

## PRESENT-DAY CONVENTS IN EGYPT

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Whenever we speak of the Coptic Church or anything pertaining to her, we cannot speak only of the present, for the Coptic Church also has a glorious history consisting of nineteen centuries and two decades. Throughout her long history she has been (and still is) the faithful guardian and preserver of the Divine Legacy bequeathed to her from St. Mark and his successors. St. Mark is her founder and first shepherd, so that the unbroken line of his succession is always attributed to him. The present shepherd of the Coptic Church is Pope Shenouda III, the 117th successor to St. Mark.

Now, since the Coptic Church is conservative in her doctrine, her teachings and her practices, the convents for nuns (as well as the monasteries for men) of the present go back to the first centuries. The ascetic mode of life started in Egypt in the middle of the third century. The vanguards of this life of complete self-dedication to God, to a life of prayer and contemplation were all “solitaries”—i.e. each lived “alone with the Alone.” This life of complete solitude was lived by women as well as men. But the solitary life for women has ceased since the middle of the seventh century though it is still practised by men.

As for the monastic life in a communal order, it was started by St. Antony the Great (entitled ‘Father of monks’) and completed by St. Pakhom (known as ‘Father of Communal Monasticism, or more precisely ‘Father of Cenobites’). This communal monasticism, established at the beginning of the fourth century for both men and women, still exists today for the two sexes. The first monastery, as well as the first convent, was built by St. Pakhom in the region of Tabennesis in Upper Egypt. From this region they spread to the whole world. Outside their native mother land, monastic orders became diverse—as proven by their different names—Benedictines, Dominicans, etc. But in Egypt, their original home, there is but one Order for both women and men—The Pakhomian Order. Whatever differences may exist in each monastery or convent are related only to the daily routine of work. The principles are one throughout all the monasteries.

These principles assert that a monk (or nun) must perform some manual labor in addition to his prayers and meditations. This method was first

practised by St. Antony the Great and continued by all those who came after him. Work has a double purpose:

1. It helps the monk (and nun) to overcome the weariness which might assail him due to the surplus of his physical energy.
2. It is the means for gaining his livelihood, for helping the needy and for entertaining the numerous guests who go to him for spiritual advice and comfort.

Consequently monks and nuns maintain these principles up to the present, living the same life lived by the great desert luminaries across the ages.

During the early centuries, monasteries and convents were numerous; they dotted the Nile Valley from Alexandria up to Nubia. At present, however, there are nine monasteries and six convents. The monasteries are all in the diverse desert regions, but the convents are, without exception, within the cities. Yet despite their geographic situation, they are secluded and as much havens of peace and serenity as if they were in the heart of the desert. They are a living witness to our Lord's words that we are "*in* this world but not *of* this world." Their seclusion is the reason why the strangers hardly know of their existence.

The six convents are:

1. Mar Girgis (St. George) within the walls of the Babylon Fortress in Old Cairo.<sup>1</sup>
2. Abu Stefein (Mercurius of the Two-swords,<sup>2</sup>) also in Old Cairo, but outside the Fortress.
3. The Blessed Virgin, and
4. Mar Girgis—both of which are in that section of Medieval Cairo known as Harit Zaweila.
5. St. Marina<sup>3</sup> in the heart of the Cairo built by Sultan al-Moizz in 961 A.D.—namely at Harit ar-Rum.
6. St. Dimiana<sup>4</sup> which stands on the site on which the Saint was martyred in 303 A.D.

The first five are within the Cairo area, while the sixth is in Barari near Damietta.<sup>5</sup>

Each convent (and monastery) is self-sufficient; nevertheless, they are all in close contact with one another. Moreover, the stream of guests who invariably visit the convents express their gratitude to the nuns by offering whatever they can give in money or in kind. Naturally these offerings are voluntary; therefore, they may be little or much, or even none at all because of the poverty of the visitor. And here, it is edifying to insert a passage from "The Prayer for the Offerings" chanted during the Holy Liturgy; it states: "Remember, O Lord, these offerings and those who offered them; Remember those who gave little and those who gave much; Remember those who would give but have not. . . ."

Each convent has its father-confessor chosen by the Pope or the Bishop under whose jurisdiction the nuns live. This father-confessor is also responsible for presiding over the Holy Liturgy on specific days for the nuns in the chapels adjoining the convents. But though these Liturgies are “private,” they are attended by whosoever desires to gain the spiritual blessing transmitted by them.

The works performed by the nuns are:

1. Whatever the convent may need of re-painting the walls, decorating them and adorning them with the icons of different saints and biblical subjects. The most outstanding convent for its beauty and attractiveness at present is that of Abu Sefein.
2. Gardening.
3. Cutting and sewing their own garbs.
4. Embroidering the priestly vestments needed during officiating.
5. Braiding leather crosses.

Needless to say they do their own cooking and baking; consequently, they breed their own fowls and plant their own vegetables. These diverse duties are performed by rotation—that is, two are responsible for baking, two for cooking, etc. for a week. The following week they exchange their duties.

Each convent has its own Abbess or as she is commonly called “The Mother Superior” or at times “The Big Mother.” An Abbess is chosen for life, unless the nuns find that they want someone else. When they have such a desire, they discuss the matter with their father-confessor. If he is convinced of their complaint, he asks the Pope or the Bishop responsible for them to effect the change. Should the Abbess become too old to fulfil her duties properly, an assistant Abbess is assigned for her.

However a writer may try to convey a true picture of the convents (and monasteries), words are inadequate. It is something that needs to be seen and experienced. To illustrate this point the writer accompanied an Indian journalist, some years ago, to some of these sanctuaries. As we were going out, the Indian guest stopped by the door and said, “Those who built these places must have been filled with peace, because I have never felt such an overwhelming peace within myself as I am feeling now.” My answer was, “Yet these sanctuaries were built in times of stress and strife.” She said, “The peace they had was that given by Christ when He told His disciples, ‘My peace I give unto you,’ so it is a peace that no outside persecution can shake.” These words of a stranger to the Coptic Church, though she is a Christian, are a message for all of us to ponder that we may come to a fuller realization of our Saviour’s tender care and of His ever-vigilant eye watching over His Church.

*Footnotes:*

1. This Fortress was so called since about 585 B.C. when the prophet Jeremiah was compelled to go to Egypt during the Babylonian captivity. And

as Jeremiah lived in that vicinity, it became known as “The Fortress of Babylon.”

2. He received this name because he was a captain in Caesar’s army, and on the eve of his conversion, an angel appeared to him in a dream and gave him a sword saying, “This is the Sword of God’s word which gives life unlike men’s swords which take away life.”

3. St. Marina is one of the 800,000 martyrs killed during the presecution started by emperor Diocletian (reigned from 284-305 A.D.)

4. Like St. Marina, St. Dimiana is another martyr killed by Diocletian. The site on which her convent stands encloses two churches—the smaller is older and encloses the relics of St. Dimiana and the forty virgins who were all martyred in one hour.

5. Damietta is the port near which the eastern branch of the Nile pours into the Mediterranean. It is famous for the battle waged against King Louis IX of France when he and his crusaders were defeated and saifed back to their homeland from Damietta.