to go to Cairo for an operation. He said, “What operation?” So, they explained it to him. He said, “I sleep naked, and men and women look at me? No, I will die here.”

The Forty-Nine Martyrs of Scetis are buried at St. Macarios in a small chapel, and Philemon took his mat and laid it over their burial site, and began shouting at the Forty-Nine Martyrs, “I am on top of you, I am not going to leave. Either you heal me, or you take me to heaven.” The whole night, the monks heard him shouting. When he became very tired of praying, he slept, and awoke in the dark to find himself being carried out of the burial place and put down in front of the royal doors. Then he saw the piles being cut and put on a piece of linen. So, he never went to the hospital.” This story is recorded in the history of the monastery, and after this the monks began to look at him as a very special person.

A bishop once came to preach at the community of St. Macarios. Philemon



had a habit of sitting with his knees pulled up to his chest, and he would sit like that for the whole service, while everyone else was standing and kneeling. After the service, when the bishop came over to greet us, he asked who I was and I introduced myself. Then he said to Philemon, “Who are you?” He said, “They call me Philemon and I am Philemon.” He said, “How long have you been here?” He said, “I don’t know.” He actually didn’t know. He said, “I came here as a young boy and now I am an old man and how many years have passed, I really don’t know.” The bishop didn’t like that. “Were you in church?” “Yes, I was in church.”

The bishop asked, “What did you think of my sermon?” I thought, “Oh my, I wish he had not asked that question,” but Philemon looked at him and asked, “Was there a sermon in the church today?” The bishop said, “Yes, were you asleep?” “No.” The bishop continued, “I spoke about this and that.” “Oh yes, you call that a sermon? You were talking about yourself and giving us a demonstration of your knowledge.” The bishop said, “How dare you say this!” “Ah, so the old Adam is still alive in you!” “What do you mean?” Philemon replied, “If people judge you and you are offended it means that you are not doing things for Christ.” I sat there praying, “Mother of God, save this bishop from the hands of Philemon.” *(laughter)*

The bishop said, “Oh, so you think I’m projecting my own image?” “Yes, that’s what I felt, and that’s why I said there was no sermon. But, bishop, if you teach and speak to us of what the Lord said, not what you think, that will be a sermon.” Then I said, “You know, Your Grace, Fr. Philemon is one of our hermits and he is an unusual man.” The bishop kept looking at him and finally said, “Well, if he is unusual, it doesn’t matter what he says.” I kept whispering to Philemon, “For Christ’s sake, man, move....” Then Philemon stood up and said, “Yes, what I said doesn’t matter at all, because the old nature in us doesn’t have a desire for truth. And you know, Your Grace, truth is not an idea, truth is Christ Incarnate. Peace and joy in Christ.” And he walked away.

The abbot looked at me and smiled, and the bishop asked me, “Do you know this man? What do you think of him?” I said, “Well, he’s a monk and monks have their own way of life.”

Opposite: St. Macarios Monastery, Egypt.

Harmony of Creation

Among real hermits (at least those I knew) there is a nice, naturally sweet fragrance, and, you know, I don't believe that Philemon ever had a bath. He washed his hands and feet and face, and that was all. But whenever I hugged him, some of his pleasant fragrance would stick to my clothes for a day or two. Isaac the Syrian says that the purity of the soul purifies the body also. You can tell when you shake hands or hug someone, something about their inner life. You can tell the devious persons and the immoral ones. You can even smell fear sometimes, in some people. If you say this, people frown at you, but people who have not been spoiled by civilization can smell fear and anxiety.

We are losing our natural abilities. For example, when I was young I could tell when it was going to rain by the smell of the air, because I was never a city boy. From our house, it was only two or three minutes to the fields on the outskirts of Cairo, and then across a valley was the desert. You could always tell what the weather would be by opening the window and taking a breath – whether there would be a sandstorm, or a hot or cold day. But living in a city, in air-conditioned and heated homes, has destroyed that ability. It's almost gone. But when I go out and live in the country again, it returns. We are the children of our own environment, and from the trees and the leaves you can tell what sort of a summer you will have. If you tell people this they think you are using magic, but it's not occult at all, it is being tuned to the blessings of God in creation.

There was a tenth-century monk, John of Dalyatha, who is not very well known in the West. He was a great disciple of Isaac the Syrian, and one of the most attuned human beings who has ever been in the Church, despite the fact that he is from East Syria, which is usually considered part of the Nestorian Church. We had an old Arabic translation of his works that we read long ago, and then the Maronites in Lebanon put out another Arabic translation of his homilies and meditations. I've begged Prof. Sebastian Brock to translate his writings into English. There is a text in which he says, "Be reconciled to yourself, be reconciled to God, be reconciled to the universe, and then you will be in the state of Adam before the Fall."

And this is true – I've known monks who had a lovely time with cobras and scorpions. Philemon was once standing reciting Psalm 19 in the Church of St. Macarios, when he felt something crawling up his leg. He put his hand inside his tunic, and pulled out a large scorpion. Now there was a panic in the

Church, because at that time they had no electricity, only paraffin lamps, and if the scorpion jumped they wouldn't be able to see where it landed.³ People started shouting, "Kill it!" He said, "No," and took it and put it outside the church, telling the scorpion, "Don't come again, the monks will kill you."

Father Matthew the Poor⁴ once told me about a time when he left his monastery to visit an Ethiopian hermit and lost his way. Finally, at late evening, he managed to spot the cave. He'd planned to return to his monastery the same day, but because it was so late and he couldn't walk in the dark, the Ethiopian monk made a big circle on the sand and with four crosses around it. He said, "Abbati, (Abbati means "My father" in Amharic), you sleep here in the circle, and don't get out." The hermit gave Fr. Matthew a blanket and he slept in the circle, very deeply because he had walked all day. He said, "In the morning, George, I saw the tracks of scorpions and snakes outside the circle, and I understood, "This man is really like Adam before the Fall."

I knew another monk who had a fox. This fox was his best friend and he used to come and eat from his hand. But when he had guests who came to see him in the cave, the fox would never appear. When we asked him about the fox, he would say, "When you leave, he will come back. He's frightened of strangers, but I am a big fox like him. We are friends."

But, you know, such harmony with creation is often lost for modern people because we are distracted. We live in a very wide circle of distractions – television, computers, telephones, ipods, radios, newspapers.... I used to say to myself, "How did I manage before the cell phone?" But I did, and very well. And even before the laptop and the computer. Do you remember the mimeograph machine? We did fine, and we were happy with it. It was what we had, and we had no sense of discontent. Printing a thousand copies out of one master sheet was a great achievement. Now, my printer has been dead for three days and I'm very annoyed, but I say to myself, "Thirty-five years ago, I was content. I don't need it." Things can wait.

Once, when I was really itching for something, Philemon told me, "You know you have the freedom of God in you when you feel that you don't

³ Egyptian Scorpions: While North American scorpion bites rarely cause any problem greater than the equivalent of a bee sting, North African desert scorpions include the *deathstalker* (*L. quinquestratus*) and the *fat-tailed scorpion* (*A. australis*), who contain potent venom and account for nearly 75% of the thousands of yearly worldwide deaths from scorpion stings (ten times more deaths than from snake bites).

⁴ Matthew the Poor: Father Matta-El-Meskeen (1919-2006) was an Egyptian Coptic monk and well-known spiritual father, who was a key figure in the revival of 20th-century Coptic monasticism after centuries of oppression by the Ottoman Empire. By the time of his death, his monastery of St. Macarius had grown from 6 to 130 monks.

need anything.” I said, “Not need anything – that’s too much. I need certain things.” He answered, “But if you can live without them...” Once, one of the monastery guests went into my cell at St. Macarios and stole one of my books and Philemon said, “You should be very happy. You lost it and that gives you more time to be free from it.”

I threw myself at the feet of great people and they gave me the best hospitality in the world. Hermits in the caves would come out to see me. Fr. Menas [another Father Menas] at St. Macarios had been in solitude for twenty-two years when I put a piece of paper under his door to let him know that I was in the monastery and would love to see him. He had been working on Isaac the Syrian, and I’d sent him some material and needed to talk to him about it before I left for England. I didn’t expect him to come out, but he did. He gave me a bear hug and we sat and talked for the whole afternoon. The monks were very surprised – “He came out to see George – George must be a very important man...” (*laughter*) It wasn’t that I was so important, but he needed some books I had. He did a wonderful edition of Isaac the Syrian in Arabic – truly excellent, and he copied the whole manuscript in his own very beautiful handwriting. In the monastery when they copy the Fathers, they write by hand in the old way, because Matthew the Poor told them that to understand a text, you must copy it, not just read it. The edition is perfect, absolutely perfect. He was a great man.

Leaving Egypt

After living with these people, I went on to academic studies, but what I had received from them helped me to get through Cambridge and finish my doctorate. I suffered, of course, and struggled a lot mentally because the western study of Biblical Criticism was not only Protestant, but very liberal.

When I was in England on my own, the only thing I could get from Egypt were letters, but the dialogues with Philemon and the time I spent with Fr. Menas and the other elders were enough to show me that there is a line that goes from Christ to the apostles through Church history to modern spirit-bearing elders, and that this is what it means to be filled with the Spirit, to be a bearer of the Holy Spirit, to lead a life of holiness. We do not need to depend so much on mental knowledge. Mental knowledge is good if it is in harmony with the wisdom of God, but if it is not, it must be stopped. I owe these fathers everything. I could never say, “I did historical research about Christianity, and through philosophy and science, I found that...” No. It was

through these remarkable people that Christ saved my life, even physically.

These men all knew about the time of their death. They knew ahead of time. Fr. Mikael George, from St. Mark’s Church in Cairo, whom I served with for three years, knew exactly when he was going to die. So did Philemon, and Fr. Menas [Coptic Patriarch Kyrillos VI]. After Fr. Menas died, I had a car accident, and afterwards I was in very bad pain. My left leg was completely paralyzed so that I couldn’t walk, and one night I screamed all night long, shouting for him and St. Menas the martyr. After many hours, Fr. Menas came in a vision with St. Menas, and St. Menas took hold of my leg and pulled it in a fierce way. I screamed, and Fr. Menas looked at me and said, “Your voice is too loud.” The next morning I walked to the doctor, who was a Copt. When I told him what had happened, he said, “Well, bend, lift your leg, do this, do that... Fine, Christ healed you, the saints came to help you. You don’t need me.” Other people also see Patriarch Kyrillos in visions – even Muslims, who still invoke him, “...through the prayers of Abba Kyrillos.”

When I think of Fr. Menas, of Philemon, and also of Fr. Mikael I say to myself, “These are the great authorities who taught me Christianity.” I owe a great deal to the Fathers of the Church, to the books I read, but the most important thing was the witness of these men to the grace of God. Without this I would have been knocked down and left the Church completely. I have been through tunnels of darkness, believe me, especially in the Coptic Church, but when I remember the things that they said – my goodness – it was as if they saw my life from the beginning to the end. None of these people had been to seminary. None. But they had mastered the teachings of Isaac the Syrian, and they loved the liturgical books of the Church and the Bible. These were their source of knowledge.

I would say that Patriarch Kyrillos VI was a great deal like St. Seraphim in his transfiguration. I’ve also seen that in Father Mikael in Cairo. These people are unusual. They appear like shooting stars on a dark night, illuminating one end of the horizon to the other, and when they disappear everything is dark again. God seems to appoint people from time to time to shock us,



Father Mikael

to wake us up from our slumber, but afterwards, there is no inheritance of grace. Grace can't be inherited, and even their close disciples are not of the same caliber. There is a mystery here that we do not understand.

I've read the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov in English, but I don't believe that after him any of his disciples were even close. Honestly, it's a mystery and it's very irritating because in this generation, as far as I know, we are left without a divinely human presence in the Church. Of course, we know that Christ is the head of the Church, yes, but the manifestation of grace in these godly people is not here in the same way. The monasteries in Egypt still have a lot of good people, but it is not the same. These others come like shooting stars on a dark night, illumining one end of the horizon to the other, and then when they disappear, it's dark again, and frightening. All we can say is "Lord Jesus Christ, why is this?" I don't know.

The Coptic Tradition and Orthodoxy

RTE: Dr. George, thank you for these wonderful accounts. How should we look at the grace that God has given to the Coptic monks and laity, although they don't have the fullness of Orthodoxy?

DR. GEORGE: Because I've seen it myself, I believe that people like Philemon, Fr. Menas, Fr. Mikael, like hundreds of people actually – don't know Orthodoxy in the historical/theological way, but have received Baptism, Chrismation, and the Body and Blood of Christ, and they live the Christian life. They really care about it, and I think, because of that, Christ does not deprive them of His presence and His love. When I was leaving for England and asked Patriarch Kyrillos where I should receive Communion (there was no Coptic Church in England at that time), he said, "Go to the Greek Church, and ask them if they are ready to give you Communion because they are our brothers in Christ." Now here is a man who had not studied theology officially in a seminary, but his attitude towards the Orthodox was, "This is our Church too." This is because we share the Fathers up to the fifth century, and the Copts even have some of the post-Chalcedonian Fathers in their liturgical books, like John Climacus (525-606) and John of Damascus (676-749). We are linked by that common tradition.

Opposite: Hermits' enclosures, St. Macarios Monastery.

In fact, the first time I went to Romania and saw the painted churches in Moldavia and their depictions of so many of the Egyptian saints, such as Sts. Onuphrius, Anthony, Paul of Thebes, and Pachomius, I felt at home. I'm quite happy to be the guest of the Moscow Patriarchate and I've enjoyed a good life with Zernov and Lossky and the people at St. Serge in Paris and in Oxford. I've seen the Orthodox tradition in the liturgy and prayers.

The new generation of Copts who now study in Greece are my hope. There are about seventeen of them at the moment, but they will not be allowed to teach at the Coptic seminary in Egypt, nor will they be given any kind of ministry or service in the Coptic Church. None.

RTE: Then why do they study in Greece?

DR. GEORGE: Because it is the only way to learn Patristics – you need to be fluent in Greek. Without Greek you cannot have a good knowledge of the Fathers. The English translation is a good guide, but it is only a guide. You need to get into the exact words used by the Fathers of the Church. Because Greek was abandoned in Egypt and because we never studied the Fathers in Greek, some Orthodox theological concepts are still problems for the Copts, and I don't think they will be sorted out in my lifetime.

It was Patriarch Kyrillos VI who told me, "You need to read the liturgical books of the Greek Church." When I did, it set my heart on fire because all of the Orthodox liturgical books are fantastic. I first obtained a copy of the Pentecostarion more than twenty-five years ago, and read it in the library of the Coptic Patriarchate. Then I read the Festal Menaion and the Lenten Triodion, and I kept saying to myself, "My goodness, this is wonderful." There was a depth of Christianity there that I had not encountered before.

The 20th-Century Coptic Church Meets the Orthodox Patristic Tradition

RTE: How did this new generation of Copts come to know about the Fathers?

DR. GEORGE: There are indications of a very early acceptance of some of the Church Fathers in the Coptic liturgical books, but in the 20th century, Copts who studied in Europe and U.S. brought the French and the English translations of the Fathers of the Church back to Egypt. At the same time, the

Orthodox Youth Movement in Lebanon began to publish the first Orthodox books in Arabic, which alerted us to the patristic heritage.

Also, visitors from the Orthodox churches were becoming increasingly familiar with the Coptic Church. You know how God moves things in a mysterious way: Dr. Nicholas Zernov came to see us in 1959-1960 and brought a lot of books with him, and we also came to know Vladimir Lossky, Bulgakov, Evdokimov, and Afanasiev.

In about 1950, the original Oxford 38-volume set of the writings of the Church Fathers, edited by Cardinal Newman and others who were part of the Oxford Movement, reached us in Egypt. Before then, we Copts had no knowledge of the Orthodox Church Fathers whatsoever. We only had the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom translated in the 13th century from Syriac and some extracts of Cyril of Alexandria, but none of the writings of St. Athanasius of Alexandria or the Macarian homilies, nothing else. I'd managed to read the writings of 12-13th-century Syrian monks in Arabic, and the collection of the desert fathers that was published later by Budge in English as *The Paradise of the Fathers*, but our knowledge before that of Church history, Patristics, and the ascetic writings was zero.

But the true beginning was the Arabic publication of an anthology under the title *The Orthodox Life of Prayer*. Matthew the Poor and the monks that gathered around him had been given a 130-page typed manuscript by Fr. Lazarus Moore, an anthology of prayer in the Orthodox tradition in English. Matthew the Poor took it into his cave around 1954-55 to read it, and it set his heart on fire. But he said, "There are things missing." This text was mostly writers from the Russian school, such as St. Theophan the Recluse, so he added John Climacus, Isaac the Syrian, John Chrysostom, and other of the Church Fathers, both the small pieces we already had, and some of the things we'd gotten from abroad, and under his hand the 130 pages became a book of 600 pages in Arabic. When that book reached us in 1955 – my generation – we were shaken by its depth and knowledge. It opened our eyes that there was a treasure called the "Fathers of the Church" about which we knew nothing.

So, how could we truly know the Fathers? There was only one way and that was to learn Greek. So some of us went to the Dominican center in Cairo, because wherever the Dominicans go, they build a religious and philosophical library. There was an Egyptian Dominican monk there, Fr. George Anawatti, who had created the largest collection ever to deal with Islam. So, from George

Anawatti we got to know the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*⁵ published in Belgium, and we began learning Greek and Latin with the Dominican monks. This became a deep hunger, and we went on to read Lossky, Bulgakov, and others in French because we had no knowledge of Russian.

The appearance of the 38-volume Oxford English edition of the Fathers of the Church created a wave of spirituality and theology that was completely alien to the main current of the Coptic Church. The Coptic Church had only just emerged from the Middle Ages, so badly bruised and wounded by the Ottoman occupation of Egypt that it could hardly organize itself. Those of us Copts who were discovering the richness of the Church Fathers, moved towards what you might call Byzantine theology and the things that were coming out of *L'Institut St. Serge* in Paris. I cannot imagine where the Coptic Church would have been today if we had not read the Orthodox books that came from Zernov, Lossky, and the others. We would have been spiritually dead, actually. We read the Fathers in English until our Greek matured enough to read the Fathers ourselves.

I was the first person to translate St. Cyril of Alexandria from Greek into Arabic. His commentary on St. John was completely unknown in Egypt. I also translated Cyril's five books against Nestorius, his book on the incarnation, and then some of his letters, which came to us from two sources: the English translation that was published by the Catholic University of America and the Greek text published by the *Apostoliki Diakonia* in Greece. Also, around that time about twenty of us went to various universities, mostly in Greece, Germany, England, and the United States. One went to the Russian theological academy at Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra near Moscow.

RTE: Were these Coptic monks or priests?

DR. GEORGE: One of them became a monk, one a priest, the others remained laymen – but all were theology students. We came back with Greek, Russian, English, French, and with the whole patristic world open to us in a wonderful way.

I have to say here that Russian scholars writing before the Russian Revolution for the *Journal of the St. Petersburg Theological Academy* published

⁵ *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*: An important bilingual collection of Eastern Christian texts with over 600 volumes published since its foundation in 1903 by Louvain Catholic University in Belgium and The Catholic University of America in Washington. Of the volumes, 240 are devoted to Syriac writers, and there are also sections for works in Arabic, Coptic, Amharic (Ethiopian), Armenian and Georgian. All volumes of the series are still in print.

the very best Orthodox studies on Patristics and Church history. We need to go back and retrieve these 19th- and early 20th-century articles and see what is there. Even today, the linguistic abilities of young Russians is staggering. For instance, in the Department of Classical Studies at Cambridge, I told one of them, “You must do a course in Latin if you want to do any work on Martin Luther.” Within five or six months he was actually translating Latin texts. They are an extremely gifted people, and that is why I think we need these monographs by Russian theologians on the Fathers of the Church. The great work by Fr. George Florovsky, eleven or twelve volumes in English, depended entirely on the work of previous Russian historians.

Having these Russian and Greek texts in translation would speed up our revival of Orthodoxy, which, unfortunately in the West, has put on the garment of the Middle Ages. We need to go back to the Fathers before the western scholastic theology of the Middle Ages suffocates us.

RTE: And for that you need inspired translators.

DR. GEORGE: Yes, for instance, Metropolitan Kallistos [Ware]’s style of English is excellent, and his knowledge of Greek is superb. He speaks Greek as easily as he speaks English.

RTE: Yes, Metropolitan Kallistos’ and Mother Mary of Bussy-en-Othe’s service translations are a great light for the English-speaking world. Dr. George, earlier you mentioned liturgical traces in the Coptic liturgical books of the Council of Chalcedon. Could you enlarge on that?

DR. GEORGE: I would even say that the main body of Orthodox teaching is enshrined in the Coptic services, but not in the later developments in Coptic Church history. I know for certain that even though the Copts don’t accept it, there are decisions of the Council of Chalcedon quoted in the Coptic liturgical books. I’ve counted twenty-six quotations from the decree of the Council of Chalcedon (451) in the Coptic liturgical books, and I can say with authority, “These quotes are not from Cyril of Alexandria, but from the Council of Chalcedon.” In the prayers to the Mother of God in Sunday Matins there is a text from Chalcedon that is amazing – it speaks of Christ’s Divinity being consubstantial with the Father and His humanity being consubstantial with us. That is Chalcedon. The entire Easter service is identical to that of the Byzantine Greek usage, and the main prayers of the baptismal service are identical to the Orthodox.



Also, the Coptic prayers for the consecration of an icon are taken from post-Chalcedonian councils. There has never been a council in the Oriental churches that actually sanctified the use of icons, but we all have icons and frescoes. Almost all of the early icons in the old churches in Cairo came from Jerusalem and were painted by Greek Orthodox Byzantine painters. So, the link was not as broken as we think, and we consciously share a large part of early tradition, up through the First Ecumenical Council at Ephesus (431). Dioscorus of Alexandria who rejected the Council of Chalcedon (451) made a huge mistake and I don't know how we can correct it.

Historically, there was antagonism from both the Orthodox and Coptic sides. For example, if you read St. Cyril's commentary on the Gospel of John or his dogmatic works, they are fabulous, but there were also personal issues between Cyril and Nestorius that heightened their disagreements. Although Nestorius held wrong belief, I believe that Cyril lacked moderation. He certainly incited the Greek mobs. When Cyril died, Theodoret of Cyrus said, "At last with a final struggle the villain passed away... observing that his malice increased and injured the body of the Church, the Governor of our souls has lopped him off like a canker. His departure delights the survivors but possibly disheartens the dead; there is some fear that under the provocation of his company they may send him back again to usPut the largest stone you can find on his grave, lest his ghost return to disturb the world."

But many theologians are hot-tempered – perhaps to be a theologian you need to be hot-tempered, to stand up in vigor. When you read the writings of the Fathers, you have to remember that, after all, they are human. And you know, in John Climacus anger is not a vice. It is vigor of the soul that has to be directed to the right goal.

So, there have been a lot of things that have gone on in history, but I have to say that, in the past few centuries, the extremely aggressive proselytizing, even attacks, by Catholic and Evangelical Protestant missionaries on Oriental churches in the Middle East put them in a constant state of self-defense. We became frightened, and, as you say in English, "dug in our heels," which blinded us from seeing such obvious things as John Climacus, who wrote after 451, but whose writings are actually a textbook for the monastic life of Egyptian monks.

The present condition of the Coptic Church – isolated, poor, oppressed, and lacking the richness of the Patristic tradition – is very sad, although dialogue

Opposite: A ray of sunlight strikes the inlaid iconostasion in the Hanging Church, Old Cairo.

with the Orthodox has been going on intermittently for centuries. There was a Russian archimandrite who came to Egypt at the time of Peter the Great (1768-1825) who recommended that the Russian synod accept the Coptic Church in communion. But the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church decided that they couldn't take this action outside of the rest of the Orthodox world.

Although we've achieved a great deal in unofficial dialogue, the present Coptic patriarch, Shenouda III, has attacked deification (theosis) as a Byzantine heresy, partly out of his fear of Islam,⁶ so the official dialogue with the Orthodox Church has not progressed. I hoped very much that the ecumenical dialogue would ease things, but in the unofficial dialogue with the Russian Church, Bishoi, the Secretary of the Coptic Synod, said that any teaching on participation in the divine nature is a heresy. Metropolitan [now Patriarch] Kyrill of the Moscow Patriarchate stood up and silenced him, but the real solution is that the Coptic clergy needs to study the Church Fathers.

In regard to the divine nature, we Orthodox do not speak of participating in the divine essence, but in the divine energies. This is from the Epistles, II Peter 1:3-4 where the apostle says, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature..."

We don't know what the future holds with the next Coptic patriarch, but you can see how God has dug "irrigation channels" from Anglican sources, Roman Catholic sources, and Russian immigrants to resurrect the old Christian church in Egypt.

In a place like Egypt, because of persecution and because of Islam, Christ manifests Himself in unusual ways. He has a place in Egypt despite all the complicated historical background.

RTE: Dr. George, does the Coptic Church actually embrace the Eutychean (Monophysite) heresy,⁷ that Christ has only one nature, or is this only a matter of mistranslation, as some people say?

6 Ed. note: Because Islam holds that man and God are completely separate as creator and creature, while Orthodoxy believes that man is created in the image and likeness of God and are united in Christ, a move by the Coptic Church towards a more patristic view could further imperil their standing with the Muslim-dominated Egyptian government.

7 Eutychean (Monophysite) Heresy: A fifth-century heresy named after Eutyches, a priest of Constantinople (380-456), who believed that Christ had only one nature -- his human nature was dissolved like "a drop of honey in an ocean of water" thus denying Christ's true humanity and true divinity. Eutyches believed that the 'one nature' of Christ completely eclipsed the human nature of Christ. Although St. Cyril of Alexandria used a similar terminology in his Twelve Anathemas, he was always careful to state the full humanity of Christ, and in 433 agreed with the 'two nature' terminology of the Orthodox Antiochene school. Eutyches, however,

DR. GEORGE: The real debate between the Orthodox and the Copts is whether it is Christ in two natures or, "of two natures" according to St. Cyril of Alexandria, or just to keep the old way "one nature of the Logos Incarnate." "In" two natures is an absolute necessity for Orthodox. I think that some Copts are Eutycheans who have no deep faith in the incarnation of the Son of God, and these ideas became even more confused after a sixth-century Egyptian monastic movement that developed Gnostic and Manichean elements. (The Manichean psalms, by the way, have only been found in the Coptic language, and in Egypt.) Manichaeism was a movement of negating the body, where they didn't accept Jesus as God Incarnate, but as divine only. When you read commentaries from the Middle Ages by some of Coptic writers about the Incarnation, the humanity of Christ is simply not there. What has kept the Incarnation alive in the minds of the Coptic Church is the Sunday liturgy, because they come back to church each week to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

RTE: Nevertheless, your experiences in the Coptic Church were very incarnational.

DR. GEORGE: My teachers were the moderate ones. But you know, there was a great shift that built up from the sixth century onwards, when asceticism was directed towards the negation of the human body.

RTE: Was that because they had rejected the Council of Chalcedon?

DR. GEORGE: No, it was because they hated the body. Eutyches, and Apollinarius before him, were real haters of what is human, and would have said, "The human mind is sinful, and therefore our Lord cannot have assumed it and cannot be completely man." That's Apollinarius.⁸ What is this fear of a perfect human being called Jesus Christ?

spoke as if almost nothing remained that was human in Christ and that His body was even different in some way. This is the 'of two natures as opposed to 'in' two natures ('of' meaning merged and fused into one) that was considered heretical by Eutyches' Orthodox hierarch, Archbishop Flavian of Constantinople (+449), and was later declared a heresy at the 4th Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451 AD. A full discussion of this heresy would take many pages.

8 Apollinarian Heresy: Heresy taught by Apollinarius the Younger (+390), bishop of Laodicea, Syria, who taught that the Logos of God, which became the divine nature of Christ, took the place of the rational human soul of Jesus Christ, and that his body was a glorified and spiritualized form of human nature. Although Christ was a man, Apollinarius believed that He did not have a human mind, but that his mind was solely divine, and that the two natures of Christ could not coexist within one person. Apollinarianism was condemned at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381.

This is why in response we have Gregory of Nazianzus saying, “What has not been assumed has not been healed.” The most extreme form of this mistake of denying the nature of Christ as both perfect man and perfect God, came in the hermit Eutyches who said, “The Body of Christ is like a drop of honey in an ocean of water – vanished.” He means that His human body disappeared into the ocean of the Divine Nature. This idea goes back to asceticism, but not to Christian asceticism. It is Manichean and Gnostic asceticism.

You have to be very prudent in dealing with the collections of stories about the desert fathers, because some of them, particularly some of the Syrian stories, are really Gnostic. Here is an example for you: “One of the elders went to the Church to pray and there was a sinful priest who was involved in adultery, but at the time of the consecration, the elder saw the priest suspended from the roof of the church and an angel celebrating the liturgy.” This is Gnosticism, because whether the priest is sinful or holy has nothing to do with the sacrament. Our Lord is the Priest who gives us the sacraments, not an angel.

There was another sixth-century Coptic story about a boy who did not remember ever seeing a woman because his father had taken him to the monastery as a baby. One day as he was walking in the desert with his father, he saw a woman looking after her goats, and he said to his father, “Who is that?” He said, “That’s the devil, it’s satan.” When he went back to the monastery, he was deep in thought and his father asked, “What are you thinking about?” The boy replied, “I like satan.” (*laughter*)

Now, no proper Christian will ever say, “This is satan.” What about the Mother of God? She is a woman too. You have to be very cautious with the desert fathers, and look carefully at the differing layers. The pioneers are the foundation, Anthony, Macarios, Pachomios – perfect. You move up – Evagrius, a little bit less. The upper, third level, which is sixth century, has parts which are far from being Christian. Don’t ask me how, I’m not a historian, but if you read these stories one after another, you feel the difference.

RTE: And yet you had wonderful experiences as a Copt.

DR. GEORGE: Yes, but as a young man I also fell into the hands of a Gnostic elder. It was Philemon who saved me from that. Do you know the T-shaped staff which we see in the Coptic icons? I was not allowed to sleep on a bed, I had to sleep standing, leaning on that staff. But this did not produce purity of mind; it weakened my body and damaged my spine. If you put all the em-

phasis on bodily practices, void of the grace of God, this is not Christianity. It doesn’t matter who says so.

Some of the versions of the Holy Fathers have to be checked carefully, because I don’t believe they said the rubbish that is sometimes attributed to them. If you only read the Arabic sources on monastic life and don’t check the Greek and what is reliable in Coptic, then you are in great danger because in some cases the Arabic sources are absolute forgeries. For example, the homilies of Isaac the Syrian in Arabic are not all by Isaac the Syrian. He knew nothing about them. St. Pachomius in Arabic has nothing to do with the Coptic St. Pachomius. For example, *The Paradise of the Fathers* that was published by Budge has nothing to do with the early sources, it is from a Syriac edition with many problems.

RTE: I’ve heard Budge’s *Paradise* read aloud, and I remember stories that sounded rather distorted.

DR. GEORGE: It is a very dangerous book. Many of the stories are anti-Christian. You can’t just gather all these stories together that were supposedly told by saints and give them a great “Amen”. No. You have to think, “What does this say?” The content will tell you that it is not a Christian story.

Just as I told you about women being called “satan,” another story says, “A ship was wrecked in the sea, and God saved the people from drowning. When they landed on the shore at Alexandria, being half drowned, they needed help, but there were some monks there who said, “Let us run away – devils have landed on the shore.” What devils? The women who were shipwrecked!

In an Orthodox story it says, “One of the elders was a priest in Scetis and he used to see the angels serving with him in liturgy. One day he said something heretical, but the deacon who was very well educated, said to him, “Father, don’t say that. These are the words of the heretics.” So the elder said, “Then, how could I see the angel? Why didn’t he tell me?” He asked the angel, and the angel said to him, “God has ordained that an angel can teach an angel, and a man should teach a man.” That’s fine, that’s Orthodox, but if an angel appears in front of me and tells me something that is not in the Fathers of the Church, if it’s not in the Bible, I’ll say “go bother someone else.” Because I’ve seen an angel, that means I’m a holy man and my teaching is right? No.

Seeing angels is not a criterion of Orthodoxy. St. Paul says, “If I or an angel from heaven teaches you something contrary to what you have heard, let that person be anathema.” We don’t receive revelation from angels anymore



– that’s finished. That’s Gnosticism. All revelation comes from Christ and it has to be according to the Scriptures.

RTE: There is an Alaskan story verified by St. Innocent of Moscow and Alaska about a baptized ex-shaman who was taught by angels in preparation for St. Innocent’s coming to these remote people.

DR. GEORGE: Yes, that could have been a revelation from God, but once there is a church and a teacher, no.

There is another story there of a man who put a rope around his waist and never had a bath, never washed, until worms started coming out of his body. What is the holiness in that? God honored your body by giving it the grace of resurrection on Judgment Day, so you can’t abuse your body to that extent.

RTE: How about some of the great Orthodox ascetics like St. Simeon the Stylite, who had maggots falling from his wounds?

DR. GEORGE: Yes, but he didn’t inflict that on himself. It came as a natural part of his illness. He was not aiming at it, nor did he advocate it. Do you remember the story of St. John the Dwarf? He said to his brother, “I’m leaving, I’m going to be an angel.” And so he left and went to the desert and when he became cold and hungry he came back and knocked on his brother’s cell, who said, “Who’s there?” He said, “John.” His brother replied, “Oh no, it can’t be John. John went to be an angel,” and kept him outside the cell, begging to come in. Only when his brother knew that John had humbled himself, did he let him in. Now that’s an Orthodox story, because you’re not going to become an angel. You progress in asceticism by loving the Lord and letting that love lead you in the ascetic life.

RTE: There’s another troublesome story in the *Paradise* about someone who eats a piece of fruit and doesn’t bless it first; there’s a demon sitting on the fruit, which they swallow, and it possesses them.

DR. GEORGE: That’s the Messalian heresy. The Messalians don’t believe in the protection of the gift of baptism or any of the other sacraments. As far as I know, a demon cannot possess a baptized Christian unless that person is somehow involved in magic or the occult. One can fall through demonic temptation, but possession is different.

Opposite: A detail of the icons at the top of the iconostasis in the Church of Saint Barbara.

I have another story. A woman appeared in a church near Cairo and her body used to give off oil. The people could see drops of oil coming out of her fingers, enough to fill a cup, and they were taking that oil and anointing themselves with it. The bishop thought perhaps she was a saint, and came to speak to me about her. I said to him, “Your Grace, I don’t know – it doesn’t have to be a sign of holiness, it might be demonic, but there is a test.” He said, “What sort of test?” I said, “Ask her to receive Communion from you. Insist that she does.” I was there watching, and after they had consecrated the Holy Gifts, she turned her face to the west and opened her mouth as if to receive Communion while the sacrifice was still in the sanctuary. She didn’t receive Communion from the priest. I said, “Why did you do that?” She said, “I received Communion from the hands of Christ.” I said, “Rubbish, that’s demonic,” and told the bishop, “Ask her to repent and if she doesn’t, cut her off.”

He told her, “You can drip blood or oil or light, or whatever, but this is the test of truth. If you don’t receive Holy Communion – out!” She was very angry and started cursing everyone, and the phenomenon stopped completely. I said to the bishop, “You know, that was important, because she mustn’t be allowed to deceive the believers and lead them astray. If we have an icon that gives off oil during a service, we know that that saint has been accepted by the Church as a saint, but a person who comes and does not participate in the sacraments, that is not Christian.”

RTE: What collections of desert fathers stories can we rely on then? How about Palladius’ *Lausiac History* and St. John Cassian’s *Conferences*?

DR. GEORGE: They are both fine. The collection by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is also good, as is *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, translated by Norman Russell.

The Ethiopian Church

RTE: Dr. George, can you speak a little about the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church? Was it originally connected with the Egyptian Coptic Church? Ethiopians that I’ve met in the U.S. say that their bishops and patriarch are appointed (or at least approved) by the Coptic pope in Alexandria, but that they never considered themselves to be Copts, which is puzzling. They also say that they never rejected Chalcedon, yet when we try to read their teachings in translation, it seems they follow a form of Coptic theology, though even

more inaccurate and confused. Where does their path actually lead, and how does it compare to Orthodoxy?

DR. GEORGE: I lived in Ethiopia both before Hailie Selassie’s death and after the Communists took power, and learned some Amharic also, and I have to say that I wasn’t pleased with everything I saw in the Ethiopian church. Historically speaking, there are two versions of their beginnings. One version speaks of Syrian monks establishing Christianity there, and the other version is that St. Frumentius was sent by St. Athanasius to become the head of the Ethiopian Church. In their prayers and their liturgical practices, they have almost nothing in common with the Coptic Church.

The Ethiopian tradition is full of ideas that relate to Jewish history. For example, they believe that the Queen of Sheba stole the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem and took it to Axum, and that it is in one of their churches, but in fact, no one sees it. They also say that Haile Selassie was a descendant of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. There is a lot of Judaism and paganism mixed in with much good teaching, and there is no doubt that the Ethiopians have many wonderful monks. The monastery of Dobra Maskel, outside of Addis Ababa has many educated, pious monks, living in community and as hermits and anchorites.

I worked solidly for ten years to sort out the complicated symbolism of both the Coptic and the Ethiopian liturgies, yet the truth is, you come to a dead-end. The more you plunge into symbolism, the more you engage the mind in self-awareness, rather than in an awareness of God. The ceremony and symbolism is beautiful and overwhelming – the open ornate umbrellas, and the dance, but I was disappointed by the church itself. There is a lot of magic practiced by the priests, and many pagan habits among the believers.

Thus, although Ethiopian women have the cross tattoo on the forehead and people are very pious, I also saw much confusion and misunderstanding about Christianity. For example, in Addis Ababa, in the red light district, these young women work as prostitutes for the whole year and then abstain and fast during Lent, returning to their trade after Pascha. They even give a tithe -- 10% of each client’s fees goes to the church. I asked the dean of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, a highly educated man and the spiritual father of Haile Selassie, the emperor, “Can’t you rescue these girls from their lifestyle, from these diseases, and can’t you ask the Emperor to make a kind of fund for them?...”



In my experience, the Ethiopian Church has many difficulties, both doctrinally and in popular practice.

RTE: Thank you. After this very rich introduction to the Coptic world, how should Orthodox relate to individual Coptic Christians. How close are we really?

DR. GEORGE: It depends on the Copt. To generalize about Copts is very difficult, and belief can be different. In the Monastery of St. Macarios, which is the fountain-head, and the monasteries around it, there are wonderfully virtuous monks who are just like the early desert fathers. Some monks are rather well educated, others don't know much about the outside world, while still others are fanatics who hate Greeks and Chalcedonians. The Coptic world is very much as if you've dropped a glass and it shattered into fragments; there is no unified tradition or practice. Fragmentation is the sign of our times. There are both moderate Copts who want to learn about Church Tradition, and there are fanatics who believe that everyone else is wrong and going to hell except for them. So, it's very hard.

But the key for all of us is, if you read the parables of our Lord carefully, you will see that Christ addresses the human person. He doesn't disregard self-interest: "If you want to inherit the Kingdom, come follow me." So, here is gain. Later it is put in another way: "What do you gain if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" Again, here is gain, and it is deeply rooted in human consciousness. Who does not want to gain the Kingdom of God? ✦

Opposite: Ethiopian monks, with biologists from Russia and Ethiopia, Lake Tana, 1980.