

The Coptic Church and People in History

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THE founder of the Coptic Church is St Mark, one of the seventy disciples and the writer of the second of the Gospels. At the site of the Cathedral named after him in Alexandria, he established the first community of Christians in Egypt and this is the origin of the Coptic Church, the Church of Egypt, from that day to this. The word “Copt” means “Egyptian”. It is related to the ancient Greek *Aiguptos* (Egypt), but nowadays “Copt” is usually understood to refer to the Christians of Egypt. Egypt and its people are very aware that they are the descendants of one of the great ancient civilisations. Furthermore, it was blessed by the presence of the Lord Himself. The only place that our Lord Jesus Christ went outside the Holy Land during His life on earth was Egypt.

Today the Coptic Church is the biggest Church in the Middle East. We are around twelve million Christians in Egypt. Our Church is Trinitarian, apostolic, sacramental and traditional, arising from the preaching of St Mark, who arrived in AD 42. The people were, in a way, prepared for accepting Christianity, because they believed in the life after death and revered a symbol that we call the *ankh*, a key-like cross, or a cross-like key. Indeed they knew it as the “key of life”; and by the end of the second century the gospel of the crucified Saviour Christ had been accepted by nearly all the population, according to the manuscript records we have in Egypt.

The Coptic Church is known as the Church of Martyrs, not only because of their number, but also because of their desire for martyrdom and to be faithful to Christ unto death. Some even went to the governors to announce that they were Christians in order to receive the crown of martyrdom, so strong was this desire within them.

Egypt continued to be completely Christian until the seventh century, when the Arabs conquered it. This was a turning point for Christianity in Egypt, because the new rulers gave the Christians three options: to convert to Islam, to pay the

very high taxes for remaining Christian, or to be killed. The rich were able to pay the high tax and to keep their faith. Far more of the middle class and the poor people converted to Islam, although many were martyred. But Egypt did not become predominantly Muslim all at once. Over time, however, because of the practice of polygamy among the Muslims, their number began to increase, and the proportion of Christians in relation to them began to fall. And even though today we are a large community of twelve million – far more practising Christians in Egypt than here in Britain – we form only 20% of a mostly Muslim population of 80 million.

In Egypt there was the first theological college in the world, the famous school of Alexandria. It was founded by St Mark himself, as it arose out of the Christianity he came to teach among us. Its deans include St Athenagoras, St Pantaenus, St Clement, St Didymus the Blind, St Origen, St Dionysius of Alexandria and St Athanasius “the Apostolic”. The last is probably the best known, playing such an influential role in the Council of Nicaea and in its subsequent acceptance. The renowned school was home to a vast library, or Museum as it was called, containing somewhere between 250,000 and 500,000 manuscripts. Unfortunately, most of this great library was lost to learning when it was burned as a result of the Arab conquest.

The beginnings of monasticism were in Egypt. The father of monasticism, St Anthony the Great, who flourished in the late third and early fourth centuries (251-356), began monastic life in the Egyptian desert and from there it has spread all over the world.

The Coptic Church as an Oriental Orthodox Church

The Coptic Church is now known as one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. This does not make us different from other Christians. Instead, let us consider how it is that we came to be “Oriental Orthodox” in relation to the other churches in the world and yet are nothing other than members of the one Universal Church. The first thing to bear in mind is that the Universal Church, the Catholic Church, started with Christ. Its first council was in the year AD 51 at Jerusalem and its course in history continued with three more: the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Council of Constantinople in 381 and the Council of Ephesus in 431.

In the fifth century, an archimandrite of a monastery near Constantinople named Eutyches, in his keenness to oppose the view that, Christ being human, Mary could not be called “Mother of God” (the formula agreed at Ephesus that asserts the Church’s faith in the full divinity of Christ), began to teach the opposite extreme. Thus he spread a new heresy that denied the human nature of our Lord, saying that His body was but an ethereal body that passed through the womb of the Virgin Saint Mary. Subsequently, a local Council convened by seven bishops, led by Flavianus, Bishop of Constantinople, and supported by the Tome (exposition of the Dogma) of Leo I, Bishop of Rome, condemned him as a heretic. Eutyches, believing himself to have been misunderstood, appealed to all the bishops of Christendom, as well as to Emperor Theodosius the Younger, with the result that a second Council was convened in Ephesus in 449 AD, attended by 130 bishops, under the presidency of Pope Dioscorus of Alexandria, together with Patriarchs Juvenal of Jerusalem and Domnus of Antioch. He submitted a full written confession, affirming the Nicene Creed, and was thus acquitted as orthodox. The bishops who had passed the earlier verdict against Eutyches based on Leo's Tome were excommunicated. Later, however, Eutyches proclaimed his heresy once again, and this time he was condemned as before and excommunicated by a local Coptic council.

That could have provided the resolution of the matter. But already Pope Leo had denounced the second Council at Ephesus, restoring the deposed bishops and excommunicating Dioscorus. Dioscorus had excommunicated Leo in return. Thus within two years yet another Council was convened by Emperor Marcianus at Chalcedon in AD 451. It is from this Council that the problem that has lasted into the present age arose. Regardless of the theological questions it was once more addressing, it was strongly characterised by political factors that had led to prejudices and conspiracies against the Church of Alexandria and its patriarch, Pope Dioscorus. Politically, Alexandria was only a city under the rule of the Eastern Roman Empire whose capital was Constantinople, Rome being the capital of the Western Roman Empire. Theologically and ecumenically among the local churches, however, it was the patriarchs and popes of Alexandria who played a leading role. There were those who resented this. Some began to create trouble out of envy, accusing the Church of Alexandria of doing nothing but gather bishops for ecumenical councils and then preside over them. Thus by the time the Council of

Chalcedon was convened, a great deal of animosity towards the Coptic Church had been aroused.

While the Council was in session, the Coptic Church was misquoted and its teachings were wrongly deemed to be Eutychean. The Patriarch of Alexandria was accused of being Eutychean, because he had presided over the second Council of Ephesus that had absolved Eutyches (but only because Eutyches had professed Orthodoxy), despite the fact that it was a local Coptic council which later condemned him for his heretical teachings, once he had returned to them. Furthermore, it was Pope Dioscorus who, in defending his Orthodox Faith, gave his famous analogy:

If a piece of iron, heated to white heat, be struck on an anvil, and although the iron and the heat form an indivisible whole, it is the iron which receives the blows and not the white heat. This unity of the iron and the white heat is symbolic of our Saviour's Incarnation, whose Divinity never parted from His Humanity, not even for a moment, nor the twinkling of an eye. Yet though His Divinity parted not from His Humanity, their union was without mixing or fusion, or change, like unto the union of the iron and white heat. This unity is defined as "the One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate" and is synonymous with Saint John's saying, "The Word became flesh." As for me, I steadfastly uphold the Faith of the Orthodox Church, the one, holy, Universal and Apostolic Church. Neither Eutyches, nor any other person, can make me swerve from this holy Faith.

When Pope Dioscorus' Orthodoxy could not be questioned, other accusations were laid. These focused on political issues, such as the question of preventing Egyptian corn from being sent to other parts of the Empire. Neither Pope Dioscorus nor the civil judges were present when the Council handed down the verdict against him (mainly for having excommunicated the Bishop of Rome). Despite being under house arrest at the time, Dioscorus was condemned and deposed in his absence after he did not appear at the Council session, having been summoned three times. Regardless of all this, however, Pope Dioscorus could neither be stripped of ecclesiastical honour nor excommunicated because of his unquestionably proclaimed Orthodoxy.

In a later session of the Council, at which the Egyptian delegation was not present, the precedence of the Churches of Constantinople and Rome was granted over the Church of Alexandria. The Egyptian Church, on the false assumption that the Coptic Fathers accepted the Eutychean view, was labelled "monophysite",

because of its emphasis upon the “One Nature” of Christ. This title was misinterpreted as covering either one of the human or Divine natures of our Lord to the exclusion of the other. But historical facts and the liturgy and doctrines of the Coptic Church prove the true Orthodoxy of the Coptic Church all along, and to the present day. For instance, when we say in our Liturgy, “his divinity did not part from his humanity”, and also that he took his body from Our Lady the Virgin Mary, making it one with his divinity “without mingling, without confusion, without alteration”, we express the Orthodox faith in Christ with the whole Church. Furthermore, it is now admitted by those who once accused the Coptic Church of being “monophysite” (that is, believing in only one nature of our Lord Jesus Christ) that it was a misunderstanding, arising from a problem of semantics; and that the Coptic Church is now properly to be referred to as “miaphysite” (that is, recognising both natures of our Lord, being joined inseparably in the “One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate”).

But, owing to the absence of the representation of the Church of Alexandria, the Council of Chalcedon passed statements concerning the two natures of Christ, and other ecclesiastical laws, which were stated in a way that could not be accepted by the Churches we now know as the Coptic Orthodox Church and the other Oriental Churches – the Syrian Orthodox, the Armenian Apostolic, the Ethiopian Orthodox, the Indian Orthodox, and the Eritrean Orthodox Churches. Therefore, the Council of Chalcedon resulted in the first major “schism”, or split, of the undivided Christian Church. Today, however, most scholars have agreed that the unfortunate events and decisions at the Council of Chalcedon were based upon misunderstandings and a misinterpretation of terms and words, rather than a question of Orthodoxy; and agreement has now been reached regarding the Nature of Christ between the Oriental family of Churches and the Eastern Orthodox Churches (see the agreed statements of their Joint Theological Commission from 1989 and 1990), and also the Catholic Church (witness the common declaration of Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria and Pope Paul VI of Rome from 1972).

In the United Kingdom today, the Coptic Church has approximately twenty-five churches. Most of the Copts who have immigrated here have come for study, or research, and ended up staying. This is why, at around 25,000, there is not such a very large presence here as there is in other countries, where people have gone to set up new communities and economic life, as for instance in the United States.

But wherever we are, and however many we are, we seek to be close to the Christians of other Churches and with them contribute our work towards Christian unity and our witness to Christ before the world.

There are many forums in which we are in dialogue with our fellow Christians towards this unity, especially with the Anglican Communion, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Thanks to these, we are all in agreement that the disagreement at Chalcedon which lies at the roots of our separation from each other is down to misunderstood terminology. Furthermore we share the view that really what was at play when our ecumenical problems began was not theological but political. Of course, since then, our differences have intensified in some respects and, despite a basic theological understanding, we have work to do in resolving them. But, even though nowadays the problem of separation is complicated by the proliferation in history of many sects and denominations, we nonetheless believe that fundamentally the Body of Christ is one and not divided. We are all baptised; we all believe that Christ is Son of God. We are all accepted by Him whoever we are and whichever part of the Church we belong to, because He is Christ and He is all in all. This means that we can sort our differences out and find our unity in Him.

The Liturgical Culture of the Coptic Church

Our church buildings are built in the form of a Cross, the symbol of our salvation, or in the form of Noah's ark, within which everyone is saved, or of a circle, the symbol of eternity and Christ who is without beginning or end. Our cathedral in Stevenage is in the shape of a Cross. You may, incidentally, like to know why our cathedral is situated in Stevenage. It began as the site of our youth centre, because our church premises in London were too small and unsuited. Over time, our services there grew and, when Pope Shenouda III sent his personal secretary to serve as a priest and four years later he was ordained a bishop, it seemed the right place for our work and mission to be built upon. So the Shephalbury Manor house was renovated and our Cathedral of St George, named not only because he is the patron of England but also because relics associated with him are deeply venerated in a number of the Coptic and Greek Orthodox Churches of Cairo, was constructed. Nowadays there is a community of around 150 Coptic families in and around Stevenage.

The language spoken by the Copts in Egypt includes two languages spoken at different periods in our history. First there is the old Egyptian language spoken by the Pharaohs and written in Greek letters, with the addition of seven characters for sounds not used in Greek, so that Coptic could be written phonetically. This language remained in universal usage in Egypt until the Arab conquest in the seventh century. It remained the main language for three further centuries, until the official language was changed by new rulers to Arabic. The use of Coptic in everyday life was forbidden under pain of cutting off the tongue and so Coptic survived mainly as a liturgical language. Nowadays in Egypt in our services we use a combination of Coptic and Arabic; in England we use some English, some Coptic and some Arabic. We do not restrict ourselves to praying in a liturgical language, as we also worship in English, or French, or German, or other languages, according to where we are. The Coptic language is musical and lends itself to being sung. Our Coptic music derives from ancient Egyptian music. The early Christians adapted the old Pharaonic music to the culture of Christian worship and so it became part of our tradition.

In Coptic iconography we refer to “writing” an icon, because an icon carries theology within itself. We write icons showing large eyes, meaning that those portrayed see with a spiritual eye, not with eyes for the material world. For, as the Scriptures say, “The light of the body is the eye” (Matthew 6.22). Similarly, the saints are shown with large ears, listening attentively to the Word of God, who said, “Let anyone who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4.9). You will also see in Coptic icons that the lips are gentle – just for praising. Overall, the head is large, so that the focus is less on the body and more on the head, the seat of thinking, prayer and contemplation more than physical concerns. Anatomically, the head is a seventh of the size of the body; in Coptic icons the proportion is one fifth. When you see icons of saints who are suffering, you will find that they are smiling and that their faces are peaceful. This means that they are full of righteousness, and joyful that they will be going to see Christ. Furthermore, most of the faces in Coptic icons are almost the same. This is not because people did not know how to depict people’s different features, but because, bearing the image of Christ, all the saints are shown as similar to him in appearance. For as St Paul said, “It is not I who live, but Christ who lives within me” (Galatians 2.20).

When you see a Coptic icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, you will always see her shown on the right of Christ her Son. As it says in the Psalm, “On Your right stands the queen” (Psalm 45.9). So she is always shown carrying Christ in her left arm. In our churches, on either side on the icon-carrier (the same as an iconostasis), we usually place an icon of our Lord on the right, with an icon of Our Lady on his right (and our left). The icons of the Annunciation and of St Mark, the founder of the church, are set next to the icon of St Mary; and icons of St John the Baptist and the patron of the Church are placed next to the icon of Christ. At our cathedral in Stevenage this is St George. Above this row of principal images, there are the icons of the Twelve Apostles, each looking towards the icon of Christ. In the centre are the icons of the Last Supper and of the Crucifixion.

Saint Mary in the Coptic Church’s spirituality and liturgy

For the Coptic Church, St. Mary is Theotokos, Mother of God, as described at the Council of Ephesus. We also call her the Golden Lampstand, because she carries the Light of the World. This comes from the Old Testament, which tells us that the only source of light in the Tabernacle was the lampstand. So this is how she is referred to in our hymns. By implication she is also the Tabernacle, because in her womb Christ came to dwell and be present in the midst of his people.

Another name for her is the Golden Censer. In Aaron’s golden censer they would put both burning charcoal and rising incense; in the same way she bears the incarnate Word of God, Christ, both human and divine. When St Cyril the Great of Alexandria was asked about the union between the divinity and humanity of Christ, how he could be both God and crucified, enduring the pains of crucifixion, and whether the divinity of Christ was affected by the pain and suffering of the crucifixion, he gave the example of how, when you put iron in the fire so that it can be beaten into shape, it is the piece of iron that is affected by the hammering, not the fire. In the same way, the lit charcoal (again, fire) is combined with incense, but it is the incense that burns and raises its smoke; the charcoal is unaffected.

She is Aaron’s Rod, which blossoms without water, because she conceived without a man. She is the Burning Bush, flaming with God’s presence but not consumed, a clear symbol of St Mary. She is the Ark of the Covenant because, whereas it contained the two tablets of the Law, the word of God written down, she bore within her the Word of God in the very person of our Lord Jesus Christ. She is

the Pot of Manna, containing the heavenly food, Christ the Bread of Life. She is the Ladder of Jacob by which Christ comes down to us and we can be raised up to heaven. She is the swift Cloud in which the Lord comes to deliver his people in Egypt from slavery (Isaiah 19.1). These themes and more occur in the many hymns we sing in honour of St Mary in our liturgy.

In our Agpeya, our Prayers of the Hours, we constantly remember the Virgin Mary, again praying that the Lord will forgive us through her intercession. Thus we pray every day with our morning office, prime, at six o'clock; at nine o'clock, the third hour; at twelve o'clock, the sixth hour; at three o'clock, the ninth hour; at five o'clock, sunset, we pray vespers; and at six o'clock, the twelfth hour, compline. At nine o'clock, it is the first watch of the midnight prayers; at twelve o'clock the second watch; and at three o'clock in the morning the third watch. At each of these offices we have a prayer to St Mary. For example, at our first morning office when we greet the Light of the world, we pray to St Mary, saying:

You are the honourable Mother of the Light. Everywhere under the sun people offer you glorification, O Mother of God, Theotokos, the Second Heaven; for you are the bright and unchangeable blossom, and ever Virgin Mother, for the Father chose you, the Holy Spirit overshadowed you and the Son in humility was incarnate from you. May you ask Him to redeem the world He has created, and deliver it from tribulations.

Let us sing to Him a new hymn and bless Him, now and at all times and forever more. Amen

Another example comes from the sixth hour, at midday, when we commemorate the Crucifixion of Christ:

Since we have no favour, nor excuse, nor justification because of our many sins, through you, we plead to Him who was born of you, O Theotokos, the Virgin; for abundant and acceptable is your intercession with our Saviour. O pure Mother, do not cast sinners away from your intercession with Him to whom you gave birth, for He is merciful and able to save us, because He suffered for us to deliver us. Let your compassion speedily reach us, for we are exceedingly humbled.

Help us, O God, our Saviour, for the glory of Your name. O Lord, deliver us and forgive us our sins for the sake of Your holy Name.

Here again, we see how important the intercession of the Virgin Mary is for the forgiveness of our sins. At the ninth hour, when we remember the Lord's death on the Cross, we again recall St Mary:

When the Mother saw the Lamb and Shepherd, the Saviour of the world, hung on the Cross, she said while weeping, "The world rejoices in receiving salvation, while my heart burns as I look at Your crucifixion which You are enduring for the sake of all, my Son and my God."

Note here how the Virgin speaks to her Son as "my God" like St Thomas, showing that, like all the human race, she prays for salvation and acknowledges the Lord as her Saviour.

The Visits and Appearances of St Mary in Egypt

As Coptic Christians we are very conscious that the Holy Family came to Egypt and stayed for around three and a half years. In Egypt there is a monastery called Al Muharraq at Assiut. In this monastery there stood an altar, which was exactly in the middle of Egypt, north to south, east to west. When St Mary appeared to one of our Popes in this place in the fifth century, she revealed the journey the Holy Family had taken during their time in Egypt and explained that this was the place in which they had stayed for six months before St Joseph was told in a dream to rise up with the Family and return to Israel. As it is written, "There will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt" (Isaiah 19.19). The Pope wrote down what he was told during the appearance of the Virgin and we still possess his manuscript.

We have many other stories about the appearance of St Mary. After the Arab conquest, the Muslims began to demolish Christian churches. When a governor of Egypt came to demolish the church in Atrib, the Christians prevented him, saying they would rather be killed than allow it to be destroyed. The governor told them that he could only delay the demolition by direct order of the Caliph, who was then far away in what is now Turkey. He gave them an impossible three days to obtain it. Meanwhile the people prayed; and that night St Mary appeared to the Caliph and asked him to issue the necessary decree. She received it from him and delivered it to the Pope of Alexandria, who took it straight to the governor. He was amazed and desisted from demolishing the church.

Another famous story in Egypt concerns the great mountain in the centre of Egypt called Al Moqattam. One of the Fatimid Caliphs, Al Mu'izz, had a reputation for wisdom. He would sit in council with the elders of the Muslims, as well as those of the Christians and the Jews. One day, one of the councillors keen to disturb this arrangement told him that there was a verse in the Book of the Christians that said that, even if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could ask a mountain to move from one place to another and it would obey. "If this is right," said the councillor to the Caliph, "you can tell them to prove it by moving Al Moqattam. If it is wrong you can either tell them to become Muslims, or they can be killed, because their Book is not right." So the Caliph summoned the Pope and asked him if he had this verse in his Bible. The Pope replied that he did and so the Caliph gave him three days to move the mountain.

In Cairo, the Pope went to the Hanging Church, Al Mouallaqa (it stands over a Babylonian fortress passage way), believed to be one of the places where St Mary stayed with our Lord and St Joseph during her time in Egypt. There he stayed, fasting and praying, for three days, asking all the people to fast and pray with him. On the morning of the third day, St Mary appeared to him. She told him to go out of the church, and there he would find a man with a pot of water. He was to take this man with him to the mountain; they would pray, together with all the Christians, and it would move. The Caliph joined them, ready with all his soldiers to kill the Christians if they were proved wrong. The Pope and the man with the pot of water and all the Christians who gathered at the foot of the mountain prayed and, every time they said "Kyrie eleison", the mountain would rise up so that everyone could see under it and behold the sun shining. Three times this happened, and the Caliph cried, "Enough!" He believed and was baptised. This story of such a great miracle arising from an appearance of Our Lady after fasting is so important to us that, when we fast for forty days before Christmas, because Moses fasted for forty days before he received the word of the Lord, and we do the same as we prepare to receive Christ the incarnate Word of God, we add three more days at the beginning in honour of those three days that our forebears fasted with such faith as to move the mountain.

In recent years, beside the many appearances to individuals attended by healing miracles, there have been some remarkable public appearances of St Mary in Egypt. The most famous was at Zeitoun on the 2nd April, 1968, which continued

for about two years. The government of President Nasser went to the length of sending an investigative committee and could do nothing other than acknowledge the reality of the apparition. This was widely reported in the press and television in Egypt and it became renowned all over the world. Our Lady appeared over the church, clothed in light. I was a young man at the time and I went to see her myself. At a time of great danger for the whole region and the safety of the Coptic people in particular, this appearance brought great peace and healing. Many Muslims love St Mary, they call upon her in prayer and fasting. Indeed, she has performed miracles not just for Christians, but for Muslims too. So when she appeared at Zeitoun, at a time when the mood for all Egyptians was depressed, she brought courage and hope.

Since then, there have been other appearances, notably in 1986, at the small church of St Demiana the Martyr in Papadouplo in Cairo. Next there was an appearance in 2000 at the Church of St Mark in Assiut in Upper Egypt. The last appearance was a little over a year ago at the Church of St Mary and the Archangel Michael, at a place called Al Warraq in the Nile Delta. Each of these appearances was of a woman clothed in light, and they were seen not just by faithful individuals but by everyone, in their many thousands. Millions saw the appearances in Zeitoun from 1968 to 1970 – not only the people of Cairo and those who came in from all over Egypt, but also thousands who came from all over the world. It is all well documented and the same is the case for the appearances at Papadouplo, Assiut and Al Warraq, which were seen by hundreds of thousands of people.

The Situation for the Coptic Church in Egypt in 2011

We cannot hide from the fact that the present situation is very difficult. After the 25th January revolution, we do not yet know how things will turn out and what will happen next. Before that, it is well-known that the regime of Mubarak persecuted Christians. You will be aware of what happened to the church bombed in Alexandria on New Year's Eve. A few months prior to that, another church was demolished in Giza. Our Church has been persecuted like this for many years, yet we feel that this is a blessing from God: "Blessed are you when they persecute and speak evil of you on account of my name" (from the Beatitudes in Matthew 5). If we cannot have complete purity of heart, if we are not able to live up to the other ideals in the Beatitudes, then at least we can be faithful under persecution and receive the same blessing for it. So our persecution does not cause us to lose heart.

But the problem for us is that the fact of our persecution is denied. No one will admit that it is going on. We cannot build or rebuild our churches without permission and they will not tell us what they want, what is needed, in order for us to obtain it. Even to maintain and decorate our churches, we have to get a permit, not from the local council whose officials we know, but from higher authorities who can ignore us. Until about five years ago, it was even worse: we needed permission direct from the President. At length he delegated decisions on small matters, but still we needed to go to the local governor for something as petty as tiling the church toilets. Now, in the new situation, we are asking for laws that guarantee equality. What can be wrong with such a law – why not? It is not, after all, that we would use our churches for commercial purposes.

We have received many promises over the years that things will be better and fairer, but they have never been fulfilled. So we pray that this time it will come to pass and we know that, whatever happens, we are in the Lord's hands. Whatever He permits, we accept it, because we are the Church of the Martyrs and we are proud to be known as that.

One of our fears, however, is that in the new constitution there will be a clause saying that Sharia law will be the main basis for legislation. This was the position we were in before in history. Thus we Christians will once again not enjoy equality, with the same rights and protection before the law. To give an example, in the Coptic Church we do not recognise divorce, but the Egyptian state and the Muslims do. Recently they tried to force the Church to give permission for a second marriage following the decision of a court. His Holiness Pope Shenouda stood his ground and said that under no circumstances would we in the Coptic Church allow that, because it is against the Bible. Our Pope was then accused of opposing the law and the constitution of the country; but he said that his law, the law of the Bible, forbade it. "If people," he said, "want to go outside the Church and marry a second time while they are still married to someone else, that is up to them; but I will not give them permission to remarry in the Church." This was only recently and there was a big debate about it throughout Egypt. We do not wish to limit the rights of Muslims to live as Muslims and to express their faith within the society strongly; all we ask is the same right to live and express our Christian faith.

That said, the majority of Muslims are very kind. We live with them and among them; they are our neighbours. So sometimes we feel that the problem really

lies among the people in power and the fanatics. Normal, ordinary people are fine with us and we get on well with them; so why can this not apply throughout our society with all people and at all levels? All we ask is that we have equality and be respected as citizens like everyone else.

There are negotiations going ahead now and the indications are that the interim military council understands our situation and is willing to address it. Definitely with the old regime it was very difficult to be treated with justice, but now we are hoping that things will improve. So we pray that God will preserve and keep the Christians and we are sure that Christianity will continue to flourish in Egypt until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, "Blessed be Egypt, my people" (Isaiah 19.25). And we will persevere whatever happens.